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Vincent Haddad

Central State University, vmhadd@gmail.com

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## “THE POWER OF TRASH”

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*Pulp Empire: The Secret History of Comic Book Imperialism* by Paul S. Hirsch. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021. Pp. 337. \$30.00 cloth.

Paul S. Hirsch's *Pulp Empire* is an outstanding work of archival research on “the power of trash, of the American comic book” in empire-making (269). By contextualizing American comics into the global project of empire from the 1940s to 1960s, Hirsch's major contribution is reframing how “the matter of race was inseparable from the evolution of the comics book and its relationship to policy” (273). To demonstrate this, *Pulp Empire* excavates how, for example, commercial publishers and government agencies used anti-German and anti-Japanese narratives in comics to galvanize patriotic righteousness in the American project during World War II and, then, how the racist portrayals of non-white characters grounded in this tradition became a global embarrassment that threatened appeals to American cultural hegemony during the Cold War. Hirsch thus challenges the commonplace narratives of canonical figures in comics history like the apparently prudish anti-comics crusader Dr. Frederic Wertham as a significant mouthpiece for “federal propagandists and policy makers [who] fretted over the damage done to their efforts [abroad] by racist and antiwar comics” (160). Equally compelling, Hirsch introduces lesser-known (sometimes deliberately so) characters like Malcom Ater, whose nonpartisan Commercial Comics created and distributed propaganda

comics for transparently ideological, if also creative-minded, US government programs.

*Pulp Empire's* seven chapters move chronologically and thematically through the checkered history of propaganda comics from World War II through the Cold War. Across these chapters, Hirsch balances coherent historical narrative with sharp close readings of a deep archive of familiar commercial and obscure governmental comics—and selfishly I often found myself wanting to hear even more about several comics throughout. Sharpening these analyses, and what readers will notice long before they read the arguments within, are visually stunning full-page and half-page color illustrations of comics and archival materials throughout that make *Pulp Empire* a truly beautiful academic monograph.

The first chapter reframes a well-known history of racist stereotypes in comics of the 1930s and 1940s into the global context of American propagandists and the double bind these stereotypes created, a thesis underscored by the archives unfolded in the subsequent chapters. In this chapter, Hirsch introduces readers to a “quasi-governmental agency,” the Writers’ War Board (WWB). This organization successfully partnered with publishers like DC Comics to produce comics like *All-Star Comics* #24, which advanced the war effort by presenting “all Germans—not just

Nazis—as inherently violent and emphasize[ing] that Americans are obligated to kill them” (36–37). This problem was even more pronounced, Hirsch notes, with representations in commercial and noncommercial comics of nonwhite characters, like Japanese characters who were simultaneously depicted as superhuman, well-matched villains and “incompetent and subhuman” characters who were easily defeated, which made it difficult to construct stories that distinguished Japanese enemies from nonwhite allies, including Chinese and Black characters (53). The WWB exemplified a double bind between promoting “race-based hatred of America’s enemies” and “domestic racial harmony and international cooperation, in an effort to both bolster the war effort and portray the United States as an inclusive society, unlike its fascist opponents” (38–39). This paradoxical reliance on race and racism was an issue not only for comics distributed domestically but also internationally, as in the case of the Office for Inter-American Affairs, which developed and distributed comics for Latin America as elsewhere in the decolonizing world where the United States sought to make strategic allies in a cultural and ideological conflict with the Soviet Union, whose own propaganda found in American comics an easy example of America’s racist and unequal society.

Hirsch closes his first chapter with the crucial point that “while

board members helped shape stories like [*All-Star Comics* #24], it competed on the newsstand with roughly one hundred other titles, the majority of which were assembled without input from the WWB” (74). In subsequent chapters, Hirsch carefully tracks how the federal government and propagandists responded to, censored, and secretly utilized commercial publishers of America’s national medium to craft pro-American and anticommunist narratives related to topics like the atomic bomb and authoritarianism. Chapters 2 and 4 examine crime and horror comics and how “within this singular swirl of dread, optimism, and newfound American power [in the immediate postwar period] that violent and sexual comics captivated millions of readers” (85). The violence and sexuality represented during this relative period without oversight and censorship—a period that offered not only horrific representations of race and gender but also “a window into the frustrations, fears, and hopes of men and women whose opinions were not valued by contemporary society,” including Black, Asian, and Jewish writers and artists—contributed in making comics an international embarrassment for federal policymakers attempting to lay the foundations for empire. As Hirsch argues, this imperial project during the Cold War, more than the more salient anti-comic narratives about juvenile delinquency and perversion,

motivated governmental backlash and resulting censorship of comics with the Comics Code Authority.

In these chapters, Hirsch’s global perspective and close readings of, for example, horror comics offer additional layers of context crucial to other groundbreaking research on representations of race in the rapidly growing field of comics studies, like Qiana Whitted’s Eisner Award–winning *EC Comics: Race, Shock, and Social Protest* (2019). Hirsch describes the intense covert government interest in EC Comics military-themed stories that “portrayed army officers in an unflattering light,” which would result in the censorship by the Comics Code Authority of any critical portrayals of government officials, including police and the military. (165). As chapter 5 outlines, purging comic books of violence, racism, and other embarrassing portrayals of American leadership was viewed as essential in raising the profile of American culture in Western Europe, especially France and Britain, and in curating a propagandized version of American society in comics palatable to decolonizing nations and potential allies in the conflict against the Soviet Union, including Cuba, Korea, and Vietnam—an initiative undercut not only by the racist imagery of jungle comics found across US military bases in the Global South, as Hirsch explains in chapter 6, but also by the overwhelming violence

of actual American policy in these countries.

*Pulp Empire* persuasively fills the gap between periods that scholars of race in comics gravitate toward: the racist caricatures that dominated the 1930s and 1940s and the earnest if problematic rise of diverse characters starting in the late 1960s and accelerating in the 1970s, documented in such critical texts as *The New Mutants* (2016) by Ramzi Fawaz and *All New, All Different?* (2019) by Allan W. Austin and Patrick L. Hamilton. As Hirsch tells it, following the critiques of racist and gendered violence, “surviving publishers responded to it not with more positive imagery but by virtually eliminating whatever non-White characters had outlasted the war” (188). Instead, chapter 7 details how “the first wave of Marvel superheroes straddled the cultural space between over propaganda comic books and commercial titles . . . [and achieved] a unique and powerful combination of sophistication and emotion that effectively masked their more over pro-Cold War perspectives” (246). By concluding the book with compelling close readings of the strident anti-communist themes of familiar 1950s Marvel comic stories featuring the Fantastic Four and Iron Man, Hirsch demonstrates the inculcation of American imperialist propaganda in the commercial comics industry. Though Hirsch makes only brief reference to contemporary comics in his conclusion, *Pulp Empire* provides

the critical historical framework for scholars of contemporary comics culture to fully understand frustrating representations of diverse superheroes that fit in the lineage of Hirsch’s archive of propaganda comics, such as heroic representations of the CIA in the film *Black Panther* (2017).

As Hirsch remarkably describes in his introduction, his archival research into the government actors, agencies, and commercial publishers who produced propaganda faced challenges not only in studying government archives of an ephemeral and dismissed medium but also in the successful safeguarding of certain archives of propaganda comics by the CIA. The result is a fragmented history that coheres around the strength of Hirsch’s main thesis of race and an inspirational beginning for future scholars of empire. While the specificity of comics as a visual narrative form is vital to the history Hirsch tells, the story he crafts in *Pulp Empire* immediately joins Eric Bennett’s *Workshops of Empire* (2015) and Sarah Brouillette’s *UNESCO and the Fate of the Literary* (2019) as an essential interrogation of how literary cultural production affected and was affected by the imperial project of governmental, educational, and nonprofit organizations.

*Vincent Haddad is an associate professor of English at Central State University. His first book, The Detroit Genre: Race, Dispossession, and Resilience in American Literature and Film, 1967–2023, is forthcoming from Lever Press in fall 2024.*