Anti-Foreign Imagery
in American Pulps and
Comic Books, 1920–1960

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Anti-Foreign Imagery in American Pulps and Comic Books, 1920–1960

Nathan Vernon Madison

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Preface

> Europe is entering an era of twilight.... It is heading for a period of social and civil warfare which is likely to last fifty years and may last longer. It will emerge from this warfare a Socialist state. But the new Socialist Europe may be faced by a war greater and more crucial than any the world has yet seen — a war for the white man's right to leadership in civilization, a war with the yellow races of the world. — Georg Brandes, 1919

The preceding prediction by Scandinavian literary theorist Georg Brandes, published on the front page of the July 13, 1919, edition of the *New York Tribune,* spoke volumes to many Americans still reeling from the devastation of the First World War and on the verge of a Red Scare. While America was fortunate enough to avoid the destruction that had ravaged Europe, the reverberations of the conflict impacted America as violently as any military bombardment ever could. The Victorian ideal of sensibility and reason was brutally shattered, and in its place appeared an America very different from the one that had preceded it. Brandes elucidates perfectly the two central "terrors" that plagued America in the early years of the century and particularly following the Great War. Bolshevism was triumphant in Russia, which precipitated Red Scares at home, combined with a seemingly never-ending cascade of immigrants from Eastern Europe and Asia.

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America was changing in many ways following the war, in every arena — from women's roles in society to Prohibition to literary experimentalism; not surprisingly, fear accompanied such change. Among the strongest fears of the time were those regarding the immigrant, the outsider, the "other," that had destroyed Europe or were slumbering in Asia waiting for their chance to "awaken." Immigrants that did not fit the traditional Anglo-American ideal had always been under scrutiny, such as the "uncivilized," "radical," and "atheistic" hordes of Eastern Europe, and the enigmatic "yellow" races of Asia. Such sentiments were not new and intermittently

gained widespread support throughout American history, such as during wartime or severe economic downturns. Discriminatory imagery of foreigners, especially the Chinese and Eastern Europeans, appeared in excess throughout American publications in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, due in part to economic uncertainties, as well as to concerns regarding cheap labor, steep climbs in immigration, and the expansion of America into a colonial and international power. After the end of World War I, however, assaults upon these groups soared to new heights — signifying, in many minds, a life or death struggle for the survival of what was considered American. Several factors contributed to the rise in anti-foreign sentiment following the First World War. A boom in nationalism that naturally follows the end of any war was certainly one reason, especially in a period of history during which "American" and "Anglo-Saxon" were understood to be one and the same. Anxiety over the possibilities of new conflicts arising out of strained international, and racial, relations also stoked anti-foreign feelings. A report on population and immigration control published in 1922 explains the connection between racial tension and the trepidation vis-à-vis renewed world conflicts:

> Around the Pacific is a new stirring of racial movements and aspirations. Russians, Chinese, Japanese, Malays, Dutch, British, Anzacs, Canadians and Americans are touching each other on the vast brim of the Pacific and are looking with apprehension at the many racial difficulties which are arising. Antagonisms are being engendered, politics are being pursued in this mighty caldron of conflicting forces which may in the future lead to another great war.[1]

Actors of foreign birth who had been beloved silent film stars before the war were forced to flee their adopted homes amidst nativist outcry. Anti-foreign rhetoric in politics and popular culture throughout the country rose, concurrent with an increase in isolationist policies that would last until America's entry into the Second World War.

The predominant forms of popular literature at this time, owing in large part to low costs both in production as well as in consumption, were first the dime novels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, followed by the fantastic pulps of the early 1920s and 1930s, and later, particularly with the advent of World War II, comic books. These mediums offered readers of varying ages many things: fast-paced action, travels to unbelievable and far-off worlds, miracles of modern science, and a reality in which good almost always triumphed over evil. What they also offered were definitions as to what that "good" and "evil" were; in many cases, the

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good was personified by a heroic, strapping Anglo-Saxon male and the evil by a villain of obviously foreign origin, either a sly and crafty Oriental or a brutish Slavic criminal — both of whom invariably held an alien-like disdain for wholesome American values. If, in the event that good was not triumphant, it was usually due to the hero's inability to cope with the foreign and alien nature of his opponent. The definitions of heroism and villainy reflected in what are now considered undoubtedly racist imagery were influenced and intensified by the horrors of the First World War. It was a time when America was undergoing fundamental changes in many aspects of its culture and identity after what was, until then, the most costly conflict in Western history. The intensity of isolationism and fear of the "other" from abroad on the part of politicians and the public alike were primarily responsible for the intensification of such imagery within the pages of popular literature.

