FROM GODS TO SUPERHEROES
An Interpretative Reading of Comic Books and Religious Pluralism

by
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Abstract

The study of pop culture within the framework of the humanities has gained increased scholarly attention. However, one area of interest that has not been fully addressed in the social sciences is the role comic books play in shaping cultural identity. This paper examines comic books as cultural artifacts that signify an alternative means of assessing the evolution of plurality and its relation to cultural identity. Drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer I employ a hermeneutical approach that highlights the multimodal nature of the comic book. The comic book presents a multilayered structure of narration that combines mythic narratives, rich symbolism, and ethical frameworks. Stated simply, I suggest that comic books present a new location for the actualization of myth in a increasing secularized society. Moreover, drawing on the findings of social semiotics theory and cultural psychology, I claim that comic books present an opportunity for scholars to critically examine the value we place on plurality in the west. In particular, I discuss how plurality is represented from 1938 to the the present through the longstanding titles “Green Lantern” and “Captain America”. These titles are important because they are widely read and have played a formative role in popularizing the comic book in Western culture. Both “Captain America” and “Green Lantern” present a vision of plurality that not only reflects the cultural landscape, but seeks to transform it.
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# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... ii

Acknowledgements ....................................................................................................................... iii

Introduction .................................................................................................................................... 1

Section 1.1: Myth and Comic Books ............................................................................................ 7

Section 1.2: Comic Books, Myth, and Cognition ....................................................................... 16

Section 2: The Participatory Nature of Comic Book Narratives and how it relates to Identity

Formation and Social Transformation .......................................................................................... 19

Section 3: Hermeneutics: How to Approach the Comic Book .................................................... 26

Section 4: Analysis ........................................................................................................................ 34

  On Green Lantern ....................................................................................................................... 35

  On Captain America .................................................................................................................. 51

Conclusion ..................................................................................................................................... 59
It is difficult to identify a date that pinpoints the emergence of the comic book as a distinct medium of human creativity. According to Scott McCloud, comic books are “[j]uxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (McCloud, 1993:9). McCloud’s definition has been heavily criticized for privileging image over text. Although contested, McCloud’s definition is still useful. If McCloud’s description is simplified to denote “comic-style art,” then the mythical and religious history of comic books becomes readily apparent. Comic-style art - which I define as images combined with text, often in paneled form - has been used to communicate mythical and religious stories in multiple geographic and historical contexts (Kraemer and Lewis, 2010:2). Some of these historical contexts include civilizations that existed nearly 3000 years ago. Narrower definitions of the medium locate its inception in the late 19th century (McCloud, 1993:17). However, most scholars agree that it is the creation of the “Superhero” that sets the modern comic book apart as a distinct medium within Western cultural discourse.

The birth of the first modern Superhero archetype, Superman (1938), shaped the symbolic contours that would come to define the future success of the comic book industry. Comic books existed prior to Superman but generally featured reprints of comic strips found in the “funnies” of the Sunday paper (Gabilliet, 2010:3-12). During this period the public tended to view comic books as nothing more than an amusing distraction from the vicissitudes of daily life. However, after Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's successful introduction of Superman the popularity of comic books skyrocketed. By 1952 over 3161 titles were being published in North America with an overall circulation of between 840 million and 1.3 billion copies per year (Gabilliet, 2010:46).
The popularity of comic books, especially amongst children, did not go unnoticed by the guardians of the status quo.

In 1954 the German psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham published his now infamous book *Seduction of the Innocent*. Dr. Wertham was concerned that comic books were corrupting an entire generation of children. Most of Dr. Wertham's critiques were directed towards the violent crimes prevalently featured in horror comics of the era. However, he also devoted significant portions of his book to highlighting the social ills and immorality that accompanied the stories of certain Superhero comics, such as Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, and Green Lantern. Dr. Wertham was not alone in his worries. His book sparked a movement of national concern that culminated with the United States Congressional inquiry into the harmfulness of the comic book medium. Publishing companies, writers, artists and comic enthusiasts appeared at the inquiry to defend the merits of the comic book. Ultimately, their pleas fell on deaf-ears and the proceedings proved to be hazardous to the growing popularity of the “Superhero” comic book. The hearings resulted in the comic book industry establishing a voluntary censorship group in 1955, known as the Comics Code Authority (CCA), which “... put an end to the excesses of horror and crime comics, sending a clear signal to the industry that comics, like everything else in Cold War America, were supposed to be God-fearing, anti-Communist, and family friendly” (Cowsill, 2010:63). The CCA remained in existence for decades but began to lose power in the 1980’s and 1990’s, until it was completely abandoned by the comic book industry in 2010.

The Kefauver hearings signaled a profound moment in the evolution of the comic book industry because it affirmed the cultural significance of comic books across the United States. The transformative power of the comic book - its potential to foster “good” or “evil” thoughts in
the reader - could no longer be ignored. Since the 1950’s, however, it appears that the social and cultural significance of the comic book has been largely forgotten. This is especially true in academia. The lack of scholarly interest in the academic study of comic books is unfortunate because “[c]omics are being used for more things, read by more people and have more of an essential importance to the culture, relevance to the culture, and effect on the culture then they ever have” (McCloud qtd in Uidhir, 2012:47). If comic books are as culturally significant as McCloud claims, then perhaps academia ought to reassess the scholarly merits of studying such “low-brow” material.

The cultural significance of comic books is directly linked to their connection to mythical narratives. According to Jacob Arlow, myths are “instruments of socialization” and “[t]he role of mythology is most important in the development of the individual and of his integration with the ideals of the community” (Arlow, 1961:386-7). Is it possible that comic books signify a modern manifestation of Western mythology? If so, what kind of role do the mythical narratives of comic books play in shaping the ideals of Western culture? Do comic books merely mirror cultural mores or do they anticipate and even facilitate changes in the social landscape of Western culture? Moreover, what do the mythical narratives of comic books reveal about our understanding of religion, religious identity, and our evolving conception of the Divine? I suggest that comic books can be framed as cultural artifacts that not only document, but also influence various shifts in the way the Western culture values religion and religious identity. Most significantly, I suggest that certain comic books produce mythical narratives that affirm the cultural value of religious plurality and that a close study of these mythical narratives can actually enhance our contemporary understanding of religious plurality.
This essay unfolds in four parts. In section one I trace the mythical history of the comic book medium and analyze the similarities between comic books and myth by drawing on the work of Christopher Knowles. Knowles claims that comic books represent a new form of modern mythology. Following Knowles, I claim that the mythical narratives of certain comic books reflect cultural values and possess a capacity to potentially change them. This claim builds on the work of certain theorists, such as Arlow, who argues that myth plays an important role in shaping both individual and cultural identity. I extend Arlow’s study of myth and apply it to comic books. Thus, following Arlow, I suggest that the mythical narratives expressed in certain comic book could potentially contribute to the formation of both individual and cultural identity.

In section two I draw on the work of Scott McCloud to analyze how the unique structure of comic books encourage a participatory relationship with the reader. I claim that the participatory structure of the comic book enhances the transformative potential of the mythical narrative expressed in certain comic books. In other words, comic books affect the reader by encouraging his or her participation in creating the mythical narrative, which, in turn, maximizes its impact on the reader.

In section three I outline a hermeneutic methodology that highlights the multimodal nature of the comic book by drawing on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. A hermeneutic strategy, like Ricoeur's and Gadamer's, that focuses on the affect a narrative has on the reader can help highlight the transformative potential of comic books. This hermeneutic strategy underscores the point that comic books tend to be most successful when they encourage readers to identify with certain aspects of the mythical narrative. The hermeneutic models
espoused by Ricoeur and Gadamer are limited, however, because they were not necessarily
designed to analyze images. Since comic books rely heavily on images to convey narratives, I
utilize a hermeneutical approach that can accommodate findings of semiotic theory. I suggest
that a modified hermeneutical approach that draws on semiotic theory is an ideal method of
interpreting the hybrid structure of comic books.

In section four I analyze the various ways two specific comic book series, *Green Lantern*
and *Captain America*, address the issue of cultural and religious diversity. I take into account
comic book story arcs that appeared in monthly single issue comic books, compilations of these
single issues often referred to as trade paperbacks, and standalone story arcs released as graphic
novels. I examine the way the mythical narratives of these characters have encouraged or
discouraged various issues surrounding social justice and the treatment of ethnic and religious
minorities. I claim that the mythical narratives embodied in these comic books reflect and
possibly anticipate historical shifts in the way Western culture views and values religious
plurality.

Some preliminary remarks about religious plurality are in order before moving to the
analysis. Michael Barnes claims that religious plurality refers simply to religious diversity
(Barnes, 2005: 408). Unfortunately, this definition raises more questions than it solves. To claim
that religious pluralism is tantamount to religious diversity begs the question: What exactly is
religious diversity? This issue can only be properly addressed by first defining what we mean by
religion. John Hinnells claims that “[t]here is no such thing as ‘religion’, there are only the
religions . . .” (Hinnells, 2005:6). In other words, diversity is embedded in the idea of
“religion.” For the purposes of this paper, I draw on Dr. James Miller's definition of religion as
mass cultural habits (Miller, 2011: September 12). Miller’s definition underscores the point that whatever it is we mean by the term “religion” it is almost always tied to a particular cultural context, that is, religion is rooted in culture (Hinnells, 2005:7).

Most scholars generally accept the notion that religion and culture are intimately linked. However, the nature of the relationship between religion and culture is highly debated. Some scholars, such as Catherine Albanese, suggest that the terms “religion” and “culture” can be considered synonymous (Hulsether, 2005:500). Other scholars, such as Mark Hulsether, suggest that religion can be conceived as a subset of culture (Hulsether, 2005:500). Hulsether claims that, “[w]e can approach religions as subsets of culture that often seek to ground cultural claims, deepen their resonance, or test their limits” (Hulsether, 2005:500). He does not deny that sometimes, “. . . religious subsets of culture may overlap extensively with the umbrella category [culture], sometimes to a point where for practical purposes they coincide” (Hulsether, 2005:500). The meanings that we attribute to culture and religion are sometimes so similar that it is often “. . . not clear whether someone is discriminated against for being, say, from Pakistan or because of prejudice against Islam, and either can be the excuse for violence” (Hinnells, 2005:9). This overlap between cultural and religious meanings suggests that a comprehensive analysis of religious plurality in the mythical narratives of comic books must include a discussion about cultural diversity. In other words, cultural diversity often implies religious diversity. Thus, in the following analysis I address cultural diversity in terms that highlight the importance of religious pluralism in the mythical narratives of certain influential comic books.

The modern meaning of the term “religious plurality” in the field of Religious Studies is generally “associated with the name John Hick and the thinkers of what might be called the
“Myth of Christian Uniqueness” school” (Barnes, 2005:408). These thinkers tend to address the prospect of interfaith and intercultural dialogue as a positive pursuit (see for example: Clooney, 2010 and Knitter, 2005) that can enhance our collective understanding of various issues related to social justice. This is because an equitable social landscape that encourages cultural and religious diversity must protect individuals and groups who are socially disadvantaged. Gustavo Gutiérrez states that the existence of the poor is an issue that “is not politically neutral” and claims that “[t]he poor are a by-product of the system in which we live and for which we are responsible. They are marginalized by our social and cultural world. They are the oppressed . . .” (qtd in Farmer, 2005:139). The creation of a social landscape that encourages religious pluralism requires the collective will to fight economic, cultural, and religious oppression. But such a lofty ideal also requires a model of social justice that can evolve with the times. Historically, myths have played an instrumental role in shaping traditional models of social justice. However, these models are limited because they have lost their social appeal. Thus, we need new myths to live by. I suggest that comic books present a new form of mythical expression that encourages a deep appreciation for social justice.

Section 1.1: Myth and Comic Books

The relationship between myth and comic books is multi-layered. Modern comic books have tended to weave mythical themes, characters, and symbols into their narratives ever since they began to be published in the mid-twentieth century. However, some scholars suggest that comic book narratives not only include mythical elements, but that they in fact embody a whole new form of modern mythology. If comic books are interpreted as a new form of modern
mythology, then perhaps they serve the same purpose as traditional myths, namely, they aim to cultivate certain cultural meanings, which have the potential to be both personally and socially transformative.

Historically, Western culture has tended to connect myth to an explicitly religious framework. This religious framework has led to the institutionalization of myth, which locates myth almost exclusively within the control of the church or state. However, this is not always the case. For example, in North America traditional mythical narratives have seeped into almost every facet of popular culture – including secular ones. In “Culture” (2009), Bruce Lincoln claims that North American culture can be divided into two main parts. The first is what he distinguishes as upper case “C” culture, which refers to certain cultural elements that are selected and controlled by the elite. The second is what Lincoln identifies as lower case “c” culture, which refers to the culture of the masses (Lincoln, 2008:412). Drawing on Lincoln's distinction, I suggest that there are important aspects of myth, which were once the domain of the elite, particularly, the “religious elite,” which are now occupied by common lower case “c” culture, or “pop-culture.”

One form of pop-culture in particular that has appropriated the role of the modern myth-maker is the comic book. Interestingly, within this new medium of expression, myth continues to be associated with religious ideas. In “Comics and Religion: Theoretical Connections” (2010). Darby Orcutt argues that some “... form of comics expression exists within the broad content of nearly every major contemporary religious tradition” (Orcutt, 2010:93). In fact, the history of comic books as a distinct medium is closely connected with the evolution of religious expression. Egyptian hieroglyphics, early monastic manuscripts, the engraved plates of the
English mystic William Blake, and the woodcut stories of Medieval European saints are just a few of the examples of the historical association between religious expression and the medium of the comic book (Knowles, 2007:1-2).

Christopher Knowles echoes Orcutt's claim by suggesting that comic book narratives are Western societies modern myths. He argues that the way some Superhero characters are treated by fans is similar to the reverence one would expect a religious adherent to have for the religious figure of his or her devotion (Knowles, 2007:3). These comic book characters are above parody and are taken very seriously by their fans (Knowles, 2007:3). Additionally, like mythical characters, each comic book hero has a “canon” of sorts. These “canons” are similar to religious canons of approved texts and religious stories. The canon is used to determine what is officially a part of that character's story. Knowles also points out that the occurrence of “cosplay”, which refers to the practice of fans dressing up as their favourite costumed heroes, is similar to some forms of ancient worship where adherents would dress up like their favourite deity (Knowles 2007:5-6).

In “Ego Psychology and the Study of Mythology” (1961) Jacob Arlow offers a psychological understanding of myth that helps to explain the role mythical narratives and mythical characters play in shaping identity. If Knowles' claim that comic books are modern myths is accurate, then it follows that Arlow's psychological understanding of myth can be extended and applied to the comic book medium. According to Arlow, myths serve a number of purposes. Myths “. . . play a role in warding off feelings of guilt and anxiety” (Arlow, 1961:375). Moreover, they constitute “. . . a form of adaptation to reality and to the group in which the individual lives [. . . and influence] the crystallization of the individual identity. . .”
Arlow, 1961:375). Arlow goes on to claim that myths express, and in some cases, satisfy repressed and socially unacceptable desires (Arlow, 1961:376). In this way, myths are “instruments of socialization” (Arlow, 1961:379). In our increasingly secularized world the role of myth as an instrument of socialization is not always readily apparent.

Commenting on the perceived absence of myth in modern society Arlow claims that “[M]ythologically speaking, we are hardly an uninstructed community, and the various media of mass communication, comic books, and literature have been issuing forth a stream of reanimated mythological figures indistinguishable from their classical prototypes.” (Arlow, 1961:389). In other words, Arlow anticipates Knowles' observation that comic books signify a modern form of mythology. This is significant because it calls attention to Arlow's implicit recognition of the role comic books play in the crystallization of identity. In other words, comic books may assist in identity formation in the same way that myths do. This is because comic books can be interpreted as a modern form of myth.

A central aspect that links mythical narratives and comic book narratives is the “archetypical hero myth” (Garrett, 2008:12-13). According to Garrett, both mythical and comic book heroes follow the same character pattern. They experience a “call to action” that leads them to cross the threshold from an ordinary life to an extraordinary one defined by adventure (Garrett, 2008:12). In this new life the heroes encounter great trials and earn great rewards before they are faced with an “ultimate challenge” (Garrett, 2008:12-13). This ultimate challenge tests their worth and often leads to some sort of literal or figurative death and rebirth (Garrett, 2008:13). Comic book heroes and mythical figures also have “immutable characteristics” and an “irreversible destiny” (Eco, 2004:147). These characters, like comic book
heroes, must embody “. . . a law, or a universal demand, and therefore must be in part predictable and cannot hold surprises for us” (Eco, 2004:148). In other words, comic book characters mimic the immutability of some mythical characters.

Alongside the characters, the actual structure of the comic book narrative is designed to accommodate a “mythical” reading. Knowles points out that there is “something about the medium of the comic book that seems to be the best incubator for our substitute gods” (Knowles, 2007:12) Echoing Knowles’ observation, Douglas Rushkoff, author of the explicitly religious comic book Testament (2006-2008), claims that comic books have a “. . . unique ability [. . .] to communicate, simulate, and perhaps even actualize transcendence” (Rushkoff, 2010:xii). Rushkoff singles out the “gutter” as a specific structural component of the comic book that lends itself to a mythical or religious reading. Evan Thomas underscores Rushkoff’s claim by suggesting that “[t]he gutter, in fact, contributes an entire plane of meaning to comics that employ it” (Thomas, 2010:157). The “gutter” is a technical term that refers to the white spaces that separate each panel in a comic book narrative. Rushkoff suggests that the gutter signifies a symbolic place for the emergence of the divine (Rushkoff, 2010:x). According to Rushkoff, the gutters allow the gods to reside outside of the finite world contained by the panel lines of the narrative, while still allowing them to impact the meaning of the story in fantastic ways (Rushkoff, 2010:x). Rushkoff claims that it is precisely the gutters that make the comic book an ideal residence to house the divine (Rushkoff, 2010:x). Interestingly, he illustrates this point in his own work by filling the gutters with images of the divine interacting with the other characters in mysterious ways. It is the gutter that defines the comic book as an alternative site of intersection for the carnal and the heavenly, the finite and the infinite, and the secular and the
divine.

Additionally, neither comic book narratives nor religious narratives are bound by the constraints of time, place, or even dimension (Crutcher, 2011:55-6). A single page in the story of a typical comic book – like the mythical story - can occupy multiple earths, multiple histories, multiple geographic locations and multiple character narrators without the flow of the story being hampered. The comic book is so multi-layered that even the layout, letters and types of lines forming the panel's edge become a part of the story. It is because of this multimodal nature of the comic book that the introduction of mythical symbolism can occur with ease.

Many influential comic book authors and artists have turned to religious myths and symbols to enrich their work. Interestingly, these religious myths and symbols take on a whole new meaning when they are recast in the medium of the comic book. For example, the character “Superman” is often portrayed as a traditional messianic figure. Yet, he is also hyper-secularized as the heroic embodiment of American democracy; he is a saviour to the masses who transcends class, ethnicity, and religious affiliation (Morrison, 2011). From this perspective, the character of Superman presents an implicit critique of religious exclusivity - and he is not alone. There are many comic book characters who voice a similar critique of various worldviews associated with traditional religion. Most significantly, certain scholars claim that comic books provide an opportunity for readers to re-imagine their traditional religious identity through the eyes of the secularized “Superhero”.

In his article entitled “Killing the Graven God: Visual Representations of the Divine in Comics”, Andrew Tripp claims that “... images of God define God as much as words name God” (Tripp, 2010:108). Given the strength of Tripp’s argument, it follows that comic books,
which are largely based on images, could possibly play a role in contributing to how Western
culture envisions God. Tripp argues that while independent companies, or underground “comix”
such as “God Nose,” can obviously depict and critique conceptions of the divine, mainstream
comic book companies like D.C and Marvel “. . . are forced to represent God through the
pantheon of Superheroes and villains” (Tripp, 2010:113). In other words, comic book
Superheroes and villains can be interpreted as symbolic surrogates for our evolving
understanding of the divine.

What is even more revealing about the expression of the divine in comic books is that
certain comic book characters exhibit a surprising level of religious diversity. The classic D.C.
character of Superman was created in 1938 and is a prime example of how mythical narratives of
comic books express the divine. He is especially interesting because of the diverse religious
readings often applied to his character over time by different writers and authors. Some of the
most common religious readings of Superman are based in a Judeo-Christian context; he is often
read as a Messiah, Moses or Samson figure. These readings are not unjustified considering the
Jewish heritage of Superman's creators, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. Moreover, the origins of
the name “Superman” are rooted in Judaism. His original Kryptonian name, Kal-El, resembles
the transliteration of the Hebrew words for “all that is God” (Garrett, 2008:19). In addition to
these traditional Judaic and Christian interpretations, Superman can also be read as an
embodiment of certain pagan and occult belief systems. For example, Jeffery Kripal locates
Superman’s roots in the occult character Dr. Mystic. Dr. Mystic was created by Siegel and
Shuster in 1935 and was very similar to Superman. Kripal claims that Superman retains some of
the occult characteristics of Dr. Mystic (Kripal, 2011:71). For instance, the name of Superman’s
home world, Krypton is the greek word for “the hidden” or the “occult” (Kripal, 2011:73).

David A. Lewis claims that all Superheroes share a messianic quality that is often rooted in a Judaic and/or Christian worldview and system of values (Lewis, 2010:173) But Superman is “the Superhero par excellence and figurative flag-bearer for the genre . . .” (Lewis, 2010:173). Lewis claims that Superman's “. . . masterful control over his power [. . .] unbelievable morality, and, most importantly, [. . .] [his] full dual life as human and more-than-human . . .” place Superman into a “unique category of 'saviour’” (Lewis, 2010:173). In a similar vein, Christopher Knowles connects Superman's status as a saviour to both Judaism and Christianity. He claims that Superman is “. . . a Messiah in the Biblical tradition who can also be seen as a metaphor for American Jewish assimilation”(Knowles, 2007:7). Knowles recognizes the multi-layered symbolism attached to Superman and what he terms the “wildly popular” Messiah hero, which he suggests stems from “deep-seated anxieties in American life” (Knowles, 2007:2). By locating Superman in this social context Knowles effectively treats Superman, and other Messianic Superheroes, as a symbolic representation of the struggles that many of their creators and authors faced as Jewish men living in a predominately Christian culture (Knowles, 2007:7-8).

However, the religious meanings associated with the character Superman are not limited to an exclusively Jewish or Christian reading. For example, the influential author Grant Morrison, likens Superman to a type of sun-god (Morrison, 2011:5). But perhaps most relevant to the subject of this essay is the work of Mark Millar who connects Superman's popularity to the unique way in which he embodies the ideals of religious diversity. Millar claims that “Superman resonates with everyone because he's an amalgamation of the legends we have loved for 5000
years. He's Moses, Hercules, Icarus and Jesus Christ all rolled up inside one American flag. He's the greatest fictional character of our time” (Millar, 2003:131). As a religiously diverse character, Superman signifies Western culture's ideal understanding of cultural and religious plurality. Superman is more than a symbol of the United States; he embodies the virtues associated with North American society’s attempt to create and sustain an authentic cultural mosaic.

There are other popular comic book characters that exhibit a similar capacity to integrate non-Christian religious themes into their mythical narratives. The character of Captain Marvel, for example, was created at approximately the same time as Superman and is derived from pagan mythology. His powers, given to him by the wizard Shazam, include the wisdom of Solomon, the strength of Hercules, the stamina of Atlas, the power of Zeus, the courage of Achilles and the speed of Mercury (Wein et al, 2009). Black Adam, created as a villain in 1945, was similarly imbued with the power of the egyptian gods by Shazam (Waid et al, 2009). And there are many other popular characters that draw on non-Christian mythology. The character Circe - whose namesake gives away her mythical origin - is a villainous immortal sorceress who made her first appearance in 1949 (Beatty, 2009). Hawkman, who made his debut in 1940, is a reincarnation of the Egyptian god Osiris (Knowles, 2007:31-2). These examples underscore the point that mythical and religious characters are not only a common subject in comic books, but also that they often present a sophisticated level of religious diversity.

Drawing on the religious history of comic book characters, their similarities with ancient mythical godlike characters, and their reverential treatment by their fans, Knowles suggests that comic book Superheroes serve as substitutes for religious gods. He states that “[w]e have, in
fact, witnessed the emergence of a strange kind of religion here. Indeed, Superheroes now play for us the role once played by the gods in ancient societies” (4-5). Knowles' claim affirms the parallel that I have drawn between mythical narratives and comic book narratives and mythical heroes and comic book Superheroes. Rushkoff's suggestion that the structure of the comic book lends itself to a mythical reading also strengthens Knowles' claim. Furthermore, the validity of claims which identify comic books as alternative sites of mythical expression may mean that comic books could possess the same transformative function as myth.

Section 1.2: Comic Books, Myth, and Cognition

The similarity between myth and comic books may go beyond narrative structure and character likenesses. Certain theorists, such as Pascal Boyer and Luther H. Martin, claim that mythical narratives activate deep mental processes of the brain. I suggest that comic book narratives and characters, because of their similarities to mythical narratives and characters, may also engage these same mental processes.

Both mythical and comic book characters balance what Pascal Boyer identifies as the intuitive and the counterintuitive, or realism and fantasy (qtd in Lawson, 2009:80). According to Boyer, ideas are transmitted most efficiently when they combine the intuitive and the counterintuitive. The intuitive refers to those ideas that are familiar and conform to our “naturalized” ontologies, that is, to what we expect. The counterintuitive, in contrast, refers to those ideas that do not conform to our “naturalized” ontologies and are thus more likely to attract our attention due to the novelty of the idea (Lawson, 2009:80). Boyer is careful to point out that this combination must be balanced; if the balance is lost and the counterintuitive element is too
strong then the idea will seem too unrealistic and a subject will dismiss it as opposed to retaining it (Lawson, 2009:81). Boyer claims that the involvement of “superhuman agents” sufficiently balances the intuitive and the counterintuitive (Lawson, 2009:83). These “superhuman agents” are intuitive because they are recognizably human, but are also counterintuitive in the sense that they possess some sort of extraordinary quality or power (Lawson, 2009:83).

Much like mythical and religious stories, comic book narratives involve superhuman agents and attempt to communicate a balance between the intuitive and the counterintuitive. Certain comic book Superheroes and villains are often characterized as superhuman agents. Take for example the character Superman. Superman appears to be entirely human on the surface. As his alter ego Clark Kent, he looks, dresses and acts like a typical man. Kent has a normal job, wears normal clothes and often struggles to make ends meet. He is – on every account – the everyman. As Kal-El (Superman), he is completely alien. He dresses and acts like something very different than a typical man. He can fly, see (and burn) through most materials, freeze objects with his breath, lift large weights and journey through the far reaches of the universe. He is nearly invincible and possesses powers that the average person would surely envy. In short, Superman is a “superhuman agent” who clearly balances the intuitive and the counterintuitive.

Comic book narratives also appear to engage memory processes similar to those activated by certain mythical or religious stories. In his work, "Religion and Cognition" (2005), Luther H. Martin outlines two modes of transmission for mythical/religious messages: imagistic and doctrinal. The comic book narrative's tendency to engage both doctrinal and imagistic memory processes ensures that any realization the reader makes is stored vividly in their memory for a
The first type of transmission, imagistic transmission, is related to ritual remembrance. It is often episodic as opposed to repetitive, and is emotionally provocative (Martin, 2005:480). Imagistic transmission also facilitates the formation of identity through the stimulation of biographical memory processes (Martin, 2005:480). According to Martin, if a mythical story can elicit an episodic and emotional response, then it has the potential to trigger a change in self-identity. Martin refers to the second type of transmission as “doctrinal” (Martin, 2005:480). Doctrinal transmissions are remembered as “generalized scripts of schemas of knowledge” and are cognitively retained through repetition (Martin, 2005:480).

Comic book narratives often involve both types of transmission, the imagistic and the doctrinal. Comic book narratives stimulate this episodic and emotional response by encouraging readers to identify with the characters and feature emotionally provocative images. These narratives are similar to mythical narratives. The emotional, episodic responses these narratives elicit are remembered vividly. This vivid remembrance is not surprising since “... ideas are held in memory most easily, and therefore transmittable most readily, that are acquired in powerful emotional contexts” (Lawson, 2009:82). The meaning of the narrative is then continually retold and remembered in a doctrinal fashion.

Comic books are also doctrinal. Comic book characters, like religious ones, have their own canons. The core tenets of these canons are referred to and transmitted repeatedly. There are origin stories within comic book series that are considered canonical to the evolving narrative of the character. For example, the canonical origin story of Superman begins with two parents sending their son off of an exploding planet to Earth where he is found by a kind American
farmer and his wife. In *Superman: Red Son* (2003) writer Mark Millar re-imagines the origin story and the role of Superman as an American hero. In *Red Son*, Superman's parents send him back in time when Earth is about to explode. In this narrative Superman is found by Russians instead of Americans and develops into a Russian hero who promotes communism. Although *Superman: Red Son* was well received the story did not become integrated into the official mythology of Superman. It did not become “canon”.

The emotional (and sometimes mythical) quality of comic book narratives, and the realizations these narratives elicit, activate imagistic and doctrinal memory processes. The activation of these memory processes causes the message to be remembered in a vivid manner for a long period of time and to be repeated doctrinally. These messages can then be integrated into parts of memory related to identity formation and can possibly lead to some sort of transformation in the reader.

**Section 2: The Participatory Nature of Comic Book Narratives and how it relates to Identity Formation and Social Transformation.**

Comic books are a reflection of popular culture and “. . . supply evidence of widely shared assumptions and also teach particular ways of looking at things” (Rifas, 2010:27). Much of what drives the cultural appeal of the comic book is its visual presentation (Royal, 2010:ix). These visuals, including the visual structure of the comic book, “. . . should not be taken lightly, for as history literally illustrates, the attitudes and prejudices of a culture can be greatly shaped by its caricatures, cartoons and other forms of manipulated iconography” (Royal, 2010:ix). Thus perhaps the study of a culture's “cartoons and other forms of manipulated
iconography” can shed light on its “shared assumptions” about certain social issues.

This is certainly true in the case of comic book art. According to Jenny E Robb and Rebecca Wanzo “... comics are an important record of not only a nationalist imagination but [also] a counterculture imagination” (Robb and Wanzo, 2010:212). In this sense, comic books serve as cultural artifacts. The political power of these cultural artifacts is made apparent by the various measures taken by government officials, the media, and certain academics that claim that comic books are a threat to children, and by extension, a threat to society as a whole.

In the 1940's and 50's the moral influence of comic books was drawing national attention. In 1945 the Market Research Company of America “found that 70 million Americans – roughly half of the U.S population – read comic books” (Wright, 2001:57). The report went on to outline the ages and genders of these readers: “The report found that the comic book audience comprised approximately 95% of all boys and 91% of all girls aged 6-11”, 87% of males and 81% of females 12-17, 41% of men and 28% of women 18-30 and, lastly, 16% of men and 12% of women over 30 (Wright, 2001:57). These statistics underscore the importance of Bradford W. Wright’s claim that “[i]n the broadest sense, the debate over comic books was really about cultural power in postwar America” (Wright, 2001:87). The question of who would define the identity of the youth, and, consequently, the future of American culture, became a “hotly contested terrain” (Wright, 2001:87). A growing population of youths who enjoyed comic books appeared to have claimed a large portion of this terrain, and this appeared to make adults very uncomfortable. This discomfort eventually led to adults attributing “undesirable changes in youth behaviour” to pop culture in general and comic books specifically (Wright, 2001:87). Governmental laws, bans, and industry run censorship codes were implemented to try to control
this new powerful medium.

The National debate sparked by Dr. Fredric Wertham's book, “Seduction of the Innocent” (1954) was not the first time comic books were criticized for the negative influence they have on young “impressional minds.” Prior to Wertham, Sterling North – “[i]n his widely reprinted 8 May 1940 article in the Chicago Daily News” - “branded comic books a ‘national disgrace’” (Wright, 2001:27). North claimed that “[u]nless we want a coming generation even more ferocious than the present one, parents and teachers throughout America must band together to break the 'comic' magazine” (qtd in Wright, 2001:27). The controversy surrounding the supposed threat comic books posed to the stability of Western culture led to extreme measures of regulation. Prior to the Senate inquiry on comic books and juvenile delinquency many American cities (Los Angeles, Chicago, Hartford, Topeka, Des-Moines, and Birmingham) adopted some sort of ban to limit what sort of comics could be sold and to whom (Wright 2001, 98).

Punishments for violating the restrictions were, for the most part, limited to varying fines. In Canada, however, the regulations and punishments were much more severe. For example, in December 1949 the government of Canada went so far as to place an entire ban on the “crime” comic book genre. The most severe punishment for making, printing, or selling these types of publications was a two-year prison sentence (Wright, 2001:101). Such bans on comic books were not limited to North America. In the same year France, for example, imposed a ban on Superhero comics because they were considered to be an “imperialistic” threat to French culture (Wright, 2001:100). Evidently, comic books in the 1940's and 50's were considered a very serious threat.

Historically, comic books were considered a threat to the social order because they
corrupted the youth. However, the question of how these young readers were being manipulated was unclear. Perhaps one possible answer lies with the participatory nature of the comic book narrative. Drawing on Anna Freud, Arlow claims that the transformative power of myths stems from the “gratification which comes from identification with the hero of the myth. The path is prepared for identification and subsequent character transformations in keeping with the idealized qualities of the hero” (qtd in Arlow, 1961:388). In other words, the mythical narratives of certain comic books, particularly, those surrounding the Superhero, are structured in a way that encourages the reader to identify with the characters.

One way that comic book artists uniquely encourage character identification is through the style of art commonly used in the comic book medium. According to McCloud, the “cartoony” nature of comic book illustrations also enhance the reader’s involvement in the story (McCloud, 1993:36). The more detailed the character is drawn the more easily the reader/viewer is able to objectify the character. Detailed drawings of a character prevent the reader from effectively imagining their own participation in the narrative. McCloud argues that the simplistic cartoon style drawings in comic books decreases a reader’s ability to objectify the character as something or someone completely other than themselves. In other words, simplistic drawings permit the reader/viewer to imaginatively situate themselves inside the narrative (McCloud, 1993:36). By incorporating cartoon style drawings comic books blur the boundary between the reader (the recipient of a message)- and author(s) or artist(s) (the messengers).

