

Reading Wonder Woman's Body: Mythologies of Gender and Nation

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Few enduring expressions of American popular culture are so instantly recognizable and still so poorly understood as comic books.
(Wright)

In an anthropological spirit, then, I propose the following definition of the nation: it is an imagined political community In fact, all communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.

(Anderson)

LONG-STANDING AMERICAN COMICS THAT APPEARED FOR THE FIRST TIME during the “Golden Age” of comics (the 1940s) and continue to the present day constitute a rich arena for exploring cultural meanings about America as a nation and the mythologies of national identity pervasive during specific historical moments. Traditionally a popular cultural venue marketed primarily to children, how do comic books reflect and create particular imaginaries of nationhood? Through all kinds of commodities besides the comic book itself (posters, T-shirts, action figures, dolls, lunch boxes, children’s games, costumes, refrigerator magnets, journals, coffee mugs, etc.) the comic book superhero, Wonder Woman, remains “instantly recognizable” in

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American and sometimes even in transnational contexts.¹ Understanding Wonder Woman as an iconic figure in and of American popular culture entails contending with particular, often oppositional, meanings inscribed onto the ever-changing Amazon's body. What is at stake when for over sixty years this comic book female body has been costumed in American nationalist iconography: golden eagles, the stars and stripes, red, white, and blue colors? What mythologies about America as a nation are being imagined and told through this comic book's long and continuous history?

As a symbol of America as *nation*, Wonder Woman provides a rich arena for applying Roland Barthes' method of discerning *mythologies*—those myths that appear “natural,” outside the realm of history, “evol[ving] from the ‘nature’ of things” (110). Barthes originally took on his “periode journalistique,” writing the fifty-four essays in *Mythologies* once per month between 1954 and 1956, out of frustration with the way that newspapers constituted the cultural artifacts of everyday life (children's toys, wrestling matches, films, newspapers) as “natural” (11). Barthes's *mythologies* became a method for denaturalizing myths. This article traces the *mythologies*—the historical and cultural meanings—of the Wonder Woman myths as they are produced and consumed at four particular historical moments. In developing a Barthesian approach to this comic book character, I argue that Wonder Woman's body as a cultural artifact represents specific gendered nationalisms with meanings that delineate an uneasy, often oppositional, blending of the separate spheres of femininity and nation.

Nationalism Comic Book Style

If nations are “imagined communities,” then what are we imagining about ourselves as a nation through the production and consumption of comic books such as *Wonder Woman*? These imaginings, as Anderson indicates, are neither true nor false, but rather can be read in terms of “*the style* in which they are imagined” (5–6, emphasis added). Americans imagine our nationhood, through the comic book icon of Wonder Woman, in different styles at different historical periods. A woman's body, often shown running, in star-spangled shorts in 1944 offers one style of imagined nationhood compared with a wide-eyed, large-breasted ingenue in 2001. In each historical instance, however, Wonder Woman's body is both an icon of the traditionally masculine, public

realm of nationhood as well as the traditionally feminine, private realm of female sexuality. As such, her body serves as a site for constantly oppositional encounters between gender and nation, private and public, and bondage and power. Reading Wonder Woman's body is an exercise in swinging between the binaries of women's physical empowerment (and sexual freedom) and representations of a body in bondage, lassoed into submission, sometimes by her own power.² What do such images and stories tell us about America as a nation; what mythologies about nationhood and nationalism can be read in and through Wonder Woman's Amazon body?

Wonder Woman, one of only seven American comic books that has been consistently published since the medium's American origins in the 1930s and 1940s, and the only one with a female main character, has endured and shape-shifted for sixty-two years of American history. From World War II to 9/11, her body has been consistently inscribed with cultural mythologies of nationalism and of American freedom. As a serial comic book, continuous publication also means a continuing serial story line. From its origins during the Rosie-the-Riveter era, *Wonder Woman's* story ran continuously³ until 1986, at which point the entire story universe of the DC Comics line was wiped out and each superhero's origin myth rewritten. During its sixty-two year history, then, *Wonder Woman's* origin myth has been written twice, once in 1941 and again in 1987. This article examines these two time periods, along with two others, as historically embedded socio-political contexts, especially in terms of how they inscribe particular cultural mythologies about nationhood on and through *Wonder Woman's* body.

