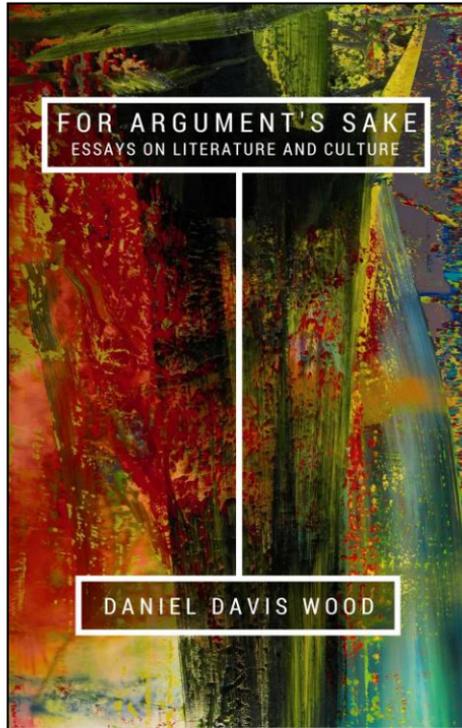


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PICKING AWAY AT POP FASCISM
ROBERT JEWETT AND JOHN SHELTON LAWRENCE'S
STUDIES IN THE MYTHOLOGY OF SUPERHEROISM

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ON APRIL 28, 2005, SOME OF THE MORE BIZARRE POLITICAL PAGEANTRY of the post-9/11 era appeared online and in newspapers across America. In photographs taken the previous day, two spandex-clad superheroes — Spider-Man and Captain America — stood on a stage to flex their muscles alongside the similarly-posed Secretary of State Donald Rumsfeld. The occasion for this unlikely union was a press conference announcing a deal struck between Marvel Comics Inc. and the Department of Defense: Marvel would contribute its cast of colourful characters to a popular entertainment-oriented campaign designed to boost morale among American troops in Afghanistan and Iraq, and would also dispatch one million free comic-books directly to the troops themselves. In the press coverage of the event, however, Rumsfeld's appearance with two well-known costumed crusaders drowned out reports of such business arrangements (see Rosin). Why? What sort of popular cultural receptors were stimulated by the image of those three men flexing their muscles? What popular cultural associations did Rumsfeld silently invoke when he stepped up onstage with 'Spidey' and 'Cap,' and what associations were onlookers likely to read into his being there?

Touching upon the relationships between political power, militarism, the rule of law, and vigilantism, similar questions animate two of the most idiosyncratic and compelling works of post-9/11 cultural analysis: *The Myth of the American Superhero* (2002) and *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil: The Dilemma of Zealous Nationalism* (2003) by Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence. Together, the two books update and extend the argument Jewett and Lawrence first advanced in *The American Monomyth*, published in 1977. In that book, they built on Joseph Campbell's analyses of cultural mythology to define a cultural myth as a narrative which is "uncritically accepted" within a given culture and which thereby "provides a model [for that culture] to interpret current experience," then they went on to draw a distinction between Campbell's "classical monomyth" and their conception of "the American monomyth" (249). Whereas the

classical monomyth rests upon “an archetypal plot pattern... in which a hero leaves home, undergoes trials, and returns as an adult,” the plot pattern of the American monomyth is one by which “a community threatened by evil is redeemed through superheroism” (249). Suggesting that the American monomyth came to prominence with the flourishing of the comic-book superhero in the so-called ‘axial decade,’ the period from 1929 to 1941, Jewett and Lawrence traced its emergence prior to those years, its maturation during those years, and its continuation after those years through dozens of popular narratives in a variety of media from comic-books to radio serials to television series and feature films.

In 2002, with American forces already in Afghanistan and with rising popular and political enthusiasm for military action in Iraq, Jewett and Lawrence saw an opportunity to test the validity of their original thesis against observable socio-political and socio-cultural phenomena. They wondered whether and how the American monomyth, as manifest in popular culture, might have construed and advanced a set of cultural assumptions about what would constitute a legitimate national response to the Al-Qaeda terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 — assumptions later appealed to and invoked by the Bush Administration in an effort to legitimise its own responses to those events:

When we look at the [popular narratives] that receive the steady attention of most American minds, we must also recognize that they are thereby forming a cultural matrix for action. [S]uperhero tales amount to a kind of mythic induction into the cultural values of America. ...

[A]s the artistic creators of popular entertainments respond to current events with mythic scenarios, they help to shape the public sense of what is appropriate in confronting the crises of national and international life. (*Captain America* 28)

In *The Myth of the American Superhero*, Jewett and Lawrence recalibrated and reissued their original argument in order to take stock of post-9/11 political rhetoric in which the United States as a whole

was cast as the archetypal community threatened by evil and capable of redemption only through the superheroism of its leaders. Identifying the logic underpinning this rhetoric as the logic that also underpins representations of conflict resolution in *The Lone Ranger*, the typical John Wayne film, *Rambo*, *Star Trek*, *Superman*, *The Matrix*, and other popular narratives, Jewett and Lawrence suggested that the popularity of such narratives throughout the twentieth century engendered a broad cultural susceptibility to political appeals to governmental superheroism after September 11, 2001. Then, in *Captain America and the Crusade Against Evil*, they turned to the governmental justifications of post-9/11 military action and read them as advocating political actions that represent the real-world apotheosis of the logic underpinning those popular narratives. In effect, the authors extracted from a century's worth of popular narratives the reiterative prescription of a behavioural norm as radically simplistic as the 'one per cent doctrine' — the ideological foundation of almost all of the Bush Administration's post-9/11 national security policies, which held that pre-emptive force supersedes diplomatic negotiation as a means of conflict resolution, and which thus legitimised the use of unfettered military action in Afghanistan and Iraq, of supra-legal surveillance in the domestic sphere, and of extraordinary rendition without respect for *habeas corpus* and due process in numerous black sites around the globe. Together, the two books paint a picture of a culture as convinced as Spider-Man and Captain America that those who wield power thereby possess a moral obligation to defend an *individual* life, even if, in doing so, they risk destabilising the entire culture's *way* of life. In defending an individual life, in short, those who wield power can and must use whatever means necessary to overawe any threat against it, even if overawing it entails a suspension and violation of the most fundamental social, ethical, and legal standards of the culture itself.

The Myth of the American Superhero strikes me as the more impressive of the two books, given that it was published well before much of the logic underpinning the American monomyth asserted itself in post-9/11 political discourses. It shows just how far back in cultural history that logic extends, and consequently how easily it

can be invoked in order to justify otherwise objectionable actions. That said, the two books are in many ways inseparable because structurally complementary. The first examines pre-9/11 popular narratives in order to theorise the machinations of the American monomyth; the second reads those theorisations into post-9/11 cultural narratives, analysing not only the cultural construction of a superheroic government but also the construction of jihadist supervillainy (as distinct from mere terrorism) and the inclusion of Israel in the community requiring superheroic redemption. Bringing the emotional rather than rational justifications of such practices under the banner of “pop fascism” (*Captain America* 42), the two books trace the steady “popularization of a crusading zeal” (*Captain America* 35-39) whose advocates celebrate democratisation as a rhetorical construct even as they undermine the operations of established democracy with what amounts to authoritarianism. Moreover, both books have been expressly written to serve their own countervailing political purpose. By disclosing the emerging confluence between comic-book fantasy and political reality and the blurring of cinematic excess into military prowess, Jewett and Lawrence hope to defuse, and thus articulate an opposition to, the cultural logic they analyse, thereby edging their readers towards an outlook on current events less warped by cultural mythology and more informed by *realpolitik*.

Of course, their argument is an audacious one that can, admittedly, seem silly at first. After all, the mere suggestion that there is anything more than a forced likeness between comic-book superheroism and post-9/11 militarism smacks of conceptual overreach. Ultimately, though, the claims they make of American culture are well-supported by close textual and cultural analysis which allows their argument to steadily accumulate credibility as they progress from one narrative study to the next. Most impressively, they also refrain from attempting to assemble a grand theory of popular militarism in post-9/11 American culture. They are content to offer just one possible explanation for why a people might have so easily and overwhelmingly acceded to particular political actions — an explanation that, at bottom, points towards the politics of fear, but that also shows in careful detail how those politics stimulated very par-

ticular cultural receptors that have occupied a place in American public life for the better part of a century.

If there is a problem with the two books, it is that Jewett and Lawrence exhibit such enthusiasm for their own conception of the axial decade as the generative force behind the American monomyth that they do not adequately explore its roots in earlier centuries and its origins in different but related cultural myths. In particular, while they credit Richard Slotkin as a major theorist of cultural mythology, they pay far too little attention to Slotkin's encyclopaedic study of "the myth of the frontier," "the conception of America as a wide-open land of unlimited opportunity for the strong, ambitious, self-reliant individual to thrust his way to the top" (5). This reticence to engage with Slotkin is a shame because, rather than being sharply distinct from the myth of the frontier, the American monomyth seems to me to be a more evolved incarnation of it. Whereas the myth of the frontier conceived and promoted a radically individualistic value system throughout the nineteenth century, its twentieth century permutation outlines an ostensibly ideal response to a situation in which a culture defined by that value system is found to be under attack. Whereas the myth of the frontier posits that one cannot prosper if one shirks self-reliance in favour of communal or governmental assistance, the American monomyth posits that those who have thus prospered cannot rely on communal or governmental efforts at maintaining law and order to safeguard their prosperity or the prosperity of others. The American monomyth essentially conceptualises superheroism as an extreme manifestation of the radical individualism promoted by the myth of the frontier, which is to say that it takes for granted the dominance of the frontier myth as theorised by Slotkin. I would have liked to see Jewett and Lawrence offer more attention to the overlap between these two cultural myths in order to identify the means by which the first gradually evolved into the second, but the most they offer is a brief discussion, in *The Myth of the American Superhero*, of the nineteenth century popularisation of Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show (49-59). Nevertheless, the remainder of that book and its successor jointly supplement

Slotkin's work in a way that allows readers familiar with Slotkin to easily identify the kinship between his myth and the monomyth.

On the whole, the result is as intellectually adventurous as it is politically unsettling, a sobering reminder that what rendered American culture susceptible to the post-9/11 actions of the Bush Administration — what made the Administration's responses to 9/11 so appealing for so many people — has been with us for a very long time. 9/11 did not create it but only served to reawaken it; and, after informing public discourse in America for more than three years after that event, it at last acquired visible form on April 28, 2005. Spider-Man is a hero inextricably bound up with New York, administering vigilante justice against villains for whom innocent people are collateral damage in a war against established authority. Captain America has a much more international outlook, usually taking any action against a segment of American society as an attack on America at large and pursuing the attackers into international spaces. Donald Rumsfeld, standing between them, assumed a position whereby he represented their amalgamation, responding to the 9/11 attacks with the administration of justice against international enemies and doing so in accordance with a superhero's logic: that, by definition, those with the power to right a wrong need not depend upon others to right it because they themselves can do no wrong in using their power to that end. The simplicity of that logic is galling for some but appealing to many, as suggested by the popularity of the narratives that invoke it; and although Jewett and Lawrence concede that it will likely remain popular for a while to come, they at least equip their readers with an awareness of how to recognise it when contemporary popular culture allows it to manifest in attractive, entertaining, and seemingly innocuous forms.

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