The sheer amount of "yellow peril" and "European brute (or extremist)" narratives found in these mediums begs several questions that have never truly been approached satisfactorily. Why were pulp magazines, and later comic books, filled with "yellow emperors," "dragon ladies," opium peddlers, and sadistic, European barbarians? And how exactly did such stereotypes appear in these mediums, did they change over the course of years between the nativist turn of the twentieth century and the more inclusive society of the early twenty-first century? And if so, how? Investigative work into this question is lacking to a large degree. The manner in which many of these foreign characters were depicted does not support the most oft-cited reasoning — that outright racism was the sole agent. Racism undoubtedly played a role, but it does not account for the explosion of anti-foreign imagery and epithets in the early decades of the century. Orientalism, as described by Edward Said (*Orientalism*, 1978) in regards to both scholarly and novelized works, can only partially explain this phenomenon; just as racism cannot be regarded as the only factor, neither can orientalism, although both unquestionably played their part.

The historiography regarding pulp magazines is not as widespread when compared to the voluminous (some may say too much) amounts of research that focus on the history of comic books. Comic book history has become rather popular these days, with many academics finding all sorts of avenues of inquiry in the pages of these four-color fantasies, while pulp history has not received nearly as much attention. To be sure, one reason for this is the reputation the term "pulp fiction" has held, and continues to hold, in popular American imagination. In the past, as now, "pulp" suf-

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fers a connotation of trash, of vulgar tales full of horrendous violence and naked women. It is true that a good deal of pulp could be described in such a way, but to blanket the entire medium with such descriptors betrays an ignorance of the medium. Many of America's most famous writers began, or spent much of their career, writing for pulp magazines, and the fact that many pulp narrations (some of which appear in this work) were re-published in hardcover following their initial release speaks against the notion that they only exist for violence-seeking, sexually-frustrated young men. To find real pulp histories, one must first go to the authors who are (or were) a part of either the pulp or science fiction industry, pulp fandom, or some combination of the two, such as Mike Ashley, Sam Moskowitz, John Locke, Ron Goulart, Ed Hulse, and others. In-depth histories of the entire industry, its more popular (and lesser-known) creators, and even of specific titles and magazines exist and are wellsprings of information for those who know how to find them.[2] It is also safe to say that a great portion of pulp history exists as an oral culture among the former professionals and dedicated fanbase of the medium. Works of pulp history are many; works of pulp history that relate to nativism are lacking. Of the pulp histories, very few address the issue of racial depictions and caricatures. Editor Tony Goldstone, in his introduction to *The Pulps: Fifty Years of American Pop Culture*, devotes very little time to the subject, offering only that the heroic characters found in the pulps "took on all the known forces responsible for the plight of the country, and anything else that itched in the imagination, particularly 'red menaces' and 'yellow perils.'"[3] Other writers do approach the topic of race and nativism in the pulps, but only by quickly making good points that deserve further elaboration. In *Yesterday's Faces: From the Dark Side* (the third in a five-volume series concerning pulp magazines), Robert Sampson suggests that the origins of the "yellow peril" made popular by Sax Rohmer's *Fu Manchu* stories of the early 1910s (which saw a resurgence in the pulps of the '20s and '30s) can be found in white, Anglo-Saxon fears concerning what appeared at the time to be a terrifyingly belligerent Oriental race. The Boxer Rebellion in Qing China in 1900 and the victory of Japan over Tsarist Russia in the Russo-Japanese War in 1905 are two of the examples that Sampson gives as the impetus for the creation of the "yellow peril" genre of pulps.[4] While the popular memories of such events as the Boxer Rebellion are vitally important to this entire discussion, Sampson, unfortunately, offers very little in the form of further evidence, failing to see a deeper and long-lasting series of events that could have led to the need for such depictions; the later texts in his