Like science fiction, comic books often emerge as speculative fictions full of both scientific hardware and fantastic imaginings that showcase utopic visions of social change. As a place where writers, artists, and readers gather to speculate about the past, the present, and the future, comic books are historical documents that can yield much insight about the particular conditions of their production. Annette Keinhorst has suggested that the imaginary perspective of speculative fiction lets the familiar—what is socially acceptable—become strange (91–98). Comic books become such a speculative arena in which the familiarities of contemporary culture are rendered strange, through origin stories such as Superman's exodus from a doomed planet or *Wonder Woman's* origins on a hidden island outside contemporary cultural and historical influences. In one panel during George Perez's creative tenure in the

1980s, Wonder Woman is actually shown reading Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land*. Perez's version of the Amazon hero constitutes one of several historical moments I will examine in this article—each with its own specific mythology of nationhood and national identity, especially as conceived via a gendered body. What happens when mythologies of the nation are conveyed through gendered bodies? Mona Domosh and Joni Seager suggest:

Representing nations . . . in gendered and sexualized terms most often has enabled the dominant powers to maintain and legitimize their power positions. But there are always countertendencies.

(172–73)

In each of the following four historical instances, I will examine whether gendered, sexualized, “body-fied” representations of the nation work to legitimize dominant power positions or whether they constitute interesting countertendencies—in many oppositional images, there may not be an either/or choice. What happens when nationalism is depicted as feminine? How is female power reigned in, even as it resists a politics of “separate spheres” in which femininity and physical/national power cannot coexist?

1942–1947: Symbol of Feminine Power in the Context of Nationalism

In 1942, Wonder Woman's creator embarked on a project that I think engaged Keinhorst's approach of rendering the familiar strange by critically engaging the institutionalized masculinity so prevalent in popular culture (especially comic books) of his time. William Moulton Marston was a Harvard-trained psychologist and lawyer, involved throughout his life with prison reform and credited with inventing the polygraph machine. Marston explicitly got involved in the new medium of comic books in order to create an alternative to what he called the “bloodcurdling masculinity” of contemporary comics (42). Specifically locating himself in the context of 1940s intellectual and social reform movements, Marston viewed himself as an “emotional re-educator”; he was hired by comics publishers as a consulting psychologist “to analyze the current shortcomings of monthly picture magazines and recommend improvements” (41). The comic book, *Wonder Woman*, constituted his “recommended improvement.”

With Marston's first issue of the comic, the origin myth of Wonder Woman appears for the first time. Princess Diana (named after the Romanized version of the Greek goddess Artemis) is the daughter of Queen Hippolyte, ruler of an all-woman—and in 1942, all-white—race of Amazons living in isolation on an “uncharted” island somewhere in the Bermuda Triangle. The Amazons have developed technology superior to any in the West, forming a utopian nation-state from which the rest of the world, occupied with a second world war, should take some lessons. When Capt. Steve Trevor's war plane mysteriously crashes on Paradise Island, this triggers the beginning of rendering the familiar strange and presenting utopian ideals for social reform, which Marston sets into motion with a gender-reversal image that becomes a continuous visual trope throughout the comic book's history: the princess becomes Capt. Trevor's savior and healer, and while ministering to him falls (quite predictably) in love with him; however, the image does not connote the subsequent female dependence and vulnerability that such a trope might conventionally entail (Image 1).

This image heralds a long-standing visual trope in the history of this comic—the rescue of the (often uniformed, hence militarized) male



IMAGE 1. *Sensation Comics* #1, January 1942.



IMAGE 2. *Wonder Woman* #3, April 1987.

body by the strong and capable female body. Images such as this one from 1942 are echoed in a 1987 cover (Image 2), in which the female body's obvious strength is softened and lightened by her floating mass of hair. Still, she carries the unconscious captain with unmitigated ease. Aside from a postwar cover accentuating Capt. Trevor's insistence that Wonder Woman marry him (*Sensation Comics*, November–December 1949), a 1995 cover, which reverses this trope to reflect more conventional gender roles (Image 3), is the only cover in the entire sixty-two year history of covers depicting such a gender reversal toward conventional gender roles. Whatever other historical shifts are reflected in this comic book's cover art, feminine strength through rescue of a supine masculine body remains a relatively stable trope.

Until his death in 1947, Marston, in collaboration with artist Harry G. Peter, produced a comic in which the hero, while often saving Capt. Trevor, primarily saved helpless women from imminent death and destruction, attempting also to empower women to look after themselves and discover their own physical (Images 4 and 5) and economic (Image 6) strengths. Girls are taught that if they "feel [they] can do things, so [they] can do them," and women are exhorted to "get strong and earn your own living."

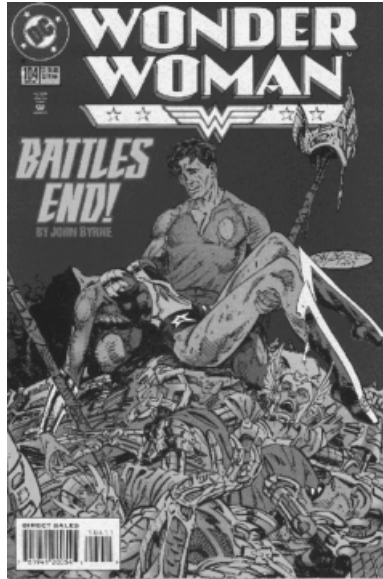


IMAGE 3. *Wonder Woman* #104, December 1995.

The historical context of World War II situates Marston's efforts within a shift in comics' intended audience from primarily children to include adults, largely through rhetorics of nationalism.⁴ World War II itself provided the impetus as hundreds of thousands of comic books were shipped to American military personnel in an attempt to "raise morale through patriotic fervor" (Savage 11):



IMAGE 4. *Sensation Comics* #40, April 1945.



IMAGE 5. *Sensation Comics* #40, April 1945.

... comic books became an integral part of Allied propaganda machines, emphasizing the need for maximum war effort by portraying the enemy as the inhuman offspring of a vast and pernicious evil. . . . War stimulated the comic-book industry, not only by providing much of the editorial matter, but also by expanding the audience for comic books. (10–11)

While Wonder Woman was created as a “role model for little girls” (Savage 77–78), her initial audience clearly includes adults, both adult men in the military and adult women supporting the war effort. These new audiences are specifically constructed through representations of nation and nationalism. The avenue for “getting strong and earning your own living,” for instance in Image 6, is to join the WAACs (Women’s Army Auxiliary Corps) or the WAVES (Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service) and get involved in America’s war effort.

As Domosh and Seager point out, “the gendering of nationalisms is a complex and changing process, but . . . it is not capricious: it always relates to and serves the purposes of social and economic systems” (164). As a major impetus for the emergence and narrative strength of



IMAGE 6. *Wonder Woman* #5 June–July 1943.

the comic book, World War II provided the socio-economic script for specifically gendered representations of the nation. The socially accepted gender roles for women during this historical period were in flux. By late 1942, the US economy was faltering under a labor shortage. Men had entered the armed forces in large numbers, so government and industry initiated the famed “Rosie the Riveter” campaign to recruit women into the work force. Through films, posters, and advertisements, this campaign appealed to women on many levels: possibilities included increasing their own economic power, acting patriotically, and helping to end the war sooner. An estimated 4.7 million women responded to the call. For most women this was their first opportunity to move into high-paying industrial jobs, and for black women it marked a preliminary movement out of domestic service. Marston situates his comic book clearly in this context: final panels in an individual issue usually contained the moral of his tale, as in Image 6: “The better you can fight, the less you’ll have to”—a prescription for a nation engaged in world war. The moral, too, is that women can empower themselves, changing from “weak girls” to economically and sexually independent women.

This independence is also specifically contextualized within discourses critical of conventional nationalism. In one panel (Image 7),



IMAGE 7. *Wonder Woman* #5, June–July 1943.

George Washington appears as a character in a wartime story, not as might be expected, as a patriotic hero come to cheer on America's war effort. Rather Washington returns to advise high-level military leaders during World War II to "trust not women! Even now they are betraying you." The women in question, and the heroines of this story, bolstered by Wonder Woman's "I can't stand this awful drive!" are the Pentagon's female clerical workers who are being scapegoated by one of the wartime villains. It is probable that such workers were real readers of the comic during the Rosie-the-Riveter era, and Marston not only accesses this readership, but also places gender above nationalism in rendering George Washington in such unpatriotic tones. In other words, Marston seems to say, nationalism at the expense of women's power remains a conventional nationalism that must be subject to critique. However, this remains a covert critique; while Wonder

Woman is a positive symbol of femininity and nationalism during World War II, the oppositional nature of this mythology of gender and nation is negotiated through trickery, as delineated by historian Lori Landay.

Landay observes that wartime popular culture primarily represented femininity as heroic, self-sacrificing, and good (147)—again overwhelmingly positive connotations, but also meanings that render the separate spheres of femininity and nationalism sacrosanct. As Domosh and Seager indicate, “feelings of nationalism are constructed out of particular socioeconomic circumstances” (170). In Marston’s *Wonder Woman*, an independent, empowered woman (vs. “a weak girl”) is constructed in the service of nationalism and “the good fight” of a nation at war. The “Rosie the Riveter” context and Marston’s reformist notions of women’s empowerment contextualize the character’s star-spangled costume as well as forays into revisionist history that call on essentialized categories of “woman” and “American.” On Paradise Island, the goddesses Aphrodite and Athena appear before Hippolyte and tell her that the world is in bad shape and the Amazons must help. If the Allies do not win the war, the world itself might end:

Athena to Hippolyte: “Yes, American liberty and freedom must be preserved! You must send with Capt. Trevor your strongest and wisest Amazon—the finest of your wonder women!—for America, the last citadel of democracy, and of equal rights for women, needs your help!”

Marston constructs women’s empowerment, even equal rights, out of particular narratives of nationhood, America as “the last citadel of democracy.” However, he must cloak this mythology in conventional femininity via the apparatus of “Diana Prince” in order to protect the separation of gender and nation.

In her exploration of “the female trickster in American culture,” Lori Landay notes that Wonder Woman operates in wartime popular culture as a metaphor for the movement of femininity out of the garden and into the war (147). Wonder Woman “leaves the Edenic herland of Paradise Island to help the Allies fight the war and be near the man she loves” (148). Her dual identity at this time⁵ as Diana Prince, army nurse, allows for an identity as a “female female impersonator” reinforcing “the idea that women’s power must be contained and

exercised covertly, not overtly” (148). As Diana Prince, Wonder Woman must always pretend to be weaker and more submissive than she really is. Fundamentally, Landay’s argument reinforces Marston’s original purpose in creating the character:

Wonder Woman’s decision to leave the private sphere of Paradise Island—the garden—and enter the public sphere of war and heterosexuality is an exhortation for women to support the war effort based on obligations of service and love. . . . Wonder Woman emerges to call attention to the price wartime women had to pay for admission to the man-made world: a fractured sense of self and the duplicitous social practices necessary to negotiate the maintenance of submissive femininity while participating in the public sphere of wartime society. Wonder Woman accomplishes this feat not with her considerable Amazon powers, but with female female impersonation, disguise, and deception—the tactics of female trickery. (148–49)

This trickster female–female personality of “Diana Prince” is one historical attempt to resolve the oppositional tension inherent in the character of Wonder Woman: How to synthesize the public realm of masculinity/nation with the private realm of femininity/sexuality? In the person of “Diana Prince,” femininity wins out and the powerful superhero pretends weakness and submission in order that the separate spheres remain unchallenged. The public and private realms collide in the body of Wonder Woman who resorts to trickery and covert action to protect the discrete realms of national interests and feminine submissiveness.

Postwar Feminine Nationalism: Controlling Female Power

The character of “Diana Prince” offers continued reconciliation of the oppositional realms of nationalism and femininity in the immediate postwar era and on into the 1960s, a process which moves the character away from nationalist iconography and toward heightened femininity. The “Diana Prince” disguise remains a relatively minimal component of the comic book during World War II, but sparked by American postwar propaganda directed at women, Wonder Woman’s identity moves further and further into the domestic, feminine realm and away from the masculine realm of politics and war. As American women are exhorted not to compete with returning servicemen for employment,

to return home to kitchens and families, to relinquish the desire to “earn your own living,” Wonder Woman herself enters a phase where she is continually hounded by Capt. Trevor to marry him. Her main occupation immediately postwar is to become a “romance consultant” to her readers. In the name of peace-time economic development, American women and their Wonder Woman allow the separate spheres of gender and nationalism to once again move apart. Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, Diana Prince appears more and more frequently until she becomes the main character, and Wonder Woman disappears all together for several years, leaving a boutique-shop owning (though also karate-chopping) Diana Prince.

In the context of the 1970s Women’s Movement, another attempt at reconciling the collision of the separate spheres as played out in and through Wonder Woman’s body occurs. In her introduction to a retrospective of Marston’s work, reknowned feminist activist and founder of *Ms. Magazine* Gloria Steinem describes this wonder woman, who thrived from 1942 until Marston’s death in 1947, as an early feminist hero:

This was an Amazon super-hero who never killed her enemies. Instead, she converted them to a belief in equality and peace, to self-reliance and respect for the rights of others. If villains destroyed themselves, it was through their own actions or some unbloody accident. (9)

Steinem writes that she herself felt rescued by Wonder Woman in her childhood. The fate of most women in comics was dependent upon the male heroes not only to rescue them, but to give them a sense of purpose. They were powerless without a man. Wonder Woman, on the other hand,

had come to her many and amazing powers naturally. Together with her Amazon sisters, she had been trained in them from infancy and perfected them in Greek-style contests of dexterity, strength, and speed. The lesson was that each of us might have unknown powers within us, if we only believed and practiced them. (Steinem 7)

As noted above, the comic book lost much of its integrity after Marston’s death, and Wonder Woman, in her mod Diana Prince version, became what Gloria Steinem called “a female James Bond, though much more boring because she was denied his sexual freedom” (15).



IMAGE 8. *Ms. Magazine* July 1972.

Steinem herself attempted to save Wonder Woman as Wonder Woman once rescued her. When she launched *Ms. Magazine* in 1972, she persuaded DC Comics to allow her to put an original image of Wonder Woman on the cover and to reprint some of the Golden Age episodes inside (Image 8).

Wonder Woman appeared on newstands again in all her original glory, striding through city streets like a colossus, stopping planes and bombs with one hand and rescuing buildings with the other. (Steinem)

This original image commissioned by the founders of *Ms. Magazine* for their first issue exemplifies the oppositional meanings that emerge at the intersections of gender and nationalism. Does the gigantic superhero embody peace and justice, protection of land and people or does she convey volatile political and military values? The character's facial expression itself conveys apprehension and anxiety on this front and belies Steinem's placid reading of combining these two conflicting endeavors. As the "colossus" strides between these two realms, she conveys danger and alarm perhaps more than balance and capability.

In this *Ms. Magazine* cover image, whose imagined community does Wonder Woman belong to? As a dangerous "colossus" in the



IMAGE 9. *Wonder Woman* #260, October 1979.

Ms. Magazine image, Wonder Woman's enlarged and dangerous body, attempting to straddle the masculine realm of war and politics with the feminine realm of peace and justice, echoed the discourses of danger surrounding the women's movement in the 1970s. While the movement appropriates Wonder Woman as a powerful symbol of feminist strength and possibility, DC Comics' own representations of Wonder Woman during this time often depicted her as too powerful. The symbol of Wonder Woman loses cultural capital in the broader imagined community where she—and the women's movement—are perceived as a threat. By 1979, for instance, Wonder Woman had become a "menace" (Image 9)—female power unleashed, uncontrollable, "gone beserk" (Image 10)—who by the 1980s had been tamed into a glamorous, unthreatening "Miss Clairol" model (Image 11). Note that she is also tamed through the return of her phallic (though "invisible") airplane. Female power is depicted as a menace to society, and by the 1980s, Wonder Woman herself tried to quit the job and return to Paradise Island, amidst recycled story lines from the "Golden Age" stories of the 1940s. The comic book had run out of steam and the tamed, glamorized version of the character emerged as a marketing disaster.



IMAGE 10. *Wonder Woman* #259, September 1979.

1987–1992: Bringing Women into the Comic Shop

Many of DC's big name comics were experiencing a slump in sales by the mid-1980s. DC's tactic for *Wonder Woman* was to attempt to draw in female readers. Bringing women into the comic shop; i.e., increasing female readers, heralds another historical shift in how gender and nation are represented by Wonder Woman's body. Both readership and authorship play significant roles in constructing Wonder Woman's superhero bodily identity for women readers.

Friends of Lulu (FoL), a nonprofit corporation promoting increased female participation in the production and readership of comics, found in a 1995 survey of 123 retailers that 13.41% of the total clientele was female. This fits with other estimates (Brown) that approximately 90% of comic readers and fans are male, though it may indicate a slight increase in female readership. The comic shop itself becomes a site for increasing female participation, as FoL created a guidebook for retailers called *How to Get Girls into Your Store* which includes an appendix with a list of things retailers should do to draw women, such as "Clean your



IMAGE 11. *Wonder Woman* #306, August 1983.

shop!” and “Treat customers with courtesy, both in the shop and when entering the shop” (Loubert).

Jeffrey Brown indicates that the over-seventeen adult market has rejuvenated the comic book industry, as this group tends to have greater disposable income and are more likely to become collectors rather than simply casual readers. For both men and women, there is an increase in customers with age—for men, sixteen to twenty-four years remains the average age of customers (Brown 16), while for women, twenty-five to thirty-five year olds are the more prevalent customers (FoL Survey).

Very few of the women represented in the FoL survey or on the FoL Web site (<http://www.popcultureshock/lulu>) were fans or purchasers of *Wonder Woman*. While originally marketed to girls and women, *Wonder Woman* has not had any appreciable female readership for forty years, with one significant exception. George Perez’s tenure as the main writer/artist for the comic from 1987 to 1992 constitutes “the only time *Wonder Woman* continuously broke sales records in the past forty years [because] George Perez shifted the book’s focus to include women readers in the 1980s” (Goetz).



IMAGE 12. *Wonder Woman* #1, February 1987.

In an effort to start from scratch, DC Comics obliterated its story landscape in 1987 through the apocalyptic event of “Crisis” which crossed over into all of its mainstream comic storylines. The origin myths of each of the company’s major characters were rewritten. For Wonder Woman, writer and artist George Perez took over and created a new origin myth that again put women’s power into sharp relief; this time, drawing heavily on Greek mythology and creating a level of social criticism new to mainstream comics (see *Wonder Woman* #1, February 1987). Paradise Island is renamed “Themyscira.” This time, the all-woman race of Amazons is created by the Greek goddesses Artemis, Athena, Aphrodite, Hestia, and Demeter; interestingly, the Amazons are reincarnations of battered women who were killed by their abusers (Image 12). Their purpose is to teach human beings “the way of Gaea,” a phrase that Perez uses as a pointed and sometimes quite explicit reference to issues of environmental and social sustainability.

Sustainability of place and society emerge as comic book themes for Perez as he creates a new villain for this new Wonder Woman to contend with. Her first foe in “Patriarch’s World” (an interesting revision of what from the 1940s through the 1970s the comic book’s



IMAGE 13. *Wonder Woman* #4, May 1987.

authors referred to as “Man’s World”) is the creature, Decay, a clearly feminized monster who destroys all she touches (Image 13). Perez marks Decay as a metaphor for urban degeneration, a generic city crumbling under the weight of pollution, crime, unemployment, and unrest: a veritable “society gone to hell.” As a feminized monster, Decay also represents a feminine icon in disrepair, gone berserk, a menace to and of society. This representation of female power gone berserk harkens back to the 1970s images of Wonder Woman herself as a menace to society during the height of the women’s movement. In this sense, Wonder Woman can be seen as resurrecting her positive status as national icon by vanquishing the dangerous blurring of boundaries that she came to represent during the second wave of the women’s movement in the 1970s. By successfully vanquishing Decay, Wonder Woman demonstrates that the separate spheres can remain intact, femininity will not be corrupted by too much power, and gender—as long as it is feminine and beautiful—can coexist with nation.

This third historical attempt to reconcile the culturally oppositional poles of gender and nation also gains expression in Wonder Woman’s mission during Perez’s creative tenure. In this incarnation, while



IMAGE 14. *Wonder Woman* #50, January 1991.

Wonder Woman's mission is again one of rescue, she is no longer an ally to an explicit war effort, and Perez reconstructs her as an ambassador from a superior culture. The resulting costume changes create a national icon literally positioned "on a pedestal" rather than an action figure of super-heroic proportions (Image 14). Rather than battling villains, her first priority and role is diplomatic, changing society through utopian example. This time, her costume, her standard, and her name all constitute a tip of the hat to Marston's "Rosie" origin myth: The fighter pilot who accidentally lands on the Amazons' uncharted island during World War II is Diana Trevor, Steve's youthful mother. Rather than being nursed back to health by Amazonian wiles, Diana Trevor fights side by side with the Amazons against the monsters at "Doom's Doorway"—a kind of Pandora's Box of the evils of humanity. After she dies in combat, the Amazons memorialize her by naming and costuming their "ambassador" to "Patriarch's World" using Diana Trevor's standard. The symbol on Wonder Woman's armor is no longer just an American Eagle; Perez memorializes Wonder Woman's World War II origins by transforming the eagle into the double W of the WAACs and the WAVES. As an ambassador, albeit



IMAGE 15. *War of the Gods* #1, September 1991.

sometime warrior, this new Wonder Woman appears much more persuasively as “ready for battle”—this time without golden lassoes, “invisible” airplanes, or magical devices (Image 15).

As a symbol of female power emerging in the early 1990s, Wonder Woman’s toned and muscular body, her determined expression, and her functional costume all appealed to an increasing female readership, women in their 20s who themselves sought “body projects” (Brumberg) that aligned femininity with physical power. Following a notion that women like stories about relationships and emotions more than stories of battles, Wonder Woman’s heroic identity becomes more individual and personal during this time as well. The character of “Princess Diana” has close friends, socializes with professionals, is involved with children, and is often shown as a consultant to the state. In Image 16, she is drawn for one of the first times by a female artist, Jill Thompson (the story is still authored by Perez). Thompson grounds her cover image in the specificity of place and identity, thematics Perez has narratively established. In this image, Wonder Woman carries a case as she travels between Themyscira and her ambassadorial home in the United States. Her face and body convey a specific “ethnic” identity



IMAGE 16. *Wonder Woman* #62, February 1992.

rather than a general superhero identity. The backdrop of place shows the specific, utopian island of her home.

It is interesting to compare the Thompson/Perez incarnation of Wonder Woman to a cover image appearing a few years later in the post-Perez period initiated by John Byrne's artistic and narrative authorship. Byrne once again aimed for a more conventional comic book readership: young (often adolescent) men for whom a superhero fights villains and does not eloquently agonize over whether to interfere in the politics of "Man's World" (a usage Byrne returns to over Perez's "Patriarch's World"). In Byrne's cover (Image 17), a stark and generic urban background replaces the specificity of place explored by Perez, and a generic superhero identity, complete with bulging muscles, replaces the specific ethnic identity created by Thompson. The oppositional character of gender and nation are resolved by Byrne through an image of Wonder Woman that emphasizes physical strength and steely determination. Femininity is marked by a large amount of flowing hair and large—though armored—breasts. Byrne ushers in a period in which hypersexualized images of Wonder Woman's body are used to reconcile the separate spheres of gender and nation.



IMAGE 17. *Wonder Woman* #101, September 1995.

Femininity and Nationalism After 9/11

I am aware that my appearance, by mortal standards, is strange, even unsettling. If I am to be an ambassador of my people, tradition dictates that I look the part. Sadly, those who judge me on my looks alone ignore the causes I champion. Still, when the need arises, I am a warrior.

(Ross and Dini)

By 2001, most images of Wonder Woman have become hypersexualized—large breasts and a costume that barely covers her body are prevalent no matter the artist or author. A few months after the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York City’s World Trade Towers and on the Pentagon, DC Comics released a special over-sized graphic novel called, *Wonder Woman: the Spirit of Truth* (Ross and Dini).⁶ The size is oriented toward showcasing comic book images as “serious” art—Alex Ross’s oil paintings require the book’s larger size for full impact. The cover image of Wonder Woman’s face, wide-eyed, gazing upwards, concentrating on something the viewer can’t see, lips parted, combines the “superhero” motif of capability and strength (as rendered



IMAGE 18. Ross and Dini 2001: front cover.

by John Byrne, for instance) with the wide-eyed innocence (and sexual appeal) of the ingenue (Image 18). This can be mapped directly onto a reading of American post-9/11 nationalism. The epigraph at the beginning of this section appears on the back cover of Ross and Dini's graphic novel. When "America" is substituted for "I" in the epigraph, the following message emerges:

America is aware that [her] appearance, by mortal standards, is strange, even unsettling. If America is to be an ambassador of [her] people, tradition dictates that [she] look the part. Sadly, those who judge America on [her] looks alone ignore the causes America champions. Still, when the need arises, America is a warrior.

The back cover "blurb" promoting the book continues—"Wonder Woman" has been with "America" again in the following:

America is at an impasse. Despite her lofty goals and ideals for the world beyond Paradise Island, her message of peace, understanding, and fellowship is rejected because of the way she is perceived. Not every nation is willing to embrace America—despite her actions and best intentions.



IMAGE 19. Ross and Dini 2001.

Foreign policy statements promoting American military interventions in Afghanistan and currently in Iraq, as well as mainstream media political discourse since 9/11 have often taken this “we have been misunderstood” rhetoric of nationalism.

The story line of the graphic novel evolves into a mandate for covert actions via the renewal of Wonder Woman’s secret identity; she again becomes a trickster figure as Landay suggested above (148). Feeling at a loss to have any real impact on changing “Man’s World,” Wonder Woman seeks Superman’s advice. In the business-suited guise of Clark Kent, Superman urges Wonder Woman “to work alongside people, rather than above them” (Ross and Dini). She proceeds to attend a political rally in a generic American City, an antilogging protest in another generic “rain-forest rich nation,” poses as a doctor (or some kind of health care worker—stethoscope prevalent) in a land-mine ridden “war-torn country,” (Image 19), finally ending up in “the desert nations”—another generic country, this time overtly Islamic—where she learns “that rural villages have been emptied, their people forced into use as human shields.” In a bizarre display of ethnocentric nationalism, Wonder Woman pulls off the heavy covering that is her chadohr disguise, to reveal her hypersexualized body in the star-spangled, but minimal costume that constitutes her Amazon “armor,” saying, “Well, if a human shield is what’s needed, then I gladly volunteer” (Image 20). She fights the “terrorists” (this word is never



IMAGE 20. Ross and Dini 2001.

mentioned) releases the women hostages (about whom she notes, “my presence is frightening to them”), and rises to the sky with the statement: “My real victory is in the lives that have been spared. For where there is life, there is the chance for new ideas, tolerance, and understanding. That’s triumph enough for any warrior” (Ross and Dini). While appearing as a superhero single-handedly capable of wiping out terrorists, saving hostages, and asserting a political stance of “tolerance”—all echoing the rhetorics of American foreign policy, Wonder Woman is clearly and undeniably a woman. Unlike Captain America or Superman—other comic book icons of nationalism—her sexuality emerges as an in-your-face construct that raises questions about femininity and nationalism.

Conclusions: In Bondage to Femininity?

