

his study would, however, have benefitted from a brief contextualization of his results based on a wider definition of “transatlantic” incorporating the Americas and Africa. This said, *Romantic Readers and Transatlantic Travel* provides a new and largely unexplored window into how an important part of transatlantic literature was read and understood by a range of readers. It is to be hoped that Jarvis will widen his project and fill an important gap in scholarship.

Jane Mattisson Ekstam

Kristianstad University, Sweden

Miettinen, Mervi.: *Truth, Justice, and the American Way? The Popular Geopolitics of American Identity in Contemporary Superhero Comics*. (Acta Universitatis Tamperensis 1790; Tampere: Tampere University Press, 2012). 317 pages, ISBN: 978-951-44-8995-2. \$103.65

Mervi Miettinen’s study of the popular geopolitics of American superhero comics in the last few decades is the sixth doctoral thesis in Finland in what could be described as the multidisciplinary field of comics studies. In this case comics studies is interweaved with the field of American studies, but the interdisciplinarity of Miettinen’s research is also apparent in her theoretical eclecticism, whereby the analysis draws on various theoretical and conceptual traditions. Throughout the study theoretical perspectives and previous studies are continually engaged in a dialogue with the comics under scrutiny. This approach proves useful as Miettinen manages to highlight many aspects of the relationship between American superhero comics and American popular geopolitics, as well as offering insights into the discourses and tropes so relevant for superhero comics’ ideological or political constructions and connotations.

Popular geopolitics is a term hailing from Gearóid Ó Tuathail and Simon Dalby’s (1998) division of the representational practices of geopolitics into three categories: popular geopolitics, practical geopolitics and formal geopolitics. The first one of these categories refers to “the unique way popular cultural texts contribute to national identity construction and through it, to the geopolitics of a nation” (56). In her study of the scripts of national identity in superhero comics and the position of the U. S. global geopolitics, Miettinen divides the analysis into sections which focus on masculinity in superhero comics, violence as a part of the representation of masculine he-

roics, the superhero's relationship to the state and the authority of the law in democratic society, and finally the significance of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 on superhero comics.

The primary texts analyzed in Miettinen's study were all published in the last thirty years. The earlier history of superhero comics is presented in one of the introductory subchapters. The analysis of contemporary comics is, however, flavored with references to earlier series of comics, as well as comic book issues and story lines, indicating an excellent awareness of the genre that underpins Miettinen's interpretations. The period studied by Miettinen follows, and includes, the introduction of what has been coined as revisionist or revisionary superhero comics, which opened up new perspectives on the heroes, their morals and place in society, and which in the late 1980s was seen as part of the process of comics becoming adult-oriented and reaching maturity. Most of the comics studied were produced by the two publishers that epitomize U. S. superhero culture—Marvel Comics and DC Comics. Some of the comics have been extensively studied before, such as Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, which embody the beginnings of the revisionist superhero story. Others, however, have up till now not gained much attention. The primary material analyzed by Miettinen proves to be well chosen and enlightening, but it would have been interesting to know more about the material's relationship with what has been omitted.

The introduction and the second chapter recite the history of superhero comics and present the broad theoretical framework of popular geopolitics and the study of nationalism. The third chapter then turns to an analysis of the role of masculinity in superhero comics. The broad framework for Miettinen's analysis is offered by the strong male figure of the superhero, often depicted in a hypermasculine way through the visual representation of a muscular male body in skin-tight attire, which embodies masculine ideals tied to so-called hegemonic masculinity. More specifically, masculinity is tied to the theme of white masculinity in crisis in the late 20th century, as well as to "the others" of hegemonic masculinity, represented by non-white, sexually "deviant" and female characters in the comics. The understanding of masculinity is, however, not limited to the visual representation of the superhero and his iconography, but also to an examination of what actions constitute the performance of ideal masculinity.

A close reading of *Watchmen* and the Marvel series comic *The Ultimates* is tied to the so-called crisis in white masculinity, a term used with caution

by Miettinen. In regard to *Watchmen* (published in 1987), Miettinen focuses on three of the male characters, Rorschach, the Comedian, and Nite Owl. They all represent the problematic superhero, personifying different aspects of a troubled masculinity. Rorschach illustrates the problems of vigilantism and misogyny in superhero masculinity, the Comedian leads patriotism to its most violent conclusion, and the Nite Owl raises questions of the superhero's fetishistic nature and the empowerment offered by costumes and other paraphernalia. The Captain America characters of *The Ultimates*, produced fifteen years after *Watchmen*, represent an attempt at solving the problematic nature of masculinity discussed in *Watchmen*. Captain America rises in the comic to be the personification of hegemonic masculinity rephallusized through recourse to violent action. This figure, in Miettinen's analysis, responds to the need for new geopolitical scripts in an America traumatized by 9/11, but he also carries connotations of fascistic ideals that combine masculine power and fascism.

In her analysis of the "Others" of the superhero's hegemonic masculinity, Miettinen first turns to the role of black superheroes, which she presents in an exposé of the history beginning in the 1960s. A more rigorous reading is performed on the series *Truth: Red, White and Black* (by Robert Morales and Kyle Baker), which in 2003 told an alternative story of the first Captain America being a black man. Whereas this move decidedly destabilizes the notion of the white male as embodying ideal masculinity and American patriotism, Miettinen's reading of the comic suggests that hegemonic order is restored through the infantilization of the black Captain America and the opposition created between him and the "real", white Captain. The superhero's heteronormative character is brought to light in Miettinen's analysis of the relationship between Batman and the Joker in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* and Grant Morrison and Dave McKean's *Arkham Asylum. A Serious House on Serious Earth*. In these comics, the Joker assumes a queer role, representing both a deviation from Batman's heterosexual masculinity and a madness and evil not compatible with normalcy or heroics. Again, however, Miettinen points at the deconstruction of this binary logic in the comics, which brings closer to each other the characters and characteristics of Batman and the Joker. On a geopolitical level this suggests a crumbling of the binary opposition between internal heroes and external enemies, pointing at the ambivalence of the internal, national identity. As a final inroad into the theme of masculinity, Miettinen pays attention to female characters in superhero comics and their relationship to the male

heroes. Female superheroes have a different role from their male counterparts: they tend to be more passive, in need of help or are represented in a hypersexualized way as the passive objects of the male gaze. Furthermore, as Miettinen shows in her careful reading of Brad Meltzer, Rags Morales and Michael Bair's series *Identity Crisis*, a central trait of female characters is the lack of control, of both (super)powers and emotion.

The issue of control is also relevant in the following section of Miettinen's book, in which violence, so tightly knit to the performance of superhero masculinity, is the central theme. Three comics offer the basis for the empirical analysis: *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, Mark Millar and John Romita Jr.'s parodic *Kick-Ass*, and *Superman: Red Son* by Millar, Dave Johnson and Kilian Plunkett. Superhero power is often articulated through vigilante violence, and as Miettinen notes, "[t]his discourse of violence as an empowering expression of masculinity becomes highly questionable when read in the framework of popular geopolitics, as the way violence and its justifications are transferred from fiction into the geopolitical narratives of the nation" (161). It has been noted that *The Dark Knight Returns* offers a representation of violence in a more realist, darker tone compared to earlier superhero comics. But Miettinen's analysis points at the means of internalizing violence as a natural trait of Batman. This is something that needs to be controlled, but that also allows him to simultaneously assert his masculine identity. *Kick-Ass* on the other hand turns the association of gender and violence on its head, as a ten-year-old girl assumes the role of the violent protagonist. *Red Son* places Superman in the Soviet Union instead of his usual habitat the U. S., letting him partake in the construction of the Soviet utopia. In this framework, the sheer threat of violence inherent in Superman's powers transforms vigilantism into the embodiment of totalitarian state power. The story can be read as an answer to the fantastic question of what if Superman had landed in the Soviet Union, and as a critique of totalitarian rule exemplified by the USSR. However, Miettinen highlights the story as a narrative on the superhero's role in society and vis-à-vis the state. The superpowers possessed by Superman grant him the opportunity of total control. This represents a biopower that enables him to exercise sway over individual and population alike, which presents itself as a potentiality in superheroes' power in general. This is despite the usual framing of this power in terms of vigilantism and a separation of the individual superhero from state authority.