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series offer more synopses of pulp stories than actual analysis. Similar to Sampson, Ron Goulart, author of *Cheap Thrills: An Informal History of the Pulp Magazines*, offers one recent event of the time, the Japanese invasion of Manchuria in 1931, as a possible reason for the popularity of the "evil Oriental" motif— again not taking into account many other events and far-reaching factors. Goulart only partially approaches the question of nativism, offering one small answer (albeit a very good one) before halting that avenue of discussion. One of the few works (possibly the only) that offers a detailed analysis of ethnicity and pulps, *Hard-Boiled: Working Class Readers and Pulp Magazines*, argues that it was the loss of traditionally "white" jobs by the American proletariat to "newer" groups, such as those of Eastern European origin, that fostered this animosity. Author Erin A. Smith asserts that such class and ethnic antagonisms facilitated the rise in popularity of much of the negative depictions found in pulps of both "Orientals" and "Huns" alike. *Hard-Boiled* explains superbly how nativist sympathies resulted in a wide range of discrimination, both within the pulps and without. That it does not stretch back to the earliest of literary ephemera — the pulps' predecessors the dime novel and story paper — does not detract from her analysis one bit, although a deeper analysis of them would help.

One problem with pulp historiography (more so a problem in recent years) is that in some cases the authors in question have not actually read (by their own admissions) many of the texts they claim as primary sources. William F. Wu's section concerning pulp magazines in *The Yellow Peril— Chinese American in American Fiction 1850–1940*, focuses on several pulp and periodical titles, such as *Fu Manchu*, *Dr. Yen Sin*, and the works of Dashiell Hammett. The problem lies in Wu's dependence on secondary sources for this entire section, as he deems actual pulp magazines too rare and difficult to find, which simply is not the case; a search on any number of online auction sites will provide a vast amount of pulps, many rather cheaply, spanning the entirety of the early twentieth century. Moreover, visits to the Library of Congress' Rare Book, Periodical and Newspaper, or Microfilm reading rooms argues against the scarcity of such sources.[5] In almost every region of the United States there exists some manner of depository, university-affiliated or otherwise, dedicated to pulp magazines and related ephemera. Erin A. Smith, in the article "How the Other Half Read: Advertising, Working-Class Readers, and Pulp Magazines," attempts to define the pulp magazine's audience (her conclusion: lower-class and under-educated) not by analyzing the actual stories but rather the type of advertisements found within their pages.[6] Problems arise with the fact that

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the same advertisements, such as those for correspondence schools (which Smith points out in particular), appeared in any number of more "sophisticated magazines" of the day. Also, according to sources contemporary with the pulps, publishers depended on newsstand and subscription sales for their income, with advertisements accounting for very little of the pulps' revenue. It would seem that the stories, not the ads, were the chief interest of both publisher and reader.[7] Even a superficial glance at many pulp magazine letter-pages argues against the stereotype of the ignorant, under-educated pulp reader as well.[8]

In particular regards to the subject of the depiction of minorities in comic books, most efforts focus on the subject of race relations within America, as opposed to long-entrenched American fears concerning those from outside the United States. Gerald Early and Alan Lightman's article "Race, Art and Integration: The Image of the African American Soldier in Popular Culture During the Korean War," and Jeffrey A. Brown's *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*, are excellent examples of works that study the role comic books have or have not played in relation to the social history of African-Americans. Arie Kaplan's *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books* explores the vital role American Jews played in the creation of the comic book industry itself—as publishers, writers and artists.[9]

The majority of works that detail the history of comic books do just that—provide an overview of a particular decade, a certain company, or even the entirety of the industry itself—while only touching here and there upon issues of race and their importance in comics at the time. In actuality it is difficult to find any serious discussion concerning comic books and anti-foreign sentiments, with many authors preferring to praise comic books for sending heroes to battle foreign foes before war even broke out. In many works, if the topic of race (with the exception of African Americans) is approached, it is rather quickly addressed and just as speedily left behind. Les Daniels' *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World's Greatest Comics* attributes the depiction of Japanese villains in Marvel (in the 1940s, "Timely") Comics in one sentence: as the product of "racial prejudice and resentment over the attack on Pearl Harbor," which "created a climate in which it didn't seem out of line to depict Orientals as subhuman monsters."[10] In his introduction to Marvel Comics' inaugural volume of collected reprints of 1941's *U.S.A. Comics*, Dr. Michael J. Vassallo hurriedly touches upon the issue by stating that the "ethnic references we find offensive today ... were products of their time period, and should be taken as such," then moving off quickly to analyses of the stories found within the volume.[11]

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Many works mention what the Second World War did to comics and how they changed as a result of the war—namely, the inclusion of foreigners as recurring antagonists. *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology* by Richard Reynolds states that "America's entry into World War Two gave the superheroes a whole new set of enemies, and supplied a complete working rationale and world view..." that would allow for the creation of even greater numbers of superheroes, particularly those of the patriotic theme, such as Captain America.[12] While Reynolds' statement that often times superheroes served as "proxies of U.S. foreign policy" is true, it does little to explain the virulent imagery that accompanied the exploits of these heroes. Mike Benton's *The Illustrated History: Superhero Comics of the Golden Age* recalls that there was a patriotic fervor in the nation prior to Pearl Harbor that allowed for the creation of more "foreign" characters as foils, and that their proliferation after the attack on Pearl Harbor was purely for propaganda purposes. Benton quotes comic artist C.C. Beck as having stated that his superiors demanded he draw "anything to make the Japs look ugly or the Nazis look like punks."[13] Bradford W. Wright's *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* argues that the heroes and villains that appeared in American comic books during World War II were intended to "unite the American people behind their government for the purpose of waging war." In Wright's view, the foreign enemy was a rather "recent" creation, whereas the enemy before the Second World War, in the years of the Great Depression, had been the rich and the politically corrupt within America.[14] David Hajdu's *The Ten-Cent Plague* offers the view that the appeal of the superhero during the war years was as "a simple, democratic, home-grown symbol of American might and surety of purpose."[15] In *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books*, Arie Kaplan describes the depiction of German brutes and savages as the work of American Jews in the comic book industry of the time (of which there were many, if not an outright majority) who gladly depicted "their alpha-male superheroes sweeping the floor with Nazi spies and saboteurs," not to mention Nazi soldiers and, on more than one occasion, even Hitler himself.[16] Kaplan advances comic book historiography by giving the creations of the Golden Age more of a background rather than merely labeling them as simple answers to unbridled American racism and opportunistic propaganda. *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters and the Birth of the Comic Book* by Gerard Jones follows a similar trend by emphasizing the importance of American Jews to the creation and prosperity of the comic book industry. Jones' work focuses on the personalities (and eccentricities) behind the artist's easel and

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writer's desk, pointing out how many of the ideas that were floating about in the post–World War I landscape, including fascism, socialism and scientific innovation (as well as eugenics), influenced the mindset, and therefore artistic output, of the earliest comic book creators. It is interesting to note from these works the dual nature inherent in the Jewish creators of the comic book industry — that they were creating works that featured nativist imagery and themes, while at the same time often being themselves targets of nativist sentiments (throughout American history the caricatures of the radical European and covetous, treacherous Jew were interchangeable).

William W. Savage, in *Commies, Cowboys and Jungle Queens: Comic Books and America, 1945–1954* (one of the few works to specifically address comic books published during the Korean and Cold Wars), succeeds, where other works have failed, in assigning comic books a place as a kind of barometer of the confusion facing America after the Second World War. The main problem is that Savage, in using predominately the works of EC Comics (a company, even during the height of its popularity, known to be on the fringe on many levels and to be pushing limits) as the central focus of his discussion of war comics of the 1950s, assigns to the totality of the industry what he finds in the work of a singular company: a terrified, anti-war America who was emasculated and left impotent by the ambiguous nature of the Korean War, in comparison with the more traditional goals of World War II. Savage rightfully credits a great deal of 1950s comics' imagery to uncertainties about changing societal situations occurring at the time, such as divorce rates, but does not really relate such changes to fluctuations in modern American sentiment in regard to nativism and "Americanism."

Works outside of those solely focused on the pulps and comics offer better avenues of analysis as to how anti-foreign sentiments can affect popular printed media. Examples include Sam Moskowitz's *Strange Horizons: The Spectrum of Science Fiction*, which dissects science fiction pulps' relation to everything from anti–Semitism to civil rights, and Sheridan Prasso's *The Asian Mystique—Dragon Ladies, Geisha Girls, and Our Fantasies of the Exotic Orient*, an excellent examination of modern "orientalism." Neither work, however, tackles the object of nativism in pulps and comic books, with Moskowitz's concern being specifically science-fiction magazines, over a particular length of time, nor do they address international relations to any large extent. Prasso's work, brilliant in its analysis of the exotic fetishism that permeates Western preconceptions of the East, does not mention pulp magazines or comic books for the most part; nor should it be expected to, as that is not its purpose. Titles such as these are valuable in that they help

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