McCloud utilizes “Universal Identification Simplification” (U.I.S) theory to illustrate the way a drawing can affect a viewer. According to McCloud U.I.S can be best understood in reference to cartoon style drawings (McCloud, 1993:36). By abandoning realism, cartoons allow
the reader to more easily identify with the characters. Essentially, the cartoon functions as “a vacuum into which our identity and awareness are pulled [they are] an empty shell that we inhabit” (McCloud 1993, 36). Viewers are more apt to receive the messages communicated through the cartoon medium because cartoon characters are more malleable than “realistic” ones, and this malleability permits viewers to project themselves onto the characters. Most significantly, this phenomenon prevents the messenger from getting in the way of the message (McCloud, 1993:36). Comic books that utilize realistic drawings for the background, clothes, and other details of a narrative, while maintaining simple or “cartoony” character faces further enable the reader to inhabit the “empty shell” of the cartoon character (McCloud, 1993:41). This balance of realism and simplicity allows the reader to project their own identity onto the character.

Some comic book narratives strike the same balance through a different method. Instead of utilizing simplified facial drawings these comic book stories employ the use of masks. Superhero comic books, like Green Lantern, will often portray the Superheroes in a very detailed manner. These comic books still take advantage of the effects of Universal Identification Simplification theory by placing the characters in costumes and masks. The characters may be drawn in a detailed manner but readers can still realistically imagine themselves as the character behind the mask. Interestingly, these reader fantasies are sometimes extended into the real world at comic book conventions where fans are encouraged to don the costume of their favourite character. An even more telling example of this process of character identification is evident in the increasing occurrence of real life young people who dress in colourful masks and costumes to fight real crime in their own communities, no doubt inspired by the heroic exploits of their
favourite comic book characters (Brill, 2010)

Another unique way comic books foster character identification is by encouraging a reader to participate in the creation of the narrative. The comic book invites the reader to draw on his or her imagination to “fill-in the blanks” of the narrative. If the comic book narrative is preconceived to be inherently dangerous, as the early critics suggest, then such a move to invite the reader to participate is tantamount to a plea for moral corruption. However, if the comic book narrative is conceived in less hostile terms, then its participatory structure can be understood as fostering a positive reading experience. This positive reading experience – when coupled with the participatory nature of the comic book structure – can inspire the reader to make positive changes in themselves and their community.

One specific structural component of comic books that highlights this participatory element is the “gutter,” which I addressed earlier. The gutter serves as a place for the reader to become a co-creator of the narrative. McCloud refers to this phenomenon as the “blood in the gutter” phenomenon and uses the following image to illustrate his point (McCloud, 1993:60):
All the reader/viewer is shown is that there is a man about to hit another man with an axe. The next panel simply portrays a scream through illustrated onomatopoeia. The details of how the actual scene unfolds are up to the reader to decide. The reader decides how quickly the axe falls, how much blood is shed, whether the death is quick or slow, and how each person reacts. It is this reliance on the imagination of the reader that defines the participatory quality of the comic book narrative. Throughout the entire narrative the reader is required to literally fill in the blanks. The gutter compels the reader to become more invested in the story – they are, after all, a co-creator. Most significantly, the reader's role as a co-creator increases the retention of the message communicated in the narrative. The reader has not just been told a story with a message; he or she is both a recipient and the messenger.

Symbols also enhance a reader's participation in the comic book narrative. Darby Orcutt claims that “symbolic texts, images, acts and other means of religious expression, like comics narratives, involve and evoke multiple ways of interpreting and understanding” (95). The inclusion of symbolic and iconic images in the comic book enable the reader to take an active role in “. . . crafting [the] narrative by acting as co-creators of their reading experience” (Orcutt, 2010:97). In other words, the presence of symbols on the pages of comic books enhances the already present participatory role of the reader.

By utilizing a combination of simplistic and detailed drawings, combined with masked heroes, comic books create a world that readers can inhabit on their own terms. As such, the line between the messenger and recipient is blurred. Instead of just “reading” a message, the reader can unintentionally internalize it. Furthermore, structural components of the comic book, like the gutter, blur the lines that separate the reader from the author or artist. The blurred distinction
between the reader and the author, combined with the reader's capacity to project his or herself onto the narrative or onto a particular character, creates a liminal space in the communicative process in which the message of the narrative is perceived by the reader to be a result of his or her own realization. These types of realizations elicited from an emotionally provocative narrative have the potential to shape or reshape an individual’s sense of identity. Stated simply, to become Superman, one must first identify with role of a hero.

The participatory function of the structure of the comic book contributes to the comic book's ability to transform readers. The comic book's role as a tool of enculturation is heightened by both its past and present popularity. Thus, a study of the comic book can shed light on many cultural trends and practices ranging from violence and sexuality to cultural and religious diversity. Stated simply, comic books have the potential to influence our social landscape.

Section 3: Hermeneutics: How to Approach the Comic Book

The etymology of the word hermeneutics is associated with the mythical messenger of the Greek gods Hermes (Penner, 2000:57). Jewish and Christian theories of interpretation serve as the connecting thread between the Ancient Greek exercise of *hermeneia* used to interpret Homer's *The Illiad* and *The Odyssey* and modern hermeneutical theory (Green, 2005:393). Jews and Christians simply appropriated Greek grammatical and allegorical interpretive methods for their own use (Green, 2005:393). It is clear that on multiple levels the origin of hermeneutics lies in myth and deciphering the supra-factual truths residing within the structure and symbols of myth. It should not be surprising then that hermeneutics is a common methodological approach
within theological and religious studies. As a method of interpretation hermeneutics can be applied to the study of comic books because it can accommodate its multimodal nature.

The task of interpreting comic books has specific challenges. One of these challenges is related to the comic book's place in pop culture. Irving Howe asks the question of “... what happens to the anonymous audience while it consumes the products of mass [or in our case, popular] culture?” (Howe, 2004:43). Howe goes on to recognize a very real difficulty in answering this question. He claims that in order to answer this question a scholar “... must reach that precarious condition where he can identify himself with the audience's reactions while yet retaining his critical distance (Howe, 2004:43). This task is problematic because “... we cannot escape what is so much a part of the atmosphere in which we live” (Howe, 2004:43).

Two hermeneuticists, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, have developed hermeneutic philosophies that attempt to exist in this “precarious condition” by acknowledging biases carried by both the interpreters and the authors of texts.

Neither Ricoeur or Gadamer’s hermeneutic theory can be applied directly to the comic book medium. This is because comic books are a hybrid creation of visual art and writing and thus constitute their own medium (McCloud, 1993:17). Hence, as a distinct medium, the study of comic books requires a specific hermeneutic method. Gadamer claims that all people possess certain pre-conceptions or “prejudices” that shape the way we interpret the world (Green, 2005:399). Gadamer calls for a reflective consciousness that brings these pre-understandings to light in any methodology of historical inquiry (Ricoeur, 2007:72). Far from understanding these pre-understandings as obstacles, Gadamer suggests that they play an “essential role in all acts of understanding” (Green, 2005:399). He claims that the writer and interpreter of any text have a
shared role whereby the act of understanding fuses the horizons of both participants (Green, 2005:399).

Building on Gadamer, Ricoeur utilizes a “hermeneutics of suspicion” (Ricoeur, 2007:100). Ricoeur argues that the act of writing distances what is written from the author; it renders the text autonomous, making it impossible to discern the intention of the author by analyzing the text (Ricoeur, 2007:83). Essentially, Ricoeur argues that worldviews shape our sense of self and because worldviews are subjective, so too is the notion of self (Ricoeur, 2007:83). Ricoeur concludes that it is impossible for a reader and author to share identical worldviews because worldviews are defined subjectively. Since understanding is based on subjective prejudices related to worldviews it follows that it is impossible for any two people to understand a text in an identical way. Thus, it is impossible for readers to interpret a text in such a way that they uncover exactly what the author was thinking when he or she wrote the text (Ricoeur, 2007:83). For Ricoeur, this impossibility is present even if both the author and reader occupy the same historical and geographic location. This is because once something is written it is freed from the worldview of the writer to be received by the worldview of the reader.

In some ways Ricoeur's hermeneutics of suspicion is similar to Gadamer's theory of blending horizons. Both Ricoeur and Gadamer recognize that both authors and readers possess differing worldviews. However, unlike Gadamer, Ricoeur refuses to allow these horizons to blend. If Ricoeur is correct, then trying to discern any sort of truth about the author from the text is a futile endeavour. Thus, Ricoeur privileges the proposed world that the text makes available to the reader (Ricoeur, 2007:86). According to Ricoeur, this proposed world is the only hermeneutic pursuit that takes ideological critique seriously. This is because it accounts for the
subjectivity of both the author and reader. The world projected is one that that reader can inhabit and “project one of [his or her] own most possibilities” (Ricoeur, 2007:86). In this way, distanciation is placed in a dialectical relationship with appropriation and understanding; interpreting the text requires the reader to first understand and interpret his or herself. Hence, the act of interpretation requires the reader to continually engage in the act of self-reflection.

Ricoeur's hermeneutic theory of distanciation is especially helpful when applied to fictional texts. Fictional texts purposefully distance themselves from the “real” world. Ricoeur argues that in fiction reality is “... metamorphosed by means of what the 'imaginative variations' that literature carries out on the real” (Ricoeur, 2007:86). In other words, according to Ricoeur, truth claims do not become invalid when a discourse becomes a fictional text (Ricoeur, 2007:86). When first order realistic portrayals of society are abolished (as they are in fictional texts) the possibility of a higher, second order representation of the world remains. Thus, fictional writing can communicate higher ontological truths than realistic descriptions are able to do.

As an expression of myth, comic book narratives minimize first order references of the world. Comic book narratives are located in a mythical second order version of the world. The involvement of the reader in the development of this second order version of the world is amplified in the comic book medium because of the reader’s role as a co-creator in the narrative. The participatory role of the reader also augments the blending of horizon phenomenon that Gadamer outlines in his hermeneutical model. Every space that divides panels in comic books is the space where the horizon of the reader has an opportunity to blend with the horizon of the author. Thus, comic books embody a tangible realization of Gadamer's theory of “blending
Ricoeur's move to privilege the reader over the author is especially applicable to the study of comic books. This is because, despite the implied singularity of authorship present in the reader's perception of the work, very few comic book characters have just one author. Many modern comic books are created by a collaboration of individuals such as writers, letterers, pencillers, inkers, colourists and cover artists. Since every aspect of the comic book is a part of the story, seeking the mind of the creator becomes problematic; which creator's worldview ought to be analyzed in order to discern the intended message of this collective piece of art?

Commenting on collective authorship Christy May Uidhir states that “. . . if comic convention and practice suggests that the inker, colorist [sic], letterer, and breakdown artist are candidates for authorship, then any theory of comic authorship ought to allow for that (but needn't entail that)” (Uidhir, 2012:51). The collective authorship of comic books proves to be a challenge for any interpreter whose main goal is to seek the mind of the author behind the analyzed work. The multimodal complexity of the comic book and multiplicity of author/creators make this task nearly impossible. Each part of the comic book works with each other part so well that distinguishing where one creator's influence ends and where another's begins is extremely difficult.

This issue is further problematized when the main characters of a story arc have over seventy years of history attached to them. Characters who find their origins in the early golden age (the late 1930’s to late 1940’s) of comics may have been written by dozens or, in some cases, potentially hundreds of authors throughout their history. Hence, these characters represent a mosaic of worldviews. A modern author may be writing the story but has to do so within the
limits of the established canon of the character. Completely removing the creator from the work ignores a large part of what the story is reflecting. Although it is true that much can be learned about readers through how they perceive the world, it is important to realize that the perceived world does not just reflect the reader. Even though the world expressed by texts and symbols is better suited to reflect the place – mentally, historically and geographically – of the reader, it still reflects the author or creator of the text.

The multiplicity of authors, combined with the multimodal nature of comic books prevent any hermeneutic designed for typical texts from being utilized to interpret comic book narratives. Comic books “constitute “multimodal” texts” which necessitate and facilitate “understanding through 'multiple approaches to meaning-making” and are able to “mimic virtually all modes of human perception, physical or mental” (Orcutt, 2010:94). This multimodal characteristic of comics makes them especially effective at projecting worlds but also makes them difficult to analyze from a traditional hermeneutical perspective. This is because traditional hermeneutic perspectives do not account for the hybridity of comic books, which utilize both words and images. I suggest that these limitations can be mitigated by drawing on the findings of semiotic theory.

Diane Mavers and Gunther Kress suggest that contemporary forms of communication are not limited to traditional textual methods of using language. This is because contemporary messages “are now constituted in several modes: on pages in the mode of writing, of image and of layout [. . .] and on the web, in speech, music, image – moving or still, in gesture, colour and soundtrack.” (Mavers and Kress, 2011:166). “Social Semiotics”, as Mavers and Kress describe it, deals with the reality of multimodality by assuming that all modes have a role in the process
of meaning-making. Semiotic theorists recognize that there is a need for more theories that can account for the heavy influence of image, colour, and music in modern forms of communication.

Modern age comic books are especially multimodal; they appear in print, in animated ebook form, and on websites. They use writing, image, layout, colour and Stan Lee recently introduced the concept of sound into the printed comic book medium (Johnston, 2011). Hermeneutic theory must be modified to accommodate the multimodal nature of comic books. By focusing on the reader, Ricoeur's hermeneutic theory presents the most advantageous interpretative method to study comic books if it is modified. One potential way that Ricoeur's methodology can be modified so that it can be applied to comic books is through the integration of semiotics.

One aspect of semiotic theory that fits well with Ricoeur and Gadamer's hermeneutic methodologies is the branch of semiotics that focuses on the fusion of form and meaning. This is because Ricoeur treats all written works as discourse and approaches discourse as the dialectical relationship between events and meanings. According to semiotic theory, signs are not seen as stable but are instead “... seen as constantly newly made out of the interest of the (socially and culturally formed and positioned) individual sign-maker (Mavers and Kress: 2011 167). This view of signs fits in well with Ricoeur's hermeneutic method because it focuses on shifting meanings (which is related to shifting worldviews) and the viewer of the sign instead of the maker of the sign. As mentioned earlier, the reader is a co-creator of the story in comic books. In Ricoeur's model the subjectivity of the individual necessarily leads to the reader being a co-creator of the world that the text projects. Semiotic theory and Ricoer's methodology both focus on the reader and can account for shifting meanings and worldviews. These similarities highlight
how complementary these interpretive methodologies are, and, as such, how they can be combined to create a hybrid hermeneutic method well suited to the comic book medium.

Another important part of semiotic theory that fits in well with the hermeneutic models of both Ricoeur and Gadamer is the phenomenon of “cohesion”. According to Mario Saraceni, cohesion refers to the way panels cling together – it is based on the human being's ability to “. . . recognize elements belonging to the same “semantic field” [or area of meaning]” and on “. . . the capacity to make sense of incomplete information [or inference]” (Saraceni, 2003:46). One's ability to infer is, in part, reliant upon knowledge of semantic fields. The way a symbol is interpreted is, in large part, dependent upon the interpreter's understanding of semantic fields. Semantic fields are not always static, but can also be fluid. The swastika is an example of a symbol that has shifted semantic fields; what began as a symbol of prosperity was changed forever to a symbol of tyranny. It follows then, that a symbol drawn by a comic book artist may not mean the same thing – due to shifting (historically and geographically) semantic fields – to the reader. The way the reader perceives the work of the comic book author/artist may be very different than how the author/artist intended the work to be perceived.

The author/artist does not have full control of the perceived world. A hermeneutic approach that focuses on the perceived world, like Ricoeur's model, must recognize and account for shifting semantic fields. This is especially true in the case of comic books because the way one panel relates to another (cohesion) is dependent on a common understanding of semantic fields. A shift in a semantic field can impede or change the flow of a comic book narrative and obscure the intentions of the author/artist's.

There are two main advantages of combining hermeneutics and semiotics. The first is
that it presents a model of interpretation that can accommodate both the perceived world of the reader and the mind and social context of the author. Secondly, it accounts for the role shifting semantic fields play in the process of understanding. This modified hermeneutic approach ensures that the meaning and importance of images in comic books are not overlooked. Moreover, it accounts for shifting cultural meanings of some of those images by recognizing the importance of shifting semantic fields.

The modified hermeneutic method that I have outlined above, which integrates social semiotic theory, is ideal for interrogating the effect comic books have on their audiences. This is because it accounts for the power and cultural relativity of images and privileges the audience over the author. Even though this method privileges the audience over the author it still recognizes the imprint of the author on the text. Hence, this method acknowledges that the act of reading a text leads to a blending of the author and reader's horizons, which, in turn, has the potential to affect and change the horizon (or worldview) of the reader. In the next section I utilize this modified hermeneutic method to analyze the way cultural diversity, social justice and religious plurality are expressed in certain key comic book series.

Section 4: Analysis

In this section I apply the methodology outlined in the previous section to analyze the way cultural diversity and religious plurality is conceptualized in the comic book medium. I address the mythical narratives of comic books as signifying cultural artifacts that reflect and refract certain social norms. From this perspective, comic book heroes embody modern mythical tropes that inspire devotion from the reader. Most significantly, building on the aforementioned
transformative potential of comic book narratives, I suggest that the mythical narratives of comic books may not only reflect but also direct certain aspects of the shifting cultural and religious landscape of North America.

**On Green Lantern**

It is widely accepted by critics that the *Green Lantern* series is one of the most socially relevant mainstream comic books that DC Comics has published. However, discussions about the social relevance of the *Green Lantern* series rarely address issues relating to religious plurality. In the following analysis I aim to call attention to the various ways the *Green Lantern* series addresses the issue of religious plurality by examining three key themes, namely, Orientalism, social justice, and cultural diversity.

The Green Lantern's first appearance was in *All American Comics* in July of 1940. At the time, American society was gearing up for World War II and many of the anxieties and prejudices of the period were reflected in the narratives of the early *Green Lantern* comics. A particularly troubling theme running throughout these early narratives is Orientalism. According to Edward Said, Orientalism is a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” that involves “. . . making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, [and] ruling over it.” (Said, 1977:3). Western literature and art have been popular mediums that participate in describing, teaching, and authorizing views of the Orient. Comic books are no exception to this trend.

The first Green Lantern, Alan Scott, is characterized as an ideal American. He is tall, handsome, hardworking, and has a stable job as a radio engineer (Finger et al, 1940). Be it fate
or destiny, Scott discovers a strange green lamp while riding a train that later derails killing everyone except Scott (Finger et al, 1940). The powers of this lamp transform Scott into the Green Lantern (Finger et al, 1940). The reader eventually learns that the lamp originates from a “mysterious” place in Asia (Finger et al, 1940). The Asian characters are generally depicted as inept and unintelligent. Fearful of whether the lamp contains a good or evil power they attempt to destroy it, but fail (Finger et al, 1940). The lamp eventually reaches America where it is refashioned to look like a traditional train lantern (Finger et al, 1940). Once Scott possesses the lantern the mystery of its power is revealed (Finger et al, 1940). Interestingly, the narrative suggests that the lamp's power can only be made intelligible once it is in the hands of an American. Moreover, it is only once the lamp has lost its “exotic” look and is refashioned in the form of an American train lantern that the “mystery surrounding it is dispelled” (Finger et al, 1940). The train lantern is a symbol of American ingenuity. It signifies industry, power, wealth, resource and technological advancement. The Green Lantern origin story appears to suggest that the “exotic” resources of the East, i.e. the powers of the lamp, can only be properly understood and utilized once they are situated in the West.

Scott's origin story, in many ways, reflects the American attitude toward the East that Edward Said outlined in his work “Orientalism” (1977). Essentially, Orientalism espouses a romanticized, mysterious and mystic view of the East. According to Jeffrey Kripal, “. . . for much of Western history [. . .] sacred source[s] of power [(powers that Kripal pairs with religious expressions)] [have been] traditionally located ‘far away’, ‘long, long ago’, and, more often than not, ‘in the East’” (Kripal, 2011:27). Kripal goes on to claim that “[a]nother extremely common strategy of Orientalism was to place the Other in a contemporary civilization
more or less distant or foreign to Europe” and cites China as an example of such a place (Kripal, 2011:41). This trend is especially visible in the *Green Lantern* series.

The early *Green Lantern* series presents a view of the East that reflects what Storey outlines as an institutionalized domineering, restructuring and colonial view of the Orient (Storey, 2009:172-8). This colonial view is rooted in the perceived opposition between *mythos* and *logos*. This oppositional worldview is rooted in a European [and for our purposes, American] colonial, rational and domineering worldview. This worldview, tied to Orientalism, has been used to justify the West's devaluation of the “Orient”

Even though there are Orientalist themes present in the *Green Lantern* series another prevalent theme of the story arcs of this period is social justice. The theme of social justice in these narratives mirror the concerns of early *Superman* narratives; most of the villains are in organized crime or are corrupt men of power. According to Garrett, the social justice themes that characterize the Superhero comics of the 1930's and 40's are defined by the atmosphere that characterized the social climate of the depression (Garrett, 2008:36). Garrett argues that another source of inspiration for these social justice themes stems from religious texts and themes. Garrett states “[t]he underlying principles of many of these early comics reflect universal principles of morality found in the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, but also peculiarly American notions of right and wrong, wrapped up in patriotism” (Garrett, 2008:36). What this means is that Green Lantern's concern for social justice echo the concerns of Hebrew prophetic literature.

The *Green Lantern* series addresses issues related to both Orientalist and social justice and reflects the problems that confronted American society in the modern era. On the one hand,
the series promotes an ideal of social justice that is based on the traditional Judeo-Christian understanding of morality. When situated in American society, this sense of morality is ostensibly dedicated to encouraging equality and cultural diversity. On the other hand, the *Green Lantern* series contains strong Orientalist themes that work against equality and cultural diversity. It is clear that these Orientalist tendencies reflect a Western colonial worldview. The conflict between social justice and equality on the one hand, and Orientalism and colonialism on the other, calls attention to the underlining tensions that characterized American society in 1930's and 40's and beyond. Significantly, both the Orientalist and social justice themes present in the *Green Lantern* series, and other Superhero comic book series' were especially pronounced in the WWII era. After WWII, both social justice and Orientalist themes were less prevalent but so was the Superhero genre in general.

The *Green Lantern* series ended up being one of the victims of the infamous post war Superhero decline. Before the series' eventual cancellation a major shift occurred. Like other comic books Superhero series' the wrath of the Green Lantern was redirected from grand injustices towards less socially destructive “evils”. Wright observes that Green Lantern, who was “[f]ormerly a spirited crusader against social ills and political corruption, […] now sparred with clownish criminals in half-baked plots that paved the way for his cancellation in 1949” (Wright, 2001:59). These “half-baked plots” not only paved the way for Green Lantern's demise but also led to the end of the so-called “Golden Age” of comic books. Some scholars have attributed the lack of social justice concerns in narratives written after WWII to a cultural mindset that was weary of social reform. Although post war America may have been weary of social reform it appears that they were not satisfied with heroes who did not stand for something
substantial.

The silver age of comic books (mid 1950's to 1970) signalled the rebirth of the Superhero genre. This rebirth was gradual, and the *Green Lantern* series was not reintroduced until three years after the Superhero renaissance began. The re-emergence of the Superhero in comic books was influenced by both the cold war and the space race (Wright, 2001:53). The ability of humanity to reach space spurred a new era of excitement and expectation in American society. The new Green Lantern was reintroduced in 1959 and “. . . was the first new character to experience considerable popularity” (Gabilliet, 2010:53). The new narratives were heavily influenced by the space race. The excitement surrounding the space race, combined with the new intergalactic flavour of the *Green Lantern* series, were two very probable factors responsible for the success of the new series. The fear of Russian communists, combined with the impact of Kefauver hearings (and the Wertham controversy in general), likely influenced the tone the new *Green Lantern* series took towards various social issues. The new Green Lantern, Hal Jordan, was different from his predecessor. Instead of being socially progressive, Jordan, like many heroes of the era, was characterized as a defender of the status quo (Wright, 2001:185). Whereas Scott was a crusader for social reform, Jordan embodied the ideals of law and authority. The story arcs no longer featured corrupt politicians. Rather, the “super villain” was introduced.

The villains were not the only thing that changed in the silver age. Jordan's costume and origin were also entirely re-imagined. Instead of coming from Asia the lantern (or power battery used to charge the ring) now originated from outer space and was accompanied by a dying alien, Abin Sur (Broome et al, 1959). Abin Sur bequeathed the power of the lantern ring onto Hal
Jordan (Broome et al, 1959). With Abin Sur came the introduction of the Green Lantern Corps as an intergalactic, militaristic, police force ruled by a council of immortal beings.

The relocation of the origin of the Green Lantern’s power from the “East” to outer-space did not get rid of the Orientalist themes of the narrative. Kripal suggests that the reality of the colonized world being completely colonized led to “. . . a felt need to locate the Somewhere Else, well, somewhere else” (Kriapl, 2011:27). For the Green Lantern series this somewhere else was outer space. The reality of air travel meant that more people than ever before were able to travel to the mysterious “East,” and as such, it became far less mysterious. Furthermore, the American “Walter McCarran Act” (which nullified all previous anti-Asian exclusionary immigration laws/acts) led to an increased presence of Asians in America, which also lessened the mystery of the East. These acts did not eliminate Orientalist thinking, but it did lessen, to varying extents, the mystery surrounding the “East” and likely influenced the relocation of the mysterious power of the Green Lantern from the East to outer space.

The Orientalist focus of the Green Lantern series is maintained because of the intergalactic scope of the series. The universal scale of the series allows the writers of the series to move the “other” into outer space. That being said, the Green Lantern is not unique in its Orientalist focus. One genre of comic books in particular, jungle comic books, shared a similar theme. They, like the Green Lantern series, were “. . . centred on a hero -- either male or female but always white -- who championed Western interests and sensibilities in savage lands plagued by internal chaos and external threats.” (Wright, 2001:36). Although the majority of Green Lantern narratives were focused on North American social justice issues, some narratives, such as “The Planet of Doomed Men” follow the same Orientalist pattern as the aforementioned
jungle comic books.

“The Planet of Doomed Men” (Aug 1960) is especially intriguing in the way it portrays primitive or even “savage” races of human beings from other worlds. In this narrative Jordan is instructed by his ring to solve a conflict on a distant planet of human beings (Broome et al, 1960). These humans are depicted as being less evolved in both appearance and language, and are drawn in an apelike fashion. Importantly, these beings are referred to as “the primitive humans of calor,” which resembles, quite strikingly, primitive humans of colour (Broome et al, 1960). The monster responsible for the conflict on the planet is an ape (Broome et al, 1960). Historically, the ape is an image that has been used to promote the view that people of colour, and their rituals, are primitive. Jordan is both a member of the intergalactic police force known as the Green Lantern Corps and is a test pilot who represents world order, technological development, American ideals, and in a broader sense – modernity. Jordan's defeat of the ape monster can thus be read as Western modernity's defeat of the primitive “other”.

Jordan's victory over the primitive ape monster can also be read as white America's domination over the primitive. After defeating the monster on their planet, Jordan observes the people praying to a tree spirit in gratitude (Broome et al, 1960). He connects this act of worship to their primitive nature (Broome et al, 1960). Upon seeing this, Jordan reflects that he should not interrupt their ceremony, as their belief that he is the answer to their prayers is not harmful (Broome et al, 1960). Since Jordan, by being a part of the Corps, participates in a daily, almost religious, ritual himself – he has to recite an oath and participate in a ritual to change his Green Lantern ring - his attitude towards both the religious ritual and people before him is intriguing. It could be reflective, to some extent, of an implicit critique of Orientalism.
The immortal beings known as the Guardians of the Universe are depicted as nothing less than gods. Their command of the Green Lantern Corps, along with their intention to preserve order across the universe, has religious implications. Indeed, the requirement of each Corps member to recharge his/her ring by reciting an oath daily has religious aspects. Each Corps member must recite the oath towards his/her own power battery, which is directly connected to OA (the planet where the immortal guardians reside) (Broome et al, 1959). Through this ritual, the object of the green lantern becomes a religious artifact or relic from OA. The writers of the *Green Lantern* series are aware of the religious implications of this daily ritual referring to it as “sacred” repeatedly throughout the series.

Even though the Green Lantern Corps has a unified religious undercurrent, the Corps also symbolizes a peaceful sense of unity amongst diversity. The Corps is made up of sentient beings hailing from all over the universe. Some of the planets and races that specific Corps members represent are at war with each other, but under the mantle of the Green Lantern Corps these differences are overcome for the sake of unity. The Green Lantern Corps is a shining example of what a culturally diverse universe can achieve through peaceful co-operation. According to Ricoeur, texts project a worldview that readers can project themselves onto. The worldview that the Green Lantern series projects through the Corps is idealistic. It promotes an ideal of religious plurality. According to Gadamer, when a reader encounters a text their worldview blends with the worldview projected by the text. If the worldview expressed by the *Green Lantern* series blends with the worldview of the reader it could lead the reader of the comic book series to desire and work towards a similar ideal.

As the bronze age of comic books took hold in the 70's the Green Lantern series went
through further changes. At this point in comic book history the CCA's influence on comic book content was beginning to wane (Wright, 2001:229). In response to the counter cultural movement of the 60's comic book writers began to return to their roots, namely, the social justice concerns of the Golden Age. Super-villains remained a focus in Green Lantern, but social justice issues were also explored.

By pairing the socially and politically conservative Jordan with the anarchist and liberal minded Green Arrow (Oliver Queen) the writers were able to reflect, and comment on, the political dialogue happening in the "real" world through the second order representation of the world expressed by the series. This famous pairing, beginning in 1971 critiqued the social system relentlessly. At the end of the majority of the narratives during this period Jordan is shown reflecting on what it means to uphold justice in a morally grey society. Issues such as drugs, sex, racism, corruption, and native rights are just some of the problems the series addressed during this period.

Commenting on the famous comic book issue where Green Arrow's ward, Speedy, is addicted to drugs, Alan Cowsill states the following: “It was taboo to depict drugs in comics, even in ways that openly condemned their use. However, writer Denny O'Neil and artist Neal Adams collaborated on an unforgettable two-part arc that brought the issue directly into Green Arrow's home, and demonstrated the power comics had to affect change and perception” (Cowsill, 2010:146). In the 60's and 70's the art that stemmed from youth culture (such as comic books) was being increasingly recognized as a form of art that “. . . played a major part in reflecting and affecting the upheavals of the 1960's” (Wright, 2001:229). Commenting on the Green Arrow and Green Lantern team up series O'Neil explains that “. . . while enormously
complex problems couldn't be dissected within a 25-page comic he hoped that his work 'might awaken youngsters to the world’s dilemmas, giving them an early start so that they might find solutions in their maturity’” (qtd in Wright, 2001:229). During this era the CCA was revised which allowed comics to do and show more controversial issues. Unlike the time of the Kefauver hearings, the beneficial influence of the comic book was now being upheld.

Series like Green Lantern/Green Arrow gave a voice to the disgruntled youth of the nation. Instead of veiling their political commentary, mainstream comic book authors and artists – like the underground “comix” creators of the sixties – were bringing their concerns to the forefront while confronting the bigotry of the series in the past. The series became overtly political. Although “… real world politics had always gone hand-in-hand with comics and their creators' own personal perspectives …” these perspectives were not always communicated in a clear way (Cowsill, 2010:139). After the counter cultural movement comic book writers began to be bolder about how they express their own political views.

The presence of political views in the comic book “… was never more creatively expressed than when writer Denny O'Neil and artist Neal Adams paired the liberal Green Arrow with the conservative Green Lantern” (Cowsill, 2010:139). This unique pairing allowed the series to explore and represent the social dialogue present during the era. It introduced shades of grey into Hal Jordan's previously black and white morality. It also addressed some of the past ills that even Green Lantern took part of through his own inaction. In one particular narrative, Jordan confronts his ignorance of the plight of black people while he was busy helping aliens with an assortment of different colour skins. He entertains the possibility that his blind allegiance to authority may have led him to allow injustices to occur. In Green Lantern No 77
Jordan realizes that “. . . authority isn't always right” and that he “. . . doesn't know what is just” (O'Neil et al, 1970). Additionally, the Green Lantern series introduced John Stewart as the first Black Green Lantern (O'Neil et al, 1971). The explicitly political flavour of the Green Lantern series in the bronze age enabled the series to get even more involved in issues surrounding social justice and diversity.

Recent narratives, such as the War of the Green Lanterns mini series (2011), have continued the explicit critiques of the bronze age. Most recently, critiques expressed in Green Lantern narratives have focused on cultural plurality and religious diversity. These story arcs have centred on conflicts between the Green Lantern Corps and other different colour lantern Corps. Each lantern Corps has its own powerful “entity,” its own rituals, ideals and goals, which often conflict. The narrative discloses that the guardians of the universe knew about the other entities but chose to banish them (Johns et al, 2011). In their wisdom, the guardians purged themselves, and much of the world, of the harmful influence of these other powerful entities (Johns et al, 2011). They sought to maintain peace in the world through the Green Lantern entity alone and saw all the other entities – based on emotion rather than willpower- as harmful (Johns et al, 2011). As a human being, one of Jordan's main conflicts with the guardians has revolved around his human nature and his tendency to be too emotionally driven and therefore, too potentially connected to these other entities. The Lanterns have trained, painstakingly, to overcome their emotions and desires in order to serve the Corps and the cause of justice. According to the guardians, to be a part of the Corps means to relinquish any potential tie to the other entities (Johns et al, 2011).

The introduction of other coloured Lanterns, along with the periodic necessity to work
with them, forces the lanterns to reconsider the harmfulness of the emotional spectrum. In *War of the Green Lanterns* each of the four earthmen Green Lanterns are forced to don the rings of forbidden Lantern Corps in order to save their own (Johns et al, 2011). By doing this, each lantern is forced to abandon his or her devotion to the green entity of will power alone. Each Corps member has to reach into, and accept, the entity his or her new coloured ring represents. At the end of the narrative, each character returns to their Corps (Johns et al, 2011). When they return they do so with a renewed understanding and respect for the other coloured rings.

The worldview that is expressed from the guardian's point of view is representative of religious exclusivity. By crafting a narrative that requires the Green Lanterns to violate that exclusivity the writers and artists critique religious exclusivity and encourage interfaith dialogue. The world projected by the *Green Lantern* series in this narrative reflects the conflicts of the real world regarding religious diversity. The guardians can be read as representing certain fanatical religious communities threatened by the very prospect of religious dialogue. The Corps members can be read as religious adherents who privilege their own beliefs but recognize the necessity of interfaith dialogue to solve world conflicts. This narrative is an ideal example of the way the *Green Lantern* series has changed over time. It has critiqued the exclusivity embedded within its Orientalist roots and encouraged interfaith dialogue and diversity.

It is clear that over the last seventy years the Green Lantern mythos, like the real world it reflects, has gone through many changes. It has shed its Orientalist roots and has moved on to embrace diversity. This diversity has taken many forms. Periodically, it is visible through the religious inspirations or influences apparent in the narratives. Other times it is present in the narratives themselves. Recent story arcs have begun to recognize the potential for justice that the
other coloured Corps may share with the Green Lantern Corps. The tensions between the
different Corps may reflect some of the tensions between different religious groups in our own
society. The willingness of the different coloured lanterns to work together when universal
threats emerge is similar to some inter-religious dialogues occurring in contemporary society.
As the lanterns work out their ideological differences by recognizing each other's value they are
transformed. It is possible that, through participating in the creation of the narrative and by
projecting themselves onto the characters of the story, the reader too is impacted.

As mentioned earlier, media reflects and refracts the "real" world. According to
hermeneuticists like Gadamer and Ricoeur, texts (including comic books) project a second order
representation of the real world. The current diversity present in the *Green Lantern series'*
representation of the real world is reflective of the diversity of the authors/artists and audiences.
This second order representation of the world, through cultural identity formation, has the
potential to influence the first order world we currently live in. As readers project their own
world (which Ricoeur claims they do) and their own identities (which McCloud claims they do),
onto the fictional world and characters contained in the Green Lantern mythos, they can
internalize the positive evaluation of both cultural diversity and religious plurality that the
narrative presents.

**On Captain America**

Although Captain America does not contain any explicitly religious parallels, his role as a
piece of American propaganda sets him apart as an important character to study. Captain
America was created to represent America and reflects the evolution of what it means to be
“American” in light of a diverse populace. Analyzing the way the Captain America series approaches public policy can shed light on tensions that arise when America violates so called “American” ideals – especially when these ideals relate to cultural diversity and religious plurality.

Superheroes have a history of serving “as emblems of national coherence” and as productive sites “. . . for investigations into the creation, maintenance, and sometimes disruption of national identity.” (Costello, 2012:62). These roles are especially evident in the Captain America series. Although most Superhero titles have political leanings of some sort (often associated with the political leanings of the authors, artists and/or censorship committees) Captain America’s political history is especially notable.

Joe Simon “. . . explained that Captain America’s origin was consciously political because ‘. . . the opponents to the war were all quite well organized. We [Joe Simon and Jack Kirby (the creators of Captain America) specifically, but also supporters of the war in a broader sense] wanted to have our say too’” (qtd in Wright, 2001:36). Captain America was not the first Superhero to get involved in WWII – that title belongs to Superman - but because of his “. . . instantly recognizable red, white, and blue costume, his shield of stars and stripes, and his patriotic bravado, Captain America became the definite comic book entry into the culture of World War II” (Wright, 2001:31). The early entry of Superheroes into a conflict, which, in the case of Superman, had not even begun yet, is related to the Jewish background of comic book writers and artists (Wright, 2001:35). Essentially, “Simon and Kirby [who were both Americans of Jewish heritages] used Captain America to wage metaphorical war against Nazi oppression, anticipating the real American war they believed was inevitable”(Wright, 2001:36). In this way,
Captain America, like Superman before him, was an instrument of WWII propaganda before the United States actually entered the war.

Captain America’s role as an instrument of propaganda continued well into the war. During wartime, government manuals instructed “... the producers of entertainment to present American society as a great melting pot free of racial, ethnic, and class conflict -- in other words, an image of American society that was far more united and integrated than American society really was.” (Wright, 2001:35). Comic books were a form of entertainment that was especially popular during wartime - both on the home front and abroad - and, as such, were important tools in establishing this false image of a unified America. The importance of comic books in this regard goes beyond their wide readership. Wright claims that “... by their nature, comic books seemed well suited to perpetuate this desirable national fantasy” (Wright, 2001:35). Captain America was designed to take advantage of this nature - he represents - in many ways - an idealized, or maybe even false, view of America.

Captain America may have represented an idealized view of America but that did not prevent the series from containing negative Orientalist views towards the East. Series featuring Captain America were not the only comic books that contained anti-Asian (specifically anti-Japanese) sentiments. The Orientalist tendencies of comic book heroes, like Green Lantern and Captain America, were heightened during wartime. During WWII “[c]omic books rendered the Japanese using the most vicious caricatures that artists could imagine” (Wright, 2001:45). In a post Pearl Harbour environment these caricatures could have been justified as simple war propaganda but this argument falls short as soon as one compares the caricatures of Japanese enemies with European enemies. The amount of hate directed to the Japanese outweighed that
directed at Germans or Russians (Wright, 2001:48). Anti-Japanese sentiments in comic books were not just directed at enemies. These sentiments were also directed, albeit to a lesser extent, towards Japanese Americans. Americans who had a German or Russian heritage fared much better than Japanese Americans in comic book renditions (Wright, 2001:48).

The tendency to treat enemies of Asian descent worse than people of European descent in comic books betrays the racist foundations of the American worldview during wartime. Captain America, the supposed heroic embodiment of America participated in this racism. The racist treatment expressed in comic books reflects the societal reality. It also reveals the American public's violation of the ideals of social and individual justice and freedom.

Not all people of Asian descent were treated terribly in the pages of comic books. The Chinese, who, prior to Pearl Harbour were portrayed as “. . . mysterious and sinister villains who schemed to promote racial dominations from the opium dens, torture chambers and laundries of fog-bound American Chinatowns” now fared much better (Wright, 2001:49). This is because of the newfound alliance between America and China. After this alliance the “Chinese became a peace loving, albeit rather simple, people, and the Japanese became the standard bearers for the ugliest stereotypes” (Wright, 2001:49). Although the Chinese were treated positively (compared to the Japanese) in comic books it is important to note that even this positive treatment carried Orientalist overtones. The Chinese were now allies but by being portrayed as “simple” they were represented as being clearly below the Americans. The relationship between Americans and the Chinese in comic books reflected Roosevelt's “Good Neighbour Policy” (Wright, 2001:50-51). The Chinese may have been a good neighbour but the United States was clearly represented as the bigger, smarter neighbour (Wright, 2001:53).
The racist treatment of the East on the pages of comic books did not go unnoticed. A section of Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* was centred on racism in comic books and seemed justified in its critique. In the “Silver Age” of comic books these racist portrayals calmed down but so did comic book sales. Although some heroes, like Superman survived the post war Superhero decline, Captain America, like Green Lantern, did not. Captain America's demise occurred in issue 75 (1950) of the series. It was not until 1963 that Captain America found himself in the colourful red white and blue pages of the comic book.

As the Silver Age of comics took hold in the 60's Captain America was again revived. This time returning “. . . as a World War II hero, literally revived out of suspended animation, haunted by past memories, and trying to adapt to 1960's society” (Wright, 2001:215). Marvel completely ignored the anti-communist flop of the past and started afresh. A theme that permeated many Superhero titles during the Silver Age of comic books was American unity. Most heroes, were “. . . squarely on the side of established authority, with which [they] naturally equated the best interests of American citizens” (Wright, 2001:184). This was likely influenced by the controversy surrounding Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, the Kefauver Senate hearings that followed, and the perceived communist threat of the Cold War. During this era all DC Superheroes were upstanding, law abiding citizens (Wright, 2001:184).

In the height of the Silver age Marvel comics decided to diverge from the typical Superhero silver age pattern. Marvel introduced “. . . ambiguity into the vocabulary of the comic book Superhero . . .” fusing “. . . the disorientation of adolescence and the anxieties of Cold War culture into a compelling narrative formula” (Wright, 2001:215). Instead of having Superheroes simply represent the establishment, Marvel heroes rejected “consensus and
conformity” (Wright, 2001:217). These new heroes “. . . were misunderstood by the public and persecuted by the authorities . . .” (Wright, 2001:217). This new narrative formula tapped into the persecution and misunderstanding that many Americans, particularly, minorities and youths, were experiencing. As Wright puts it - “[t]he outsider hero had arrived as the most celebrated figure in youth culture and Marvel had him” (Wright, 2001:223). Captain America, as a revived character of the past, tapped into this new “outsider” formula. By introducing ambiguity and limitations into this “new breed” of Superheroes Marvel was able to comment on the limitations of the great superpower that America now represented (Wright, 2001:217). The CCA limited a full exploration of these issues but comic books were beginning to return to the social justice critiques of their birth. The counterculture movement of the sixties – expressed in underground “comix” like God Nose – paved the way for mainstream comic books to fully embrace their potential to critique society. This embrace came to fruition during the Bronze Age of comic book heroes.

During the Bronze Age the Captain America series underwent a further transformation. Captain America was no longer a Nazi bludgeoning soldier or an anti-communist crusader. He now dealt more directly with issues of race, cultural diversity, and national identity. Although the counterculture movement of the sixties affected most Superheroes in the seventies and eighties, it was Captain America who, “[p]erhaps more than any other Superhero, [. . .] bore the burden of these political and cultural changes. As a sworn champion of patriotic values, Captain America had to determine what those values now meant” (Wright, 2001:244). For most of Captain America's beginnings he was the epitome of American propaganda but in the 70's (and afterwards) Captain America began to critique sacred parts of American society.
In both *The Avengers* and *Captain America* he has “. . . stood up to patriots who espoused racism or violence, questioned the nation's governance during the Watergate era, and most recently, asked hard questions about the American way – and about the policies that have made that way possible over the years.” (Garrett, 2008:48). At one point, during the Watergate scandals, Captain America renames himself “Nomad” because he has no home. He eventually “. . . resumes his identity as Captain America and pledges to reclaim the ideals of America which its leaders have trampled upon” (Wright, 2001:245). Although Captain America reclaims his identity, his expression of alienation (by taking on the name “Nomad”) reflects the challenges Captain America faced regarding his role as a symbol of modern “America”.

With regard to the Vietnam War this challenge became particularly pronounced. Controversy over whether or not the United States should have been involved in Vietnam led to Marvel deciding not to take a political stance. This decision was meant to ensure that none of Marvel's readers were alienated (Wright, 2001:223). Captain America did not take a stance on the war but this did not mean that the series did not express the political instability regarding the controversial topic. Even though “Captain America said little about Vietnam, the letters to the editor became a forum for pro-war and anti-war readers to debate political issues that had little or nothing to do with the stories in the comic books” (Wright, 2001:244). Marvel's trend setting decision to include a section in each comic book dedicated to letters from fans added a new political dimension to the comic book.

This political dimension provided a place for young comic book readers to voice and develop their political opinions. For many comic book readers “. . . comic books offered more than a casual distraction. They opened up an absorbing alternative that helped disaffected young
people carve out a sense of identity in a vapid consumer culture” (Wright, 2001:253). Comic books and the fan letters section helped young comic book readers forge their individual identities. By identifying with the character of Captain America and reconciling their social reality with the world that the comic book presents, comic book readers were given a unique opportunity to work out their individual and national identity in the midst of shifting perceptions of what it meant to be “American”.