The following chapter elaborates on the analysis of the relationship between superhero and state authority in a democratic society by utilizing

Giorgio Agamben's concept of a "state of exception." This refers to the prolonged overriding of citizens' freedoms by state authorities in an emergency situation. When protecting democracy, society or its citizens by means of vigilante actions the superhero constantly overrides the laws of the very society he aims to salvage. The powers of the superhero also pose a constant threat to lawful authority, which in principle can be overthrown by the use of such powers. This power is examined in *Red Son*, but also in *Miracleman* (by Alan Moore et al.) and *Kingdom Come* (by Mark Waid and Alex Ross), which test the idea of superheroes as sovereign rulers, and which enables Miettinen to elaborate on the paradoxical nature of the superhero. This is resolved in *Miracleman* through the hero's rejection of his humanity and membership in society, and in *Kingdom Come* through a (re-)integration of the hero in human society. Marvel's *Civil War*, which is spread over a large number of comic books and series, brings the superhero universe close to its contemporary American geopolitical home, as the so-called Superhero Registration Act (having superheroes register for government control or risk detention) bears clear association to the War on Terror and the U. S. Patriot Act. The Superhero Registration Act divides the superhero community, some willing to become government agents, others struggling to maintain the superhero's freedom from attachment to authorities other than the superhero's own sense of justice, morals and missions. The comic, in Miettinen's analysis, is shown to be an exploration of "heroism through the conflicting discourses of freedom and security" (244).

In the final chapter, which examines the consequences of 9/11 in superhero comics, the encounter between the fantasy worlds of the comics and real-life events is actualized all the more. While the focus of this study of popular geopolitics is on representations, rather than reality, and on fictional discourses and not practical geopolitics, the conclusion, which specifies the object of study as 9/11 in superhero comics, brings together the popular geopolitics of superhero comics—in previous chapters studied through masculinity, violence and superhero-state relations—and other levels of U. S. geopolitical identity. Miettinen's study leaves one with an understanding of ambivalence as a central characteristic of contemporary superhero comics. This is an ambivalence linked to ideals of masculinity, as well as the relationship between personal morals and collective ideals and identities. More specifically between individual and state authorities. In part this trait is related to the revisionary rewriting of generic conventions, in part it hails from the comics' explicit processing of U. S. politics after 9/11. All in all,

Miettinen's analysis of the ambivalences of the geopolitical renderings of superhero comics, open to both hegemonic and counter-hegemonic readings, reaches far beyond shorthand descriptions of superheroes as national icons, as fascist symbols, or as representatives of media violence.

#### Reference

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Ralf Kauranen

University of Turku, Finland

Youngquist, Paul, ed. *Race, Romanticism and the Atlantic*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2013. 267 pages, ISBN: 978-0-7546-6927-2, \$104.95 (£60)

*Race, Romanticism and the Atlantic* explores the African presence in Romantic literature and culture. Divided into three parts—"Differences", "Resistances" and "Crossings"—the collection discusses topics as diverse as racism, the stage, single mothers, holiday festivals, rebellion and poetry. The nine essays highlight the crucial contributions of diasporic people to British cultural production by challenging accepted descriptions of Romanticism as the product of a national culture and by focusing on the enslaved themselves rather than the discourse of masters.

The collection also complicates received notions of race during the Romantic era, demonstrating that the concept is a "muddled distinction" (2) that hides a more complicated truth: what is, for example, the link between liberty and subjection? How should we understand the perverse historical fact that the Romantic era saw both the abolition of the African slave trade and the development of a biological racism that dehumanized Africans in the British Empire and laid the foundations of the eugenics of the Holocaust? Only when the discourse of mastery is combined with that of the enslaved themselves, as in *Race, Romanticism and the Atlantic*, can one begin to answer these questions.

Three axioms form the basis of *Race, Romanticism and the Atlantic*: the slave trade provides a material occasion for the rise of race as a marker of human difference; during the eighteenth century and much of the Romantic era, race was an ambiguous marker, a diffuse rhetoric of human differences;