What happens when gender and nation intersect in the sexualized body of a comic book superhero? Wonder Woman’s body constitutes a historical site for the interplay of the culturally oppositional spheres of femininity vs. (masculine) nation, private sexuality vs. public politics/war, and relationships vs. action in battle. The intersections of these separate spheres are fundamentally reconciled by asserting the



IMAGE 21. *Sensation Comics* #40, April 1945.

masculine realm over the feminine via the recurrent theme of bondage. Throughout the comic book's history, bondage remains a recurrent trope, beginning with images during Marston's 1940s era of Wonder Woman repeatedly breaking out of bonds (Image 21). Later images primarily depict Wonder Woman in bondage to another woman, often through her own artifacts of power—bracelets or lasso (Image 22).



IMAGE 22. *Wonder Woman* #19, August 1988.



IMAGE 23. *The Legend of Wonder Woman* [mini-series], #3, July 1986.

These later images tend to be highly sexualized and eroticized, though some, such as Trina Robbins' version of the cover in Image 22 (see Image 23), intentionally convey and celebrate the "golden age" version of Marston's bondage scenes.

As noted by Rhodes, Marston's *Wonder Woman* is characterized by a prevailing appearance of bondage and torture scenes. Wonder Woman is forever being tied up, bound with ropes and chains, and tortured, as well as rescuing other women from the same scenarios with her famous golden lasso. Elongated panels frequently display an Amazon in chains, showing her straining against bondage (Rhodes 103).

Rhodes argues that these representations of bondage emerge from Marston's interest in creating a powerful woman, who for all intents and purposes can be characterized as a classic dominatrix (97). Breaking out of ropes and chains and wearing heavy metal bracelets at all times allows Wonder Woman to assert her role as captivator. Indeed Marston himself articulated such an approach in 1943:

Frankly, Wonder Woman is psychological propaganda for the new type of woman who should, I believe, rule the world What

woman lacks is the dominance or self assertive power to put over and enforce her love desires. I have given Wonder Woman this dominant force but have kept her loving, tender, maternal, and feminine in every other way. Her bracelets, with which she repels bullets and other murderous weapons, represent the Amazon Princess' submission to Aphrodite, Goddess of Love and Beauty. Her magic lasso, which compels anyone bound to it to obey Wonder Woman . . . represents woman's love charm and allure by which she compels men and women to do her bidding. (Qtd. in Daniels 22–23)

Rhodes makes a persuasive case for psychologist Marston's creation of a dominatrix who "induces 'passion' through her own state of 'captivation'" (97–98). Marston himself asserts that he has tried to create a feminine woman with masculine characteristics of authority, physical strength, and psychological empowerment (cf. Marston 43). But what happens if we bring representations of the nation into this reading of Wonder Woman as an icon of gendered hypersexuality? Throughout the comic book *Wonder Woman's* history, America as an imagined community feminizes the representational body of the nation and then puts that body into bondage. The inclination to feminize nation must be tempered so that female power does not "go beserk" and become "a menace to society" as in the context of the women's movement. Hypersexualizing Wonder Woman's body assures that female power is reigned in, tacitly directing the primary purpose of the body decorated in nationalist iconography to be an object for male sexual pleasure.

Domosh and Seager suggest that imagining nationhood as gendered often maps directly onto a doctrine of separate spheres: feminine nationhood emerges as unchanging, natural, protective of children, a mother figure, while masculine nationhood emerges as political, volatile, official, and warlike (172). Wonder Woman, as created by Marston and perpetuated by various authors for the last sixty two years, embodies historically specific mergings of these separate spheres. Whenever feminine nationhood threatens to become overly masculine, the images of Wonder Woman become increasingly sexualized and her body becomes subject to bondage.

Nationalism comic book style reveals a great deal about prevalent cultural messages about gender: as an icon of the nation, Wonder Woman must always assert her femininity, whether as a marriageable

"Diana Prince," a long-haired ingenue, or a body in bondage; the feminized nation is always at risk of becoming a menace to society.

NOTES

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1. *Wonder Woman* is translated for export to Japan, Indonesia, Spain, Mexico, France, and Germany. The comic book is also sold in all English-speaking nations (Rhodes 95).
2. Wonder Woman is often shown bound by ropes and chains, and on some occasions by her own magic lasso.
3. Albeit "subject to incessant renovation to offset slumping sales" (Daniels 165).
4. Marston himself argued that nearly half of all comics readers were adults (35).
5. The secret identity is a common characteristic of comic superheroes (cf. Batman's Bruce Wayne and Superman's Clark Kent) but one that only occurs at specific historical moments for Wonder Woman. This has never happened for the male superheroes. Once a dual identity is established, it is maintained throughout the history of the character.
6. The graphic novel appeared in November 2001, ostensibly to raise money for victims and families of 9/11. The last page states: "Proceeds from the sale of the original art from this book will be donated by the artist to a charity benefiting victims of September 11, 2001."

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