

The Man of Tomorrow: Superman from American Exceptionalism to Globalization

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“People from all over America—from all over the world—who went to the city to live the lives they wanted, to be the people they wanted to be. That’s the idea America was founded on. But it’s not just for people born here. It’s for everyone. And it’s for people like me...”

(Superman 711).

“Truth, justice, and the American way’—it’s not enough anymore.
The world’s too small. Too connected”

(Action Comics 900).

“About as American as it Gets”

IN 1978, *SUPERMAN*, STARRING CHRISTOPHER REEVE, BECAME A BLOCKBUSTER FILM, thrusting Superman onto the world stage with a force previously unachieved. For decades, a uniquely American character, complete with a “melting pot” immigration story, Superman always represented what was “super” about what many Americans considered the nation’s superior cultural approach to basic human justice. Always a reflection of the times, Superman over the last seventy-five years has shifted both in persona and mission, evolving with each generation to match the domestic mood. However, the hero’s increasingly global platform has complicated his story even as America’s role as the lone, and perhaps declining, superpower and interconnected world events alter both the image of the nation and its superhero. Although Superman remains a symbol of American exceptionalism, his international image challenges his mission at home and exposes his gravitation toward more global pursuits. The end of the Cold War, for example, was previewed by the plot of *Superman IV*, which found Superman saving Russians and seeking to rid the world of nuclear weapons. Another such evolutionary leap followed the tragedy on September 11, 2001, resulting in a Superman who in *Action Comics 900* is willing to engage a complex conversation about not just the paradigm of his adopted homeland, but a more sophisticated understanding of the negotiation of cultures that are increasingly borderless. Similarly, while 2013’s *Man of Steel* finds the Superman character reassuring his audience that he is “about American as it gets,” his actions to spare the Earth from alien conquest find their inspiration in far more than his sense of justice bred in the American Heartland upbringing. They also spring from his recently recovered Kryptonian heritage. For Superman, being American is not enough, and only his articulation of identity in both cultures provides him with the tools to rescue the planet.

While the character has long supported two public identities, Superman and Clark Kent (keeping his Kryptonian third identity, Kal-El, generally private), he has also developed metaidentities representing both American values and American exceptionalism, all the while gradually superseding his national identity and embracing his role of a reluctant world icon caught in the tensions of globalization. The seventy-five year history of Superman in comics, movies, and television reveals a late twentieth century shift in the character from American exceptionalism to globalism, and while the metamorphosis is neither consistent nor well-defined, the progression can be traced through events in various *Superman* texts in response to world headlines. While the US has largely embraced “go it alone” policies for international affairs in the twenty-first century, and President Obama even recently proclaimed to the United Nations, “I believe America is exceptional” (Eilperin), the reality is that others in the world have conflicting viewpoints concerning the role of the United States in the world, and Superman, who generally goes it alone as arguably the world’s mightiest hero, can no longer avoid those conflicts.¹ As a result, the philosophical discord between the exceptional hero and the dogmatism of American exceptionalism has created an ideological Kryptonite to the traditional character, in turn influencing contemporary incarnations of a globalized Superman.

Kal-El: Super Immigrant

Since his creation, Superman was arguably genetically destined to become an icon of globalization. Created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster and debuting in *Action Comics* 1 in 1938, the character borrowed liberally from other cultures from its inception. Siegel and Shuster, sons of Jewish refugees, created a hero who could, through force, correct the wrongs of the world ranging from protecting immigrants who lived in neighborhoods similar to their own native Cleveland to the anti-Semitic atrocities committed across the ocean. Sent across galaxies in a tiny spaceship by desperate parents from the doomed planet Krypton, Superman’s back story invokes the almost four-thousand-year-old story of Moses. Similarly, Superman’s otherworldly strength is reminiscent of Samson, whom the Old Testament describes as owing his power to long locks of hair. Like Samson, Superman uses his strength to alleviate the suffering of others, even remembering the Biblical hero and acknowledging his fictional DNA with a single curl of hair adorning his forehead. Most telling of Superman’s “other heritage” is his Kryptonian name, Kal-El, which borrows from the Yiddish “El” which means God (Tye 65). Along with Superman’s father’s name, Jor-El, Superman’s birth name, is a deliberate play on words suggesting the son of God or a god and meant to mirror the Jewish longing for a savior. In fact, for seventy-five years, predominately Christian America has subconsciously accepted Superman as such, an opportunity not missed by producers of the 2013 *Man of Steel* which directly marketed the film to churches to boost sales (Marripodi).