This political dimension was not only used for debating international conflicts – it also was utilized to negotiate internal national conflicts, such as racial, religious and cultural diversity. One particular story arc - “Captain America No More” (1987)- features Steve Rogers refusing to serve simply as a government operative. Since Captain America is technically a product of the United States the government strips Rogers of his title and costume. The government then replaces Rogers with John Walker and James Barnes (Bucky) with the African American Lemar Hoskins (Gruenwald et al, 1987). These replacements are notable. By having Walker (a southerner) and Hoskins replace Bucky and Captain America the writers of “Captain America No More” are commenting on the “ . . . evolving relationship between region and nation in the 1980’s - an era in which, as Cobb and McPherson suggest, that relationship was particularly fraught and ambivalent” (Costello, 2012:66). The way this relationship is depicted is far from shallow, “ . . . the story both interrogates and sometimes reaffirms the traditional relationship between the South and the nation” (Costello, 2012:66-7). What Costello fails to address directly is the way this relationship also “ . . . interrogates and sometimes reaffirms the traditional relationship between . . . ” whites and blacks during a time period where the nature of this relationship was being reformed. “Captain America No More” is not only about regionalism
and nationalism, it is also about navigating what it means to live in a multicultural society without one culture suppressing another.

The goal of the “Captain America No More” narrative appears to be a noble one. It seems that Mark Gruenwald, through this story arc, is attempting to promote racial equality. The series “... pays lip service to the notion that Walker and Lemar are equal partners - rather than a hero and his sidekick” (Costello, 2012:73). However, the series fails to move beyond mere lip service. The first noticeable inequality amongst Walker and Hoskins is related to the shoes they were filling. Walker was expected to fill a mantle previously occupied by a living legend whereas Hoskins was responsible for replacing an eager teenage fanboy.

Secondly, the name “Bucky” is problematic for two main reasons. Firstly, “buck” was a racial slur (Costello, 2012:72). Secondly, the addition of the suffix “y” to “buck” added insult to injury; “buck” as a racial slur always referred to big, violent, black men - adding the suffix “y” to “buck” while placing Hoskins in a costume meant for a teenager effectively amplifies the violence of power associated with the term “buck” in a very insulting manner (Costello, 2012:72). This gross oversight – related to shifting semantic fields - led to fan outrage in the form of letters. Even though Gruenwald addressed the racial slur of the name and was deeply apologetic, the general tone of the story arc remained racially paternalistic (Costello, 2012:73).

Costello notes one particularly striking example of this racial paternalism when he observes that many of Hoskin's missions require him to play the role of a racial stereotype. In one story arc Hoskins is required to play the role of “... the black pimp out to tempt white women down from their pedestals and into his bed [metaphorically, he is actually pretending to recruit them as nude models for a men’s magazine]” (Costello, 2012:77). In this instance
Costello observes that Hoskins is actually playing “. . . the role of the ‘buck’ with its associated danger and sexuality, but only as a ruse meant to serve the government’s aims” (Costello, 2012:77). Costello goes on to claim that Hoskin’s “. . . safe performance of the buck’ suggests the containment of forces that might otherwise prove disruptive to white privilege” (Costello, 2012:77). In this way, “Captain America No More” supports, perhaps unintentionally, the racial tensions and white privilege that characterize America society in the 80's.

The governmental use of racial stereotypes in this 80's narrative mirrors the cultural landscape of the time. On the one hand, Gruenwald’s choice to use an African American as a prominent comic book character combined with the statements of equality throughout the narrative reflect the anti-racist movements of the era. Gruenwald’s choice to pair Hoskins with the Southern Walker shows a clear attempt to illustrate the possibility of peaceful racial - and cultural- diversity and equality in American society. On the other hand, the apparent ignorance of the meaning of “buck” and the implications of naming a black hero “Bucky” betrays the reality of white insensitivity to minority situations in the United States. The use of “Bucky” as a clear sidekick to Captain America - he supports and helps his Captain, but rarely leads himself - betrays the embedded, and sometimes unrecognized, mindset of racial inequality. The government’s decision to have “Bucky” enact a racist stereotype also has multiple implications. On the one hand, it shows the recognition that these stereotypes are just that - stereotypes. Hoskins is a clear example that these stereotypes are not always true. On the other hand, Gruenwald’s decision to place Hoskins in this stereotypical role reflects the reality that these stereotypes still defined what it means to be a “black man” - hero or not.
Modern Captain America comic book issues have continued to convey social critiques. Recent comic book issues, especially post 9-11 issues, feature Captain America admitting to flawed policies and dealing with guilt over America’s political policies about the Middle East. At the same time, Captain America expresses his desire and belief that America can undergo reform and be a force for good (Garrett, 2008:48). The Marvel Civil War (2007) storyline is one example of a very thinly veiled critique of the American response to 9-11. In this story arc the government enacts a policy that requires all meta-humans/mutants/Superheroes to register themselves (Brubaker et al, 2007). This policy results in a division amongst the Superheroes (Brubaker et al, 2007). One group of heroes supports the registry whereas the other group opposes it as a violation of rights and freedoms (Brubaker et al, 2007). Interestingly, Captain America – who has been historically the embodiment of American propaganda – is the leader of the heroes who oppose the registration (Brubaker et al, 2007).

Greg Garrett claims that the Civil War story line is a “. . . clear metaphor for the civil liberties given up under the Patriot Act . . .” (Garrett, 2008:49). Building on this, Paul Jenkins claims that in “. . . many respects, Civil War was/is a tremendously topical series that dealt with 'civil liberties and national security, public safety and private freedom' . . . ” (qtd in Garrett, 2008:49). According to Garrett, narratives which feature Captain America breaking American law or governmental policy still make sense for the character. This is because, according to Steve Englehart, Captain America should represent “American principles rather than the American government” (qtd in Garrett, 2008:49). Captain America's peer, Susan Reed (AKA “Invisible Woman” of the “Fantastic Four”) sums up the stance Captain America takes in response to the government policy that he believes is amiss – “[s]ometimes the government is
wrong and when it is you must fight against it, even and especially when you are alone, even if it costs you your life” (qtd in Garrett, 2008:51). One explicitly politically damning view of American policy is expressed by Captain America when he refuses to commit vengeful violence in response to 9-11. Instead, he expresses a steadfast desire to remain in America and help rebuild it (Garrett, 2008:100-101).

Instead of hating all Muslim’s for the atrocities of 9-11, Captain America defends these American minorities from violence (Garrett, 2008:104). Instead of promoting revenge and cultivating a “us vs. them” mentality Captain America promotes love and forgiveness and encourages all Americans to stand with the oppressed and suffering – including Muslims (Garrett, 2008:106-109). By protecting Muslim minorities, the Captain America series promotes a strong message of anti-Islamaphobia in the midst government policies that seem to affirm it. Determining what it means to fight for “American” ideals when the government seems to be misrepresenting these ideals is a defining theme of the modern Captain America.

Captain America reflects the disparity between imagined, often idealistic, cultural identity and actual cultural realities. Captain America also reflects the very real tensions present within communities forced to live in this type of cultural paradox. However, Captain America does more than just reflect this disparity and the tensions connected with it; the series embodies it within itself. Thus, the Captain America series is evidence of this disparity. By projecting themselves on the character of Captain America readers can work out this disparity along with him. When the reader's horizon or worldview collides with the world projected by the comic book narratives, the reader has an opportunity to re-evaluate his or her own worldview in light of the one presented to by the text. The worldview presented to the reader by the Captain America
series is one that simultaneously problematizes and promotes cultural diversity and plurality. By projecting themselves into the world they perceive in *Captain America* (as Ricoeur claims texts allow readers to do), comic book readers are exposed to alternative ways of thinking about cultural diversity that highlight the benefits of religious plurality.

**Conclusion**

In this paper I have tried to demonstrate that comic books are not simply child's play. Far from being idle reading material, comic book narratives signify a modern manifestation of myth in an increasingly secularized world. The unique structure of the comic book is an ideal container for the expression of mythical narratives because it combines both text and image and this multimodal quality may account for the vast religious history of the comic book medium. Comic book heroes are, in some cases, re-imagined mythical characters. These characters follow the same archetypical hero pattern that traditionally defines mythical heroes. The appeal of both comic book heroes and traditional mythical heroes stems from their ability to balance the intuitive and counterintuitive perceptions of the reader/listener. Moreover, certain comic book characters are often treated with the same reverential treatment frequently reserved for mythical heroes.

The similarities between myth and comic book narratives have led scholars like Arlow and Knowles to claim that comic book narratives are modern myths. Hence, comic book narratives may serve the same purposes as myth, namely, to critique, reflect, and potentially transform society. The similarities between myth and comic book narratives suggest that reading a comic book can activate the same cognitive processes as those activated by listening to
a mythical narrative. These cognitive processes cause messages to be remembered internally, vividly, and for long periods of time. The memories associated with these cognitive processes can sometimes affect identity formation and underscore the potential transformative function of both mythical and comic book narratives.

The potential transformative function of comic book narratives is heightened by the way the structure of the comic book encourages reader identification and participation. By identifying with comic book heroes and helping to create the narrative, the reader can become more invested in the story and identify with its message. This process of psychological internalization increases the possibility of the narrative message affecting the reader in a profound way.

The hermeneutic methodology outlined in this paper addresses the unique challenges an interpreter faces when approaching the study of comic books. This methodology highlights both the multimodal and participatory nature of the medium. Both Gadamer and Ricoeur recognize that texts project a worldview to readers. Gadamer contends that the act of reading leads to a blending of these worldviews (or horizons), while Ricoeur claims that the text presents an opportunity for a reader to project himself or herself onto the worldview that the text presents. Although Gadamer and Ricoeur privilege different models of interpretation they share the belief that reading a text affects the reader. The multimodality of the comic book requires the incorporation of semiotic theory. When this methodology is combined with semiotic theory it is suited to address the shifting symbolic meanings of images in comic book narratives. When this hermeneutic is applied to the comic book medium it heightens the potentially transformative function of the medium.
If comic books possess a transformative function, then perhaps their narratives can be analyzed in terms of how they express certain cultural and religious ideas. Such an analysis can shed light on the various ways Western society values the idea of cultural diversity and religious plurality. For example, *Green Lantern* and *Captain America* appear to have strived (perhaps sometimes imperfectly) to promote a positive attitude towards diversity, but still reflect the Orientalist mentalities that characterized Western discourse during the twentieth century.

By exploring certain social tensions and simultaneously promoting the value of cultural diversity, the comic book narratives that characterize *Green Lantern* and *Captain America* provide readers with an opportunity to reflect on real life issues. The potentially transformative function of comic books in general, combined with the positive view of cultural and religious diversity expressed in *Green Lantern* and *Captain America*, suggests that both of these series promote the idea of social reform.

*Green Lantern* is especially suited to foster this type of change because the narrative reflects the negative history of imperialism and Orientalism, while critiquing social policy and espousing the value of inter-religious dialogue and understanding. In this way, The *Green Lantern* series is a microcosm of the “real” world and presents readers with an opportunity to reflect on their own views about cultural and religious diversity.

*Captain America*, on the other hand, is the embodiment of American propaganda. In early narratives the character represented American idealism and social unity during World War II. More recently, the Captain America has been refashioned to embody the struggle of an alienated American trying to make sense of American culture in a post-9/11 world. By affirming the relative value of the individual, *Captain America* encourages an understanding of cultural
and religious diversity based on equality.

The place of comic books in the future may not be certain. Commenting on the future of the comic book medium Wright states that “[i]n this culture, comic books do have a place. And they will endure so long as they bring out the super hero in us all”. Wright's comment may be idealistic but it touches on an important aspect of the comic book that has been explored throughout this paper, namely, that the comic book is socially transformative. Historically, there has been much controversy surrounding the nature of the transformative power of comic books. Do they have a positive influence or a negative one? This question is not easy to answer, however, I hope that this brief analysis has shed some light on the various ways comic books depict, shape, and possibly transform our collective understanding of cultural and religious plurality.
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