

A Roundtable on Paul Hirsch, *Pulp Empire: The Secret History of Comic Book Imperialism*

Justin Hart, Matt Loayza, Caryn E. Neumann, Cameron D. McCoy, Lori Clune, and Paul
S. Hirsch

Introduction to Roundtable on Paul Hirsch, *Pulp Empire*

Justin Hart

Over the last quarter century, two of the most vibrant subfields in the historiography of U.S. foreign relations have been the literatures on public/cultural diplomacy and the relationship of race and racism to U.S. foreign policy. In *Pulp Empire*, Paul Hirsch is not focused on engaging the major debates in either of those fields, but he nevertheless makes an extremely compelling case for the centrality of comic books in telling each of those stories.¹ The following reviewers do an excellent job summarizing the structure and major arguments of *Pulp Empire*, so I will not duplicate their work and will instead concentrate on synthesizing their assessments of the book.

The reviewers are unanimous in praising Hirsch's book as "compelling," "enormously enjoyable," filled with "telling quotes and interesting anecdotes," and "composed with an enviable clarity of expression." Caryn Neumann closes her review with the simple statement that "the book is recommended," and based on what they write here I think the other three reviewers would certainly agree. In addition to commending Hirsch's prose, his eye for detail, and his cogent summaries of particularly revealing individual comic book issues—"he read so we don't have to," as Lori Clune puts it—reviewers also appreciated the beautiful presentation of the book, which includes numerous full-color reproductions of images (printed on high quality paper) from the comics being discussed. In order to fund such an expensive publication with a university press, rather than a commercial press, Hirsch applied for and received a subvention from the Robert B. Silvers Foundation. We are all beneficiaries of his entrepreneurial impulse here, because the book simply would not have been as effective without these images.

The reviewers do, of course, also have their "quibbles," some more than others. Clune argues that "the narrative threads tend to tangle. The chronology here may jump around a bit for some readers." Cameron McCoy notes the lack of an attempt to resolve the paradox of arguing, on the one hand, that the comic book industry was a refuge for various minoritized peoples, while on the other hand indicting the publications as a whole for their absolutely vile misogyny and racism. Why, in other words, did these people not have more of an impact on the final product?

Matt Loayza asks for "a more precise definition of the pulp empire"—a concept that would seem central to the argument, but really only appears in the introduction and conclusion and is not contextualized within the large literature on the United States as empire. Two reviewers question why the story stops in 1965. Finally, Neumann offers a critique that is a constant weakness of almost all studies of U.S. public and cultural diplomacy—the lack of data or evidence about the impact of the media in question upon foreign populations: "The book is strongly focused on consumption inside American borders," Neumann points out.

Hirsch offers a thorough and generous response to the reviews. He concedes most of the reviewers' critiques, while attempting to clarify the concept of the "pulp empire" and why the narrative stops in 1965, as well as restating the book's major arguments. He also acknowledges the ways that "the realities of time, funding, and my physical disability" (not to mention CIA intransigence on FOIA requests) prevented him from tracking down the answer to every question raised by his story. The same is true for all of us, of course. No book can do everything, so readers should use these reviews as an inspiration to pick up a copy and judge for themselves. Enjoy this thoughtful discussion of the *Pulp Empire*!

Note:

1. Perhaps because he is targeting a crossover audience, Hirsch is largely silent on historiography, even in the introduction. Many of the staples of the literature on U.S. public/cultural diplomacy appear in the endnotes to chapters 5 and 6, but more for contributing factual information to his narrative rather than to engage their arguments or the field as a whole. In terms of the very large number of books on race/racism and U.S. foreign relations, the only titles to appear in Hirsch's references are Thomas Borstelmann, *The Cold War and the Color Line: American Race Relations in the Global Arena* (Harvard University Press, 2001); and Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Harvard University Press, 2006). That said, I think many of the authors in both of these fields will immediately recognize how many of Hirsch's arguments about comic books fit into their own arguments about the role of image in U.S. foreign relations.

Review of Paul S. Hirsch, *Pulp Empire: The Secret History of Comic Book Imperialism*

Matt Loayza

In *Pulp Empire: The Secret History of Comic Book Imperialism*, Paul S. Hirsch examines the convoluted relationship between the U.S. government and the comic book industry from the Second World War to the mid-1960s. U.S. officials, captivated by the potential of comic books to disseminate ideas, joined forces with the comic book industry during both the Second World War and the Cold War as part of their propaganda campaigns, which were designed to showcase American values and discredit totalitarianism. The government's support for and partnership with commercial comic book publishers helped to legitimize the industry and expand its markets, which complicated subsequent efforts to devise coherent and comprehensive propaganda strategies.

The resultant "pulp empire" was a contested space in which policymakers in Washington vied with comic book producers, officials of other nations, cultural critics, and a growing body of international readers over control of the visual and narrative content within comic books. Over the life of the pulp empire, U.S. propaganda officials sought to curb the perceived excesses of the industry while simultaneously appropriating the medium to realize their policy goals. Hirsch argues that the most essential and enduring facet of the pulp empire was race, and that policymaking decisions related to comic book content were "driven by the matter of race and its role in US foreign policy" (31). In the long run, he believes, efforts to portray America as an enlightened, tolerant society were undermined by racist depictions of people of color and whiteness narratives.

Pulp Empire's seven chapters can be divided roughly in half. The first three chapters examine how the government came to view the comic book as a potent propaganda weapon in the war against fascism. Comic books, dismissed by Americans as lowbrow entertainment since the birth of the medium in the early 1930s, nevertheless attracted a growing number of young and adult readers by the end of the decade. U.S. officials quickly grasped that comic books were a cheap means of conveying powerful visual images (and, accordingly, ideas) to wide audiences of varying literacy levels. Uncle Sam subsequently partnered with comic book publishers and appropriated the medium by developing its own products to educate their readers on the need for domestic unity and the perils of fascist totalitarianism.

Following the defeat of the Axis powers, Washington ended its partnership with and oversight of the industry, whereupon commercial publishers proceeded to sate the appetite of their American and international audiences for sex, violence, and the macabre with a number of lurid crime, horror, and romance titles. Although these stories offered far more provocative social commentary than did traditional media, such nuances were lost upon a growing number of critics, who recoiled at the prospect of tales that portrayed the more unsavory aspects of American society.

The second half of the book (chapters 4 through 7) explores how the controversial themes presented in crime, horror, and romance comics prompted a widespread backlash against comics in both the United States and abroad. Psychiatrist Fredric Wertham led a growing coalition of Americans who blamed comics for stunting the intellectual and moral growth of American youth. Wertham

devoted considerable energy to alerting the public of the dangers that displays of gore and cleavage posed to the body politic. He added that if the pervasive displays of poor taste in comics did not damage the reputation of the United States beyond repair, then the racist caricatures of non-white peoples would certainly finish the job.

These charges resonated with an increasing number of critics overseas, and the growing outcry prompted the government to pressure the industry into accepting self-regulation in 1954. The government subsequently reappropriated the medium (via collaborations with select publishers and the creation of its own comic books) as a means of alerting the developing world to the threat of Soviet communism.

Meanwhile, the commercial comic industry struggled through the 1950s because of the chilling effect of the 1954 Comic Book Code. Its revival began shortly after the failed Bay of Pigs Invasion, when the Timely Comics Company rebranded itself as Marvel comics and introduced a new stable of superhero titles that featured more complex character development and relationships

that readers found more realistic and relatable. Hirsch observes that despite these innovations, Marvel's characters operated in a sphere that was strikingly similar to that of World War II comics: a bifurcated, simplistic world where white heroes led the forces of good against non-white villains.

From the outset of his book, Hirsch emphasizes that propagandists regarded the cheap, portable, and malleable nature of comics as prime virtues. The fact that comics were not taken seriously as literature or art was originally viewed as an asset rather than a disadvantage, since their modest reputation made them unlikely objects of scrutiny and could thus help them fly under the radar. By the early postwar period, U.S. officials had come to disdain the "violent, racist, and imperial" (212) nature of commercial comic books.

However, officials remained convinced of the medium's power to persuade and were still aware that comics were highly popular across the globe. As the 1950s progressed, growing concerns that the developing world was increasingly susceptible to Soviet influence prompted them to appropriate comic books, eschewing the unreliable commercial comics in favor of their own titles, which they produced and disseminated for audiences in Latin America and other parts of the developing world.

Hirsch draws upon numerous examples to support his points, and he has a keen eye for telling quotes and interesting anecdotes that will provide scholars with an abundance of materials that are certain to engage students. Notable highlights include textual and visual analysis (the text is accompanied by illustrations) of a 1947 tale in which Donald Duck builds an atom bomb. It detonates and irradiates the good citizens of Duckberg, whom Donald proceeds to swindle (138–39).

Donald's disdain for civic responsibility and the gloomy depiction of atomic weaponry were highly problematic to U.S. officials, who preferred the reassuring themes found in a 1949 educational comic in which Blondie and Dagwood show a more "chipper attitude toward atomic energy" (129). Later chapters include a concise and engaging summary of the anticommunist narrative formulas featured in the Marvel superhero titles during the first half of the 1960s. Although Bradford Wright has already established Iron Man's Cold War credentials, labeling him as "the most political of Marvel's superheroes," Hirsch reveals that Iron Man had a kindred spirit in Thor.¹ Although the Norse God of Thunder may appear to be an unlikely disciple of

George Kennan and Paul Nitze, Thor needed little urging to align himself with the United States in the Cold War, going as far as to battle the Vietcong in a 1965 story that concludes with the expected repudiation of the communist way of life (254).

Hirsch describes the “pulp empire” as the result of a “complex and fluid network of interactions” in which a wide variety of policymakers and commercial comic book publishers contributed to and often contested the creative content of these increasingly popular cultural forms. He establishes that U.S. policymakers would attack or appropriate the medium depending on their policy objectives at any given time and that this approach lent itself to numerous inconsistencies and contradictions.

That said, the book would benefit from a more precise definition of the pulp empire. The empire was clearly amorphous, but turns of phrase stating that “sticky” comics “were everywhere, and yet they were nowhere” (16) often tend to obscure rather than enlighten. The development and maturation of the networks that Hirsch references merit further scrutiny; the book ably describes several of these relationships, but it is not clear when the networks actually begin to function as a pulp empire. Finally, given the importance of race to the pulp empire, I am curious about Hirsch’s thoughts on the long-term repercussions of the pulp empire’s narratives to Washington D.C.’s efforts to cultivate improved ties with the developing world.

Although *Pulp Empire* persuasively defines comic books as both a popular form of entertainment and an important, valuable propaganda vehicle, the claim that comics were a “uniquely powerful” (6) form of “revolutionary media” is somewhat overstated (12). In discussing the Eisenhower administration’s use of cultural diplomacy, the author notes the importance U.S. officials attributed to showcasing American culture (notably, through jazz exhibitions) to show the world that the United States was a refined, sophisticated nation.² He goes on to argue that French and British anti-comic book campaigns of the late 1940s and early 1950s indicate that “low” cultural forms possessed as much power as their elite counterparts, but he does not really test this assertion by examining how high and low culture impacted French and British opinion.

Moreover, while U.S. officials clearly viewed comics as important in their own right, the author does not devote extensive analysis to how policymakers viewed comics relative to the other media at their disposal. Although some attributes of the comic book were not easily duplicated by magazines, radio, film and, later, television, it would be interesting to discover how American propagandists thought the comic book stacked up against the other options at their disposal.³

To his credit, Hirsch pulls no punches in identifying racism as one of the linchpins of the pulp empire. He contends that “race was inseparable from the evolution of the comic book and its relationship to policy” (273). Indeed, one of the most important contributions of his book is its revelation that racist assumptions prompted white policymakers and commercial publishers to make faulty and contradictory decisions time and time again. Both before and during the Second World War, comic book depictions of non-white peoples drew from a wide variety of existing racist stereotypes. Although U.S. officials urged comic publishers to portray the United States as a nation that valued both its own diverse citizens and its global allies, it simultaneously promoted narratives that often reduced the global conflict (particularly the Pacific Theater) to a conflict between white America and a violent, devious, and racially inferior enemy.

Unfortunately, America’s Latin American, Filipino, and Chinese allies fared little or no better. In a painful but telling example from a 1941 comic, Hirsch shows that the Chinese member of the Blackhawk squadron, “Chop-Chop,” was created for comic relief and depicted in demeaning, racially stereotyped ways. He was a team member in name only. Hirsch’s findings lend further credence to Brad Wright’s observation that while comics often paid “lip service” to national unity, few bothered to explore the role of racial tolerance and inclusivity in a definition of national unity.⁴

Although the postwar crime, horror, and romance comics earned notoriety for their salacious and violent content, Hirsch again directs our attention to how these titles dealt with race. Whereas wartime comics generally portrayed non-whites as sidekicks, people of color virtually disappeared from crime and horror comics, resulting in “a construct within which being American is synonymous with being White” (112). Jungle comics, one of the few genres that regularly featured people of color, adhered to white supremacy narratives. Here, Africans invariably appeared as primitive peoples who were easily subdued and then led by white heroes such as Sheena and Tiger-Girl. Since these stories ran counter to America’s efforts to be regarded as

an inclusive society fit to lead the free world, the authors of the Comic Books Code of 1954 took steps to eliminate them, specifying that “ridicule or attack on any religious or racial group is never permissible.”⁵

Alas, comic book editors responded by writing African-Americans out of the comics entirely, thus avoiding the issue of race altogether. After 1954, the consistent feature of comic narratives, regardless of publisher, genre, or hero, was whiteness. Even Marvel, hailed for breaking new ground in several ways, was “hardly radical” in its approach to race and U.S. foreign relations. The early Marvel Universe cast the Fantastic Four, Iron

Man, and even Thor as unapologetic anti-communists in a binary conflict in which white heroes defended democracy against non-white, totalitarian villains (264).

Although the author acknowledges that the pulp empire endures in modified form to the present day, he concludes his analysis in the mid-1960s, which he views as the peak of the U.S. government’s efforts to create and disseminate comic book propaganda. By this point, the ability of comics to shape opinion, particularly opinion in the developing world, had been eroded by the ongoing U.S. aggression toward Cuba, the failure of the Alliance for Progress to live up to its initial hype, and most of all, the “optics of America’s war in Vietnam” (240). Although this theory is plausible, it remains to be seen whether international readers were sufficiently aware of events in Vietnam prior to 1965 to consciously reject pro-American comic book propaganda, or whether international audiences became more skeptical of these narratives later in the decade as the war escalated.

Readers who have a passing familiarity with comic book history will likely be frustrated by Hirsch’s 1965 endpoint, for the story only becomes more interesting at this point. As Brad Wright has noted, Marvel started to address its egregious whitewashing of the Marvel universe in 1965, when illustrations of African Americans as average citizens first appeared in background street scenes. Marvel introduced its first black superhero, *Black Panther*, a year later, and in the second half of the decade Marvel, however timidly, began to introduce social issues such as Black Power, feminism, and the Vietnam War in its storylines.

Although it is fair to say that comic publishers such as Marvel were dragged rather than pushed into the “relevance movement,” the introduction of social issues nevertheless marked an important turning point for the genre.⁶ The impact of these new twists to the narrative

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formulas of the pulp empire remains to be explored, and one hopes that Hirsch is open to writing a sequel. That said, this volume is an ambitious work that suggests fascinating questions for future research. It also opens up the potential for historians to further their engagement with interdisciplinary scholarship in various fields, among them mass media studies and critical race theory.

Notes:

1. Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore, MD, 2001), 222.
2. See Penny M. Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War* (Cambridge, MA, 2004).
3. On this point, see Susan A. Brewer, *Why America Fights: Patriotism and War Propaganda from the Philippines to Iraq* (Oxford, 2009), particularly chapter 4.
4. Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 53.
5. "'Good Shall Triumph over Evil': The Comic Book Code of 1954," *History Matters*, available at <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/6543/>.
6. Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 219, 233–34.

Review of Paul S. Hirsch, *Pulp Empire: The Secret History of Comic Book Imperialism*

Caryn E. Neumann

Trash is fun. The U.S. government shipped thousands of works of great literature around the world during the Cold War, but it also sent millions of comic books. Readers loved comics. Passed from person to person and often left in waiting rooms, comics would be read until the pages fell apart. Unfortunately for American plans to win the hearts and minds of other peoples, the comic books portrayed the United States as a horrific place, filled with extreme violence, virulent misogyny, and ugly racism. Paul S. Hirsch discusses these trashy works in his enormously enjoyable *Pulp Empire: The Secret History of Comic Book Imperialism*.

Visually arresting and easy to read, the comics of the 1940s and 1950s were not today's graphic novels. With titles such as *Crimes by Women* (1949), *Fight Against Crime* (1951), and *Underworld Crime* (1953), these books had no pretensions. The cover of *Underworld Crime*, reproduced in Hirsch's book, shows two simian-looking thugs about to assault a terrified woman with a red-hot phallic-looking tool while her horrified husband/boyfriend, tied up with rope, looks on. The cover of *Thun'da* (1952) features a half-naked Tarzan look-alike saving a barely dressed woman by attacking stereotyped Africans, primitively attired, with large lips and claw-like hands. As Hirsch persuasively demonstrates, these images were common and informed a global readership that the United States remained a deeply racist and violent country despite government pronouncements to the contrary.

The ubiquity of comic books in the late 1930s, '40s and '50s made them powerful. As Hirsch reports, early comic books sold between 200,000 and 400,000 copies per issue. Nearly all American boys and girls in the 1940s and 1950s read them, and the federal government's support for the industry during the war ensured that millions of American adults did too. Hirsch cites a study that claims half of urban families read comics. He does not cite studies of readership outside the United States, as the book is strongly focused on consumption inside American borders.

Adult readership grew during World War II, as half of all soldiers and sailors relaxed with comics. The Navy

even classified comics as essential supplies for the Marines stationed on Midway. However, the little books were never reputable. Much of American society regarded them as slightly above pornography.

Popular, with plain text that was easy to read and comprehend and storylines that emphasized raw emotion, comic books looked to the Writers' War Board (WWB) like the perfect medium for their purposes. A quasi-governmental agency, the WWB used funding from the federal government during World War II to attack fascism, encourage racial tolerance, and promote international cooperation. As lowbrow entertainment, comics seemed to be an unlikely vehicle for government propaganda, but through the WWB, comics became political media. Even the advertisements, which would never be found in explicit propaganda, were geared toward helping comics to promote government aims. The agency never tested the effectiveness of comic-based propaganda, though, and Hirsch provides anecdotal evidence that the comics did not change racist beliefs among Americans. This anecdotal evidence also undermines his argument that comics subsequently had a powerful influence on overseas consumers of American comics.

Despite the WWB's efforts, comic creators continued to employ the ugly words and images that had always made comics sell well. Derogatory racial tropes appeared on the same pages as patriotic, inclusive imagery. Hirsch cites the example of a 1943 issue of *Young Allies*. The allies, a group of children, are fighting Japanese soldiers. Both the Japanese and the only Black member of the allies, Whitewash Jones, are depicted in the crude, racist visual language of the era. Jones has thick purple lips and wears garish clothing. The Japanese have piglike noses and enormous buckteeth. While the WWB helped shape some positive stories, these stories competed on newsstands with a hundred other titles

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with vicious stereotypes. Hirsch notes that the WWB had no tangible evidence that audiences absorbed the correct messages, but he doesn't present any proof that audiences absorbed the wrong ones, either, though the circumstantial evidence is strong.

Superheroes dominated comic books during World War II, but funny animal comics sold well, and crime stories also appeared at this time. After the war, the public preferred crime, horror, and romance. Hirsch provides a superb history of mid-century comics. He notes that the true-crime genre, which tried to portray real events in as shocking a manner as possible, first appeared in 1942, when the first issue of *Crime Does Not Pay* came out. That issue was so different from other comics that newsstand workers were unsure how to display it. On the cover, gunmen are shown shooting at each other across a saloon, while a dead body falls to the floor and a wounded man slumps on the bar. Another gunman chokes a buxom woman while pointing a machine gun at his opponent. On an inside page, a man is shown bending a woman over a stove and setting her on fire. As Hirsch notes, major characters who were not white rarely appeared in postwar comics, so the increasingly graphic violence the comics showed was directed at whites. While *Crime Does Not Pay* sold poorly during the war, circulation leaped after the soldiers came home, and in no time, copycat comics from other publishers appeared on the newsstands to take advantage of the desire from readers for extreme violence in realistic settings.

American publishers sold their products, both in English and in translation, in dozens of countries. By the early 1950s, over four hundred comic book titles could be found

on newsstands in the United States and abroad. American tourists, soldiers, and diplomats also brought these comics overseas and then left them in various places to be read by others. Few people thought twice about abandoning them, as they were cheap and only about sixty pages long. New readers would pick them up in barbershops, hotels, and doctors' offices to amuse themselves and kill time.

Hirsch fills his book with a wealth of examples of the imagery found in the comic books of this era. A popular anthology, *Wings Comics*, which was distributed internationally in both English and Spanish, typically featured images of bondage in which women were both the victims and perpetrators of sexualized violence. Black characters, who rarely appeared in these pages, adhered to stereotypes. Chinese men were uniformly portrayed as communist troublemakers, while Chinese women alternated between being hypersexualized or fetishized as helpless pro-American dolls. These images, Hirsch argues, undermined the state-sanctioned presentation of America as a culturally advanced and politically inclusive society.

America's international military commitments expanded at the same time the comic book industry became a major cultural and economic force. The strategy of containment, coupled with federal support for American companies involved in global trade and a growing emphasis on international tourism, guaranteed the steady circulation of uncensored comic books on every continent. Working independently or under the auspices of the Marshall Plan, private American companies shipped comics to merchants in Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Hirsch notes that one publishing company received a contract from the Economic Cooperation Administration (ECA) for sending comics to Germany that was about five times larger than the ECA orders for *Reader's Digest*, *Time*, Bantam Books, and Pocket books combined. The Pan American International Agency sent 50,000 to 90,000 copies per month of the crime comic *Accion policiaca* to all Spanish-language countries in Latin America except Argentina. It is not clear why Argentina was spared. The International Comics Group sent Spanish-language horror and romance titles to every Spanish-speaking country. Ziff-Davis shipped *G.I. Joe* to thirty-five countries.

The U.S. government bought and distributed violent, racist comic books as weapons against totalitarianism. Apparently, no one considered that it might be self-defeating to present the nation as a cesspool of hate and brutality. Hirsch does not present a government defense, if one exists, and this is certainly a shame, as the reader is left to wonder what officials could possibly have been thinking. He does suggest that they may simply have not paid close attention to the contents of comics because they were so eager to promote American culture.

Until psychiatrist Fredric Wertham raised the alarm in 1954, no one attempted to censor the violence in comic books. Films had been subjected to varying degrees of censorship nearly from the start, while works of literature also faced bans for deviating too greatly from community standards. Comic books, however, occupied a different rung in popular culture. Since they were low art, most people may have simply dismissed them as having no value and no impact anyway. Army intelligence and the FBI had begun covert investigations of the industry once they realized that crime and horror comics promoted skepticism about the Korean Conflict, cynicism about government, vicious misogyny, and both racist and pro-civil rights imagery. J. Edgar Hoover, the head of the FBI, suspected that a Communist

published *Crime Does Not Pay* because of the disrespect for authority in its pages and its celebration of violence and chaos. The combination of covert investigations, Wertham's call to arms, and the U.S. Senate's desire for a juicy public investigation led to a public reckoning.

Wertham succeeded in neutering comic books by linking deviant behavior in children to violent images in the medium. Testifying before a Senate subcommittee on juvenile delinquency, he observed that comics were always found near any children or young adults committing acts of violence or cruelty. The hearings horrified the American public, or at least the ones who did not enjoy comics. The committee discovered that Communists in Asia and Africa cited comic books as evidence of the depravity and racism in American life. Since American soldiers spread comic books, communist propagandists capitalized on the image of soldiers littering the world with violent and racist narratives. Comics also provided ammunition for anti-colonial movements that stressed the racial history of the United States. Propaganda from Romania, Iran, and Czechoslovakia used comics books as source material. Hirsch does not share this propaganda with readers.

In 1954, the Comics Code Authority, an initiative by comic publishers to fend off government censorship by censoring themselves, prohibited graphic images of violence and gore as well as salacious images of women. The Comics Code killed off crime and horror comics, leaving only the superhero and romance ones. Most adult readers subsequently found other amusement, and comics became frozen in the public imagination as infantilized entertainment of little worth.

In summary, Hirsch effectively explains why the comics should have horrified Americans who were trying to promote a positive image of the United States. But he is much less effective in demonstrating the actual impact of the comics. The book opens with the Pakistani ambassador to the United States relating in 1952 that his young sons loved American comic books, acquired them in Pakistan, and left stacks of them behind in every hotel. After that, foreigners disappear. There are no accounts from Europeans, Asians, Africans, or Latin Americans about how they perceived the United States as the result of reading comics. In a book devoted to imperialism, hearing the voices of the colonized would have added considerable value.

Hirsch does include—unnecessarily, I think—a discussion of a graphic illustration created by the CIA to instruct assassins on how to kill. While the graphic has sequential artwork and uses images and text, it is a stretch to call it a comic. It is violent and offensive, but it was not commercially produced for sale to a general audience. It is just a few drawings. The reader gets the sense that Hirsch found a juicy tidbit in the archives and was determined to squeeze it in somehow.

Lastly, it is perhaps unfair to complain that a researcher who explored eight archives should have visited one more, but Hirsch appears not to have checked the Billy Ireland Cartoon Library at The Ohio State University. This is the largest archive devoted to comics in the world, and a visit is a must for comics researchers.

Despite these quibbles, *Pulp Empire* is a fascinating and delightful book. While it focuses on government policy, its treatment of comics has considerable depth, and the many images of trashy comic book covers it includes add to the fun of reading it. Hirsch's work will appeal to all readers and should prompt vigorous discussions on the Cold War and the impact of cultural works upon foreign policy. I recommend it.

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Review of Paul S. Hirsch, *Pulp Empire: The Secret History of Comic Book Imperialism*

Cameron D. McCoy

Paul S. Hirsch begins *Pulp Empire* with the observation that “the comic book is uniquely powerful. Relatively uncensored, enormously popular around the world, and characterized by the remarkable diversity of its creators and consumers, the American commercial comic book can show us aspects of US policy making during the mid-twentieth century that no other object can” (6).

It is quite clear that Hirsch’s *Pulp Empire* has taken its lead from Bradford W. Wright’s *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (2001), but only in one respect: both recognize the American foundations of the comic book. Hirsch even acknowledges Wright—as he should. But apart from this obvious link, and his study of the effects of the comic book on American culture, Hirsch has set himself apart from other scholars of this genre, like Mark D. White, Robin S. Rosenberg, and William Irwin.

Comic book specialists will be delighted with Hirsch’s ability to show how cultural constructions of identity within societies and political institutions can be significantly altered by “pulp.” His work also reveals how matters of global consequence and transitions involving winning hearts and minds—specifically in the decolonizing world—were often influenced by commercial and propaganda comic books. *Pulp Empire* is thus a history that assumes two ideas: “diplomacy and culture are connected,” and the U.S. government “deliberately used popular culture” during World War II and the Cold War to achieve victory (10).

In seven chapters, framed by an introduction and conclusion and divided into two parts, *Pulp Empire* covers the creation of the American comic book and the beginning stages of its legitimization through government agencies, industry officials, and public intellectuals. It then focuses on the effects of the “pulp empire” and how it transformed the comic book industry’s content and global distribution. It convincingly introduces cultural, political, and diplomatic issues such as racism, capitalism, communism, and consumerism in ways that highlight American cultural authority and imperialism. According to Hirsch, “the American comic book was bound up with matters of race and capitalism” throughout World War II and the Cold War, and “[e]very decision made by federal agencies was, at its core, shaped by these two issues . . . At every point, political demands and policy priorities shaped the comic book industry and the medium’s contents, both commercial and propaganda titles,” and thus “transformed the comic book into a political object and a weapon deployed around the world” (21–22).

Too often, traditional comic book scholars and those studying the effects of the American comic book on culture tend to gravitate towards researching the entertainment and media psychology that suggests that comic book characters may influence how we think about ourselves and others. While Hirsch allows himself to feel the pull of this force, it is only to draw closer attention to four historical elements that describe the story of the American comic book: visual culture, commerce, race, and policy. He points out that “these four fields are analogous to the four colors used to print comic books: cyan, magenta, yellow, and black. They lie atop one another, smearing, blending, and

bleeding to create a complete image. To separate them is to disassemble a coherent whole and to shatter a picture that in its entirety shows us how culture and diplomacy were entangled during the mid-twentieth century” (22). Each element built on the next in uneven ways while providing detailed contours to the forces that affected these fields.

Within these four fields, Hirsch tackles themes of sexuality, violence, crime, jingoism, decolonization, femininity, and masculinity to show how the global distribution of comics both informed and frustrated American efforts to project a more sophisticated and inclusive democracy—a democracy that would serve as a suitable alternative to Soviet communism. The comic book industry expanded greatly, as the government used visual culture to fashion covert and overt propaganda that would shape and disseminate perceptions of America’s enemies, allies, and non-white citizenry.

During World War II, for instance, the Writers’ War Board (WWB)—a private domestic propaganda organization—helped define America’s enemies by promoting dehumanizing images of the Germans and the Japanese. The WWB depicted these Axis powers as “racially and culturally defective yet also eminently beatable opponents.” This portrayal was critical for shaping domestic wartime narratives that increasingly imagined the Germans and Japanese not just as “the other,” but as “fundamentally, irredeemably evil and violent” (38). The WWB’s intent was to ensure that all Americans viewed them as “racially defective, incurably violent, and responsible for their own destruction” (46).

The visual medium of pulp accomplished several goals. It showed that undemocratic nations were aggressive, “innately bigoted, and cruel”; it encouraged hatred and intolerance, which allowed the United States to engage in “justifiable discrimination” to eliminate global fascism and bring about greater postwar peace; and it convinced Americans that non-white allies would always remain different, “human yet not quite White.”

In this respect, the visual medium of pulp accomplished several goals. It showed that undemocratic nations were aggressive, “innately bigoted, and cruel”; it encouraged hatred and intolerance, which allowed the United States to engage in “justifiable discrimination” to eliminate global fascism and bring about greater postwar peace (46); and it convinced Americans that non-white allies would always remain different, “human yet not quite White” (59).

Because of the war, the United States prioritized victory over fascism and asked its citizens to pursue unity en route to military dominance and not to try to incorporate civil rights along with global democracy. As a result, black characters in comics were treated as footnotes, portrayed as tertiary characters and condemned by their black skin to being one-dimensional buffoons. This portrayal also influenced how white audiences interpreted and absorbed messages of tolerance and cooperation among non-white/non-American nations.

As uncensored comics continued to find larger international audiences through formal and informal networks of American distributors, visual depictions of crime stories showing violence and sex came to dominate the pulp empire, captivating millions. However, this crime, horror, and romance genre created certain problems. “By their very nature,” Hirsch writes, “these comic books posed a challenge to the growing domestic consensus that the survival of American-style democracy required a long-term confrontation with international communism. In a society that imagined itself as a more inclusive alternative to Soviet-style dictatorships, [they] raised uncomfortable questions about the true state of race relations, gender roles, and economic inequality” (85). Despite their primitive and aggressive storylines, crime-themed comics like *Crime Does Not Pay*, *Underworld Crime*, *Fight against Crime*, and *Crimes by Women* were wildly popular and appeared to present images of a postwar America that was at odds with

womanhood. These images also conflicted with the more wholesome messages of a sophisticated society promoted by propagandists and policymakers.

In 1954 Dr. Fredric Wertham, a German American psychiatrist, author, and anti-comic book crusader, published a critique of the effects comic books had on the minds and behavior of children who come in contact with them. In *Seduction of the Innocent* he argued that comics were instruction manuals (“maps of crime”) for criminal activity, juvenile delinquency, and violence. Wertham would be the leading exponent of the effort to undermine comic books along social and cultural lines, but the pulp empire would remain strong. His warnings about the long-term threat of the comic to moral authority, about delinquency, iniquity, and perversion, could not compete with consumer culture. He and others underestimated the comic book’s advance in the twentieth century. Comics were more than a silly diversion, primarily for kids. Across the entire entertainment spectrum, comic books filled a vacancy in a lucrative space at the bottom of the cultural hierarchy that united adults and children.

In any event, the pulp empire’s economic engine was nearly unstoppable by 1944. The attraction of characters like Steve Rogers (a.k.a. Captain America), Superman, Wonder Woman, and Captain Marvel very quickly made comics a pop culture mainstay. By early 1942, reports by *Business Week* and *Publishers Weekly* revealed that monthly sales for comic books had climbed, in a matter of four years, to fifteen million. This sales rate would nearly double by the end of December 1943. Moreover, publishers generously assumed that there was a “pass-along value” of five readers per comic book (18–22). With almost 125 different comic book titles hitting newsstands each month, retail sales neared \$30 million.

During the war years, U.S. commerce and industries experienced a boom, and the comic book industry was no exception. In 1944, the *New York Times* had reported that 25 percent of magazines shipped overseas were comics, which quickly landed in the hands of U.S. troops. At least 35,000 copies of *Superman* alone were read by troops each month, making comics a huge part of military culture. Thus, with the military serving as a viable microcosm of society, comic books, specifically the dominant genre of superhero comics, proved to be fertile ground for introducing stereotyped representations of cultural and ethnic relations.

Because comics relied so heavily on visually codified depictions of characters that were routinely reduced to their appearances, race became a central feature of the pulp empire. Reductionism gained a great deal of momentum in the industry, especially in superhero, crime, horror, and romance narratives. However, non-white characters found little room in the predominantly white pulp institution as mainstream figures. For African Americans, there would be no masks and capes to disguise any sort of alias. No such costume could conceal their appearance and enable them to assimilate in any meaningful way into the white culture of the pulp empire.

For many black artists and writers, the only way to disguise themselves was to appear invisible, which is what many did. Hirsch contends that “[despite] the relative freedom accorded comic book creators, one topic remained taboo in romance stories: interracial relationships. As with crime and horror comic books, the world within romance titles was virtually all White” (110). I found this to be the most paradoxical aspect of power within the pulp empire during this era. The pulp empire employed black and Jewish

artists, writers, and illustrators, but failed to acknowledge their presence prominently and positively on comic book panels.

Hirsch also argues that the most remarkable aspect of the race and diversity issue is that “[the] legacy of the pulp empire was, ironically, created by some of the least influential people” in America, yet what they created “significantly shaped global perceptions of the United States” (10). While he makes this assertion primarily in response to global decolonization and the rejection of comics as “grotesque products of American cultural imperialism” and the “embodiment of American cultural authority,” the depictions of race, violence, and sexuality in comics did influence “domestic and international federal policies toward the comic book” (10).

These depictions in fact generated significant issues for policymakers. In order to bolster the effort to extinguish communism and fascism in a decolonizing world, they were determined that everyone should view the United States as the global mainspring of cultural, political, and military power. The atom bomb, itself a symbol of technological progress and military power, provided policymakers with another tool to demonstrate to the world the racial and intellectual superiority of the United States over non-white nations, but its depiction in comics was problematic too, because it raised the specter of nuclear holocaust and

made America appear even more elitist. Hirsch thus calls attention once again to the comic book’s global reach and its influence on domestic and foreign policies, highlighting not only racism, violence, horror, crime, fascism, and delinquency, but also how everyday men and women dealt with some of the greatest issues of the day—including nuclear war.

Hirsch remains intent on showing how Dr. Wertham continued his crusade to delegitimize the comic book and demonstrate its adverse effects during the Cold War, first at home and then abroad. For Wertham and the members of the 1954 Senate Subcommittee Hearings into Juvenile Delinquency, with the special focus on Comic Books (i.e., Estes Kefauver, Thomas C. Hennings, Jr., Olin D. Johnston, William Langer, and Alexander Wiley), the comic book posed several challenges as it made its way to non-white nations. The subcommittee highlighted four concerns in this new age of decolonization and a freer global community. First, they were troubled by the increasing popularity of crime and horror comics. Second, because of the violence in comic books, they felt foreigners were being exposed only to a primitive and undesirable version of American life. Third, uncensored American comic books were creating “particular problems” among non-whites. And finally, Soviet propagandists were using comics as prime examples of the depravity of American culture (193). These concerns would highlight America’s myopic and bigoted views of racial tolerance and egalitarianism—all characteristic of an actual empire.

The content of comic books also complicated U.S. efforts to prove that it was a “modern sophisticated society that cherished the contributions of contemporary artists, designers, and composers” (213). However, despite a perceived setback in nations like France and Great Britain, the pulp empire was able to achieve some success in winning hearts and minds and rolling back communism. Marvel characters such as Thor, the Fantastic Four, Nick Fury, Tony Stark, Captain America, and Spider-Man all fed American myths of democracy and U.S. military might, as

represented by the military-industrial complex. According to Hirsch, the “Marvel method” found incredible success as the United States became more comfortable with the atomic age. The new generation of comic book heroes actively supported U.S. military intervention. As a result, “American policymakers benefited from the success of Marvel; by this time, comics had embraced the Cold War consensus and ceased to pose any meaningful challenge to domestic or diplomatic policies” (266). Yet comic books still eschewed almost anything non-white, essentially “whitewashing” the comic book universe.

That failure notwithstanding, Marvel had introduced a brighter universe of American comics to the world. “This new America was no longer a cruel and vicious place. It was a bright, technologically advanced society where superpowered men and women lived among average Americans and shared some of the same problems” (267). *Pulp Empire* captures this imagery in extraordinary ways.

Hirsch’s scholarship is both readable and densely packed with information, completely free of jargon, and composed with an enviable clarity of expression. He ends *Pulp Empire* with the migration of pulp to film, with fresh interpretations of old characters, and with thoughts on how the study of comics remains relevant today and will still be relevant in the future. Although pulp is “powerful, compelling trash that attracts, repels, and fascinates us” all at once (275), he notes, it is also a history of visual culture, commerce, race, and policy that furnishes a window into the hopes, fears, and frustrations that connect us all.

Review of Paul S. Hirsch, *Pulp Empire: The Secret History of Comic Book Imperialism*

Lori Clune

I didn’t think I was a comic book fan -- until, that is, I opened a box of childhood mementos during a COVID/Marie Kondo phase and discovered three *Archie* comics, looking much the worse for wear. Memories flooded back to the Bronze Age of comic books: the musty store, the stuffed boxes, the excitement of a new Archie-Betty-Veronica-Jughead adventure. Like Paul Hirsch, I stepped away from comic books by my mid-teens, but I still can picture *Richie Rich*, *Casper*, and *Archie* comics digest covers many years later.

What a thrill then, to delve into Hirsch’s compelling read and discover a fascinating connection between comic books and U.S. foreign policy. In “grappling with comic books’ political and cultural significance, at home and abroad” he provides “a new interpretation of American diplomacy during World War II and the high Cold War” (6, 10). What Mary Dudziak and Thomas Borstelmann did for civil rights, Hirsch has done for comic books.

Hirsch investigates the place that comic books have occupied in American culture and concludes that “just as the American government shaped the form and content of the comic book, so, too, did the comic book shape U.S. foreign policy. In this fluid relationship between policy and culture, between race and imperialism, was a fresh understanding of the most significant and costly struggles of the twentieth century: the battle against totalitarianism (35). He labels this relationship a “pulp empire.” Whether investigating and attempting to regulate the independent comic book industry or using these “disposable” cultural products for their own “state-sanctioned propaganda” purposes, a range of U.S. government officials and agencies were notable players in the comic book industry (19, 6).

The influence of these millions of comic books — “wonderful, terrible, ephemeral, important trash” — is impossible to ignore (14). Comics are popular, portable, and cheap, with accessible text, clear artwork, and a lingering

ability, which Hirsch calls “stickiness,” to educate and entertain (16). It is not surprising that government officials would want to leverage this cultural product to combat “serious anti-American sentiments around the world” (173).

Hirsch explains that while “commercial comic books could damage US policy goals...propaganda comic books could shore them up” (10). For example, Nelson Rockefeller led an effort to use comic books to fight the “rise in fascist influence” in Latin America in the late 1930s (40). During World War II, federal officials pushed a view of the United States that was “racially and ethnically tolerant” in its effort to defeat fascism (61). The Manhattan Project’s General Leslie R. Groves even urged a comic book depiction of the discovery of nuclear energy, complete with *Blondie*’s hapless husband, Dagwood Bumstead splitting an atom in 1949 (129). Despite the criticism that violent crime comic books garnered in the 1950s, most notably from psychiatrist Fredric Wertham, the CIA decided to create one of their own. The classified nineteen-page comic book provided a “step-by-step guide for assassinations, complete with cartoon images of how to conduct a political killing” (77).

Swaths of Hirsch’s book include comic book summaries that intrigue and often horrify. Many readers will likely be grateful that Hirsch has provided summaries; he read so we don’t have to. Growing up on the adventures of Betty and Veronica does not prepare someone for the decapitations and mutilations that were alarmingly prevalent in these crime comic books. Little wonder that these inspired the CIA.

Hirsch uses Dr. Wertham’s writings, particularly his book, *Seduction of the Innocent*, to examine how comic books were responsible for juvenile delinquency in the late 1940s and 1950s. Downplaying “child abuse, sexual assault, bullying, and economic inequality,” Wertham condemned “any comic book, no matter how benign it seemed” as “dangerous” and “the marijuana of the nursery” (171). According to Hirsch, comic books were attacked by a wide range of political actors, from *Daily Worker* writers to FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover. As a result, publishers banded together to form the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA) and censored themselves, imposing a code on content and advertising in 1954 (185). But the industry adapted to work within the constraints of the code and continued to thrive.

In chapter seven, Hirsch describes WWII-era superheroes and the powerhouse of Marvel Comics. With complex characters, adult themes, patriotism, bright colors, Marvel “totally reshaped the popular understanding of American commercial comic books, both at home and abroad” (246). Most of us have seen the classic comic book cover from late 1940 showing Captain America punching Hitler.

The continuing popularity of WWII superheroes brings to mind Elizabeth D. Samet’s scholarship in *Looking for the Good War: American Amnesia and the Violent Pursuit of Happiness* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2021). Samet explores the nostalgic memory of the “good war” and the sentimentalizing and mythologizing of the U.S. triumph over Nazism. She questions whether “the prevailing memory of the ‘Good War,’ shaped as it has been by nostalgia, sentimentality and jingoism, [has] done more harm than good to Americans’ sense of themselves and their country’s place in the world” (p 5). It seems likely that this appeal of WWII nostalgia, especially during the Vietnam War and the post-9/11 wars, invaded comic books as well.

I am particularly eager to add *Tales of Suspense* 39 (which introduced Iron Man in late 1962) and *Thor Battles the Vietcong* (1965) to my upper division course on the United States and Vietnam. Tony Stark’s genius and “technological hubris” in building the “American military-industrial complex, in the form of Iron Man” to fight

Vietcong guerrillas is audacious and enlightening (253). And exploring with students why Thor, the Norse god of thunder, has become an aggressively anticommunist cold warrior will be fascinating. As Hirsch explains, through these 1960's comic books, readers were exposed once again to "an image of the United States as unambiguously good and its communist enemies as perfectly evil" in spite of the increasingly dour news coming out of Southeast Asia (263).

Hirsch is to be commended for this significant contribution to U.S. cultural history, which overlaps, as such history often does, with U.S. politics, diplomacy, and foreign policy. One hopes government agencies, particularly CIA officials, will reward future FOIA efforts to shine more light on these operations. With more access, historians will be able to further flesh out the Cold War story of comic books in the decolonizing world and the Soviet bloc. We are grateful to Hirsch for blazing this trail. (Personally, I also appreciate Hirsch's candor in admitted to having had a panic attack upon his first visit to the National Archives; I thought I was the only one.)

The author and the University of Chicago Press made good use of a Robert B. Silvers Foundation grant. They understood that the history of a visual medium benefits greatly from high-quality images and paper that is up to the task. Images that appear every few pages and a beautiful layout give the book a terrific aesthetic that brings the story to life. (A history monograph with plentiful images? When do we ever say that? Let's hope more and more often.)

I recommend that survey course professors and high school teachers borrow Hirsch's lens to teach civil rights, diplomacy, propaganda, and the Cold War. While some textbooks and state standards bifurcate these stories, history, of course, does not. Hirsch confirms that "Cold War diplomacy, culture, and race...were all intertwined and blended together, not artificially separated" (9). Comic books can serve as compelling threads to weave these stories together. I have assigned the book as one of fourteen monographs in my spring 2022 graduate seminar on Cold War culture. I am confident it will broaden my students' perspectives.

As is often the case with history, the narrative threads in *Pulp Empire* tend to tangle. The chronology here may jump around too much for some readers. There is also an odd bridge at the end of chapter 1 that alludes to nuclear warfare, but readers are first taken on a detour to early Cold War global anti-communism in chapter 2. It's not until chapter 3 that Hirsch explores Federal Civil Defense Administration efforts to use comic books to "soothe Americans' fear of atomic war," shows how *The H-Bomb and You* enlisted American children as "combatants in the Cold War," and introduces *Donald Duck's Atomic Bomb* (119, 126). But these rarities do not take away from this fascinating and well-told story.

Hirsch admits that "there is no clean ending to this narrative, because it isn't over" (277). He is correct. In addition to many documents not yet public (who doesn't want to know the full story of CIA comic books and the 1984 invasion of Grenada?), the story itself is unfinished history. Historians would be wise to continue this astonishing tale up through the 1970s and to the present day. While television images overshadow comic book propaganda, the print story continues (240). There is much more to tell beyond Captain America punching Hitler. The public will be interested; our students already are.

The Secret History of *Pulp Empire: The Secret History of Comic Book Imperialism*

Paul S. Hirsch

I was enormously excited to learn that *Passport* was organizing a roundtable on *Pulp Empire*. Because my book straddles multiple historical disciplines, I was also curious about the backgrounds of the reviewers. It was good to see that they are a diverse, wonderfully accomplished collection of scholars, and I am grateful to them for their thoughtful and thorough responses to *Pulp Empire*. I would also like to thank Andrew Johns, who arranged this panel.

I was both relieved and gratified that all the reviewers accepted *Pulp Empire's* central argument: comic books are not a juvenile jumble of wild images and silly text but uniquely powerful, political media. Uncensored, enormously popular, co-opted by government agencies as diverse as the CIA, State Department, and the Federal Civil Defense Agency, comic books swept across the globe during the mid-twentieth century. What resulted was a pulp empire—a complex and fluid network of interactions among comic books, America's imperial project, and its crusades at home and abroad against fascism and communism. Within this pulp empire, the power of comic books is real and quantifiable.

I am particularly moved by Lori Clune's conclusion that "what Mary Dudziak and Thomas Borstelmann did for civil rights, Hirsch has done for comic books." To be mentioned alongside these pathbreaking scholars is at once humbling and energizing. It is also delightful that the reviewers did not challenge my claim that comic books provide significant and unique insights into the policies and perceptions of the United States. When I first began tracing the connections among comic books, diplomacy, and race, I encountered a certain hesitancy among historians, some of whom seemed reluctant to accept the comic book as a legitimate and unique optic on American diplomacy. It was only encouragement from my much-loved and recently departed mentor, Marty Sherwin, that kept me on my path. I dearly wish he was here to discuss these reviews with me.

At the start of this project I went, impeccably unprepared, to the National Archives compound in College Park, Maryland. I somehow imagined it contained vast quantities of boxes helpfully labeled "propaganda agencies and comic books," or "the relationship between the State Department and comic book publishers." Of course, this was delusional; the relationships among government agencies and the comic book medium ran across the records of many agencies both overt and covert, hidden in hundreds of boxes boasting labels totally unrelated to comic books. Once I realized this, I promptly had a panic attack and scurried out of the archive.

Always aware of this morale-splintering beginning, I am so grateful that the reviewers largely approve of my research, writing style, and conclusions. It is wonderful to learn that some already use comic books to teach, with Lori Clune noting that "The public will be interested [in *Pulp Empire*]; our students already are." Even so, they identified topics and sources I should have made addressed. Before tackling them, I want to explain the book's structure, style, and flow, and show how I chose what to include in *Pulp Empire* and what to omit.

At the core of *Pulp Empire* is the idea that comic books were inseparable from the politics and physical machinery of World War II and the Cold War. Hundreds of millions,

perhaps billions, traveled abroad with soldiers, diplomats, and tourists. Government agencies including the CIA, the State Department, and the Writer's War Board also created their own non-commercial propaganda comic books for distribution across the Global South. Federal policymakers emphasized comic books in this region because they refused to believe that non-white peoples were sophisticated enough to absorb messages embedded in more traditional propaganda.

It was a particular pleasure to discover a cultural form that not only reached millions of people of color in the Global South but also gave voice to so many marginalized groups of Americans. The industry, described by one artist as "a creative sewer," provided employment to (and exploited) talented illustrators, writers, and editors unable to find work in more mainstream industries because of their race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. Comic books, particularly those published between the mid-1930s and the mid-1950s, offer artwork and text created by Black Americans, women, Jewish Americans, Asian Americans, and other people pushed to the perimeters of American society. Their work was bold, creative, and dangerous, and there was a great deal of it. For scholars, these comic books, which were uncensored, provide a window into the frustrations, fears, and hopes of men and women whose opinions were not valued by contemporary society.

Comic books of all types respected neither borders nor local tastes and, to their numerous and vocal critics, proved quite capable of infecting children and adults wherever American power—political, cultural, and financial—left its mark. To examine history through comic books is to see clear and undeniable connections between the medium and diplomacy, between race and propaganda, and between an uncensored, uncontrolled strain of American media and global perceptions of American society at mid-twentieth century.

I wrote *Pulp Empire* as a crossover history, in two senses of the term. First, I designed it to be relevant to multiple scholarly disciplines, including American history, art history, communication studies, race studies, and gender studies. Second, given the unprecedented global popularity of movies based on comic books and the increasing acceptance of comics or "graphic novels" as highbrow culture instead of entertainment crafted by and for the mentally dim, a political history of the comic book had to appeal to a wide audience for maximum effect. I wanted scholars and general readers alike to understand that we cannot map the mid-twentieth century battles against fascism and communism without comic books; they constitute a vital and overlooked optic on American policymaking and the transnational flow of culture.

I am heartened by Cameron McCoy's observation that my scholarship is "readable and densely packed with information, completely free of jargon, and composed with an enviable clarity of expression." My editor, Timothy Mennel, taught me that a crossover monograph requires clear language, a crisp narrative pace, and a specific chapter structure—both internally and as part of the whole. In other words, it must have a plot and a certain rhythm and flow.

The plotting, rhythm, and flow required for a scholarly crossover book dictated *Pulp Empire's* structure. For example, I open each with a visceral, almost shocking anecdote. The purpose of these anecdotes is twofold: each reinvigorates the book's flow and provides general readers with the necessary background to understand the historical events

that follow. A chapter on the uncensored comic book's unique ability to describe the horror of atomic warfare begins with the story of two people—a child and a Black American man—killed by secret, intentional exposure to plutonium as part of the Atomic Energy Commission's grotesquely misnamed Project Sunshine. I hope that these intensely personal histories refocus the reader, offer essential context, and explain, with a minimum of jargon, that the United States government sanctioned experiments on human subjects far more horrifying than the contents of the crime and horror comic books discussed in the chapter.

Two of the reviewers wonder why my narrative ends in the mid-1960s. It is a valid and complex question, and I answer it cautiously in the book because scholars are still exploring the ways that comic books worked to shape American diplomacy and imperialism, along with global opinions of the United States at mid-twentieth century.

Still, I'll have a go at explaining the book's endpoint. Beginning in late 1954 the previously unfettered comic book industry had to follow a very strict censorship code. Although billions of uncensored comics produced before the code still traveled across the globe, the code made it clear that the federal government would no longer tolerate

the violent, sexual, and deeply racist narratives woven into countless commercial comic books. The domestic comic book industry virtually collapsed. Vastly fewer commercial comics reached consumers in other countries and those that did were neutered.

Government agencies continued creating and distributing their own propaganda comics throughout the decolonizing world for another decade. But the conflict between hugely popular,

uncensored commercial comic books and much tamer propaganda titles was over. The state-sanctioned version had won. Additionally, as best I could tell, the trail of propaganda comic-book and documentary evidence goes cold in the mid-1960s.

Matt Loyaza writes that my definition of the pulp empire deserves further explanation. He is right. I'll take a stab at clarifying the term. The pulp empire took shape in 1943, when the federal Writers' War Board identified comic books as perhaps the perfect propaganda medium. The board began editing and even creating narratives camouflaged in commercial comic books. They aimed to maximize hatred of Japanese and Germans and to convince Americans that the war against fascism was, despite the nation's stated belief in human rights, a race-based battle of annihilation. At the same time, various armed services began sending many millions of patriotic, uncensored comic books (some containing stories created by the WWB) to servicemembers fighting all over the globe. During World War II, publishers and federal agencies enjoyed a symbiotic relationship, each benefiting from enormous sales of pro-American comic books.

It was not until the late 1940s that the pulp empire took its final form. By that time, popular superhero comic book titles had declined rapidly. In their place came a wave of vicious, sexual, and racist comic books. These uncensored crime, horror, and "jungle" titles presented a global audience with images of a United States obsessed with criminals, gore, and violence directed at women and children. Lawmakers from France to Indonesia recoiled at these hateful depictions, triggering numerous diplomatic crises for the United States. It was at this point that the federal government cut off nearly all cooperation

with commercial publishers and began creating its own propaganda comic books to minimize the negative effects of titles like *The Killers*, *Murder, Inc.*, and *Crimes by Women*.

It is this ultimate politicization, the global interplay between billions of uncensored commercial titles and state-sanctioned, anti-communist comic books that really captures the meaning of “pulp empire.” The federal government, no longer working in cooperation with commercial comic book publishers, deployed positive images of race and femininity in American society to mitigate the brutality on display in commercial titles. Its goal was to win hearts and minds in the Global South, while keeping all comic books—both commercial and state-sanctioned—away from America’s white allies in Western Europe, where they made a mockery of American claims to cultural sophistication. The comic book was popular from the outset, but it took government intervention and reaction to make the pulp empire.

As embarrassing as both commercial and propaganda comic books were to the United States, they offered one unambiguously positive trait: they were fun. Yes, commercial comics proved a nightmare to federal agencies and provided endless material for anti-American propagandists. But there is an unarguable joy to flipping the pages of a comic book and savoring its contents. And because of America’s vast numbers of military bases, diplomats, and tourists, it was an indulgence available to a Colombian child or a Ghanaian engineer. Soviet-style propaganda was often quite serious, and American comic books operated as a constant reminder of that joylessness. Winning hearts and minds could not always be about ballet, classical music, or chess. Comic books made this project a happy obligation from beginning to end.

We are all of us living in the pulp empire. Twentieth-century comic books exist as ghosts among us. The excitement, dread, and joy generated by the avalanche of uncensored American comic books are not dead. Contemporary understandings of the United States are a jumble of old and new; they emerge from memory as much as experience. And the cultural impressions formed by billions of comic books still perform cultural work domestically and around the world. Characters created to fight World War II and the Cold War dominate American and global culture. Now, as in the past, they operate with the implied consent of the federal government. These are the phantoms swirling around us still, shaping our popular culture and policies in ways we cannot always single out because their prevalence makes them so familiar. Within the pulp empire, the presence of comic book narratives is almost oppressive.

Caryn Neumann notes that *Pulp Empire* could be improved by the inclusion of market research and demographic studies of comic book readership in the various countries referenced in the book. These include, but are not limited to, Canada, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Mexico, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other nations across the Global South. The realities of my serious physical disability, along with financial constraints and my inability to learn perhaps ten new languages made this impossible, although I used as many French-language sources as I could. But her point is a valid one: a transnational study of cultural co-optation and transmission can only benefit from more global sources. I would like to collaborate with one or several scholars to produce such a book.

Many countries including the Soviet Union, China, and Iran turned the uncensored contents of commercial comic books back against the United States. They used the torrent of violent, sexual, and nihilistic narratives—about a billion every year during World War II and the first decade of the Cold War—as powerful evidence of the cruelty inherent to American-style capitalism. Caryn Neumann flags my limited discussion of these anti-American propaganda programs, as well as the absence of related images. I searched for these records in the files of senate subcommittees, the United States Information Agency and its parent organization, and the State Department. I submitted FOIA requests—inevitably rejected without explanation—to the CIA. In this case, as in others, the simple unavailability of materials made it impossible to include relevant examples in the book. Again, this is a legitimate criticism and a helpful reminder that a thorough understanding of the FOIA system is essential to writing history.

Caryn Neumann also highlights the absence of evidence from a significant comic book archive—the Billy Ireland collection at Ohio State University. I did consult the Billy Ireland collection, but it does not include information or comic books relevant to *Pulp Empire*. I prioritized the largest government and personal collections of comic books, documents, and personal papers, in particular the Library of Congress, the National Archives, the personal papers of Malcolm Ater, and collections at Georgetown University and Michigan State University. I spent so much time in the National Archives in Washington, D.C., for example, that the security guards at the building’s entrance learned about my research and referred to me as “Captain Marvel.” Again, the realities of time, funding, and my physical disability stopped me from exploring every comic book collection in the United States. Still, her objection is perfectly fair. It is important that scholars embrace comic books as a unique means of exploring the past; the more evidence we assemble in support, the better.

All the reviewers note the fifty-odd full-color pictures peppered throughout *Pulp Empire*. Both I and my editor believed that a book arguing for the importance of comic books and visual culture demanded supporting images. *Pulp Empire* would have significantly less power without them. Unfortunately, most academic presses are unable to pay for dozens of full-page illustrations. I would encourage cultural scholars to plan accordingly: applying for grants took up a substantial amount of my time across many years. Financial awards from at least half a dozen organizations enabled me to fund the images in *Pulp Empire*. Without them, the book would be bare.

Writing on visual media, then, requires scholars to walk two paths simultaneously: that of a traditional academic, and of an enthusiastic self-promoter. It is very difficult to fill both roles at the same time, and I am so glad that the reviewers found much of value in the final product. Now I can reassure my younger self, the terrified grad student that ran right out of the National Archives, that the results were worth the effort.