Despite his ancient, exotic pedigree, Superman quickly became Anglicized and recognizable for an American audience, mirroring the national mood while always staying a step or two behind any controversy, hiding political statements about worldwide events safely behind allegory. Kal-El takes the human name Clark Kent, a simple Anglo-Saxon name, masking immigrant (and extraterrestrial) origins. When it becomes necessary to go public, the Superman persona debuts, boldly dressed in the colors of the American

flag and embodying all that is apparently good about the collective national identity. In his 1972 essay "The Myth of Superman," Umberto Eco discusses audience expectations of a character such as Superman, suggesting that it "will take on what we call an 'aesthetic universality,' a capacity to serve as a reference point for behavior and feelings which belong to us all" (931). From this vantage, Superman was able to become a torch-bearer not for just the "American Way," but the exceptionalism the "Way" produced. Throughout the forty-year Cold War, Superman dealt with foreign invaders in the guise of aggressive aliens who would attempt to conquer humans: for example, Darkseid from the planet Apokolips, was a mirror for the "evil empire" of the USSR. Likewise, Khrushchev, who threatened to destroy America from within, informs Lex Luthor, who uses US wealth and influence to persecute those whom Superman protects.

Truth, Justice, and the American Way

Superman's exceptionalism was easier maintained by keeping the character at home. In the vast majority of *Superman* lore, conveyed through radio, print, television, and film, the hero has confined his activities within American borders. While he makes the occasional trip abroad to recoup in his Arctic Fortress of Solitude or to straighten out the leaning tower of Pisa for comical effect, he typically renders heroic acts for American entertainment on American soil. Aware that the world is following Superman's exploits, DC Comics has been extremely careful in considering his interactions with other nations. A few exceptions exist, including a two-page comic in *Look* magazine in 1940 entitled "How Superman Would Win the War" that relates Superman's capture of Hitler and Stalin and their deliverance to the League of Nations World Court for judgment. However, the story was not part of the *Action Comics* continuity, and his costume was never inked with the now-familiar blue and red (Darius). Similarly, while some *Action Comics* covers featured Superman supporting the troops and even giving the Emperor of Japan a rigorous, punitive shaking, the stories inside almost never found him intervening in the war. While it may have been vicariously satisfying for war-weary readers to have Superman punching Hitler in the face with a "strictly non-Aryan sock" to the jaw (Bowden) or to intervene in a transatlantic conflict between the European nations of "Rutland" and "Blitzen" (Tye 61), the subsequent years found his publishers more cognizant of international relations and more reluctant to have the Man of Steel participate in real-life conflicts. A major concern for publishers was that if Superman actually used his superpowers to speed the end of the war, the conflict would soon be over, and there would no longer be a need for him, either at home or on the warfront. One solution to answer the readers' questions about his war involvement was to have Superman try to enlist in the Army in 1941 only to fail his eye exam and be designated 4-F. (His X-ray vision causes him to read the chart in the next room.) Says the military doctor, "You're physically superb . . . except that you're obviously blind as a bat" (Tye 59). This judgment would serve not only as an excuse to keep Superman out of a world war, but also as a metaphor for his limited involvement in any war, allowing comic publishers and TV/film producers to use his image sparingly in pro-American propaganda. Throughout the end of the twentieth century, they kept a policy of reserving Superman from major conflicts with other nations. Therefore, while "Rutland" and "Blitzen" are fairly transparent in reference, particularly

in the context of 1940s headlines, more modern references to violence-prone regions such as the Middle East have rarely been nation-specific, deferring instead to a generic UMEC, an “Unnamed Middle Eastern Country” (Bowden).

Eco argues that “in the sphere of [Superman’s] own little town [Smallville as a youth, Metropolis as an adult], evil, the only evil to combat, is incarnate in a species which adheres to the underworld, that of organized crime” (940). With the exception of some early meddling in Europe during World War II, most of Superman’s action on Earth kept him close to his adopted homes. Of course, one cannot keep a flying superhero within borders for very long and still find ways to tell exotic new adventures. Therefore, while it was easy to keep Superman away from a global perspective and continue to portray American exceptionalism through his domestic activities, an outlet for inevitable “global” stories passed right out of Earth’s atmosphere and back from where he originally came: outer space. Outer space, conveniently beyond the range of terrestrial globalization, conversely serves *as* an allegory for globalization and allows the Man of Steel to continue his exploits uninhibited by transnational concerns. Written nearly thirty years before the 9/11 tragedy, Eco’s essay suggests, “*the only visible form that evil assumes is an attempt on private property*” (940); 9/11 brings evil home to the American mainland, at the heart of its financial center (and source of global dominance), wreaks destruction of America’s private property, and complicates the suspension of disbelief required to accept a Man of Tomorrow who is so obtuse about global implications for a world around which he could circle within a matter of seconds.

Sixty years earlier, the attack on Pearl Harbor nudged a reluctant United States into a war that it had long resisted, and while Superman had appeared in print several years prior to the attack, his brief contributions to the war would be generally Euro-centric. Hawaii, not yet a state and still on the US’s periphery, did not capture the attention of Superman in the way New York did after the 9/11 attacks. The domestic tragedy incurred intense global repercussions, and even Superman and his writers could not ignore it as the devastation in New York began finding ways to emerge in stories about metaphorical Metropolis. 9/11 impacted all Americans, however, and a decade later, *Action Comics* presented “Grounded,” an “uncharacteristically self-indulgent vision quest” storyline featuring Superman choosing not to fly but instead walking across America, seeking a terrestrial view of the country with which he has recently felt disconnect (Weldon 318). While he is able to continue his good deeds during the multi-issue plot, “beneath the surface action, Superman’s search for a sense of purpose serves as an exploration of American identity” (Duncan 222). Superman, the most powerful superhero of all time, is the representative of a nation that is now alone as *the* superpower, more than two decades after the disintegration of its arch-rival, the Soviet Union. Taking a ground-eye’s view of the world as he rarely sees it, Superman considers the use of his almost unlimited power and its consequences in a new world order, acknowledging “uncertainty about the legitimate and effective use of that power, and even doubts about American exceptionalism” (Duncan 222). Both the United States and Superman have lost their philosophical way and struggle to regain their footing in a drastically retooled world. Superman is fundamentally rattled, and expressing a rare uncertainty, voices, “Everything used to be so clear. Truth. Justice. The American Way. But now? I’m not sure about *anything*” (Duncan 222).

Peace on Earth

The seeds toward Superman's evolving globalized perspective were planted mere years before the disintegration of the Soviet Union, portrayed on film for the first time in 1987's *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace*, when he attempts to rid the world of nuclear weapons. Fairly late in the game of mid-1980s films using pop culture to debate Cold War tensions (examples include *Rocky IV* and *Spies Like Us*), the film exists in part because of Christopher Reeve's insistence that Superman, with all his powers, actually be able to accomplish something to benefit the entire world and do what he felt President Reagan was failing to do: rid the world of nuclear weapons. Reeve said at the time, "I thought the character could be used effectively in the real world once again" (Tye 238). The movie was a cinematic mess and a box-office bomb, sidelining the *Superman* movies for the next two decades, but the film made remarkable inroads in the transformation of the character into a global figure who attempted to make a difference as a citizen of the world. Approaching the United Nations, he asks to speak to the convened delegates, stating clearly, "Madame Secretary, I don't represent any country." He is told that he needs a sponsor, at which point every country volunteers. Superman grins and climbs to the podium, having effectively established himself as separate from his American identity and, therefore, objective in his mission. He further distances himself from nationalism when he claims, "For many years now I've lived among you as a visitor. As of today I'm not a visitor anymore, because the earth is my home too." He continues with his appreciation of the world's many cultures, but also his concern with the "folly" of its wars. Superman's efforts are hindered by Lex Luthor, who creates a super-powered being from Superman's DNA and nuclear material. Superman confronts Luthor, asking, "You'd risk worldwide nuclear war for your own personal financial gain?" In a nod to the stalemate of the Cold War political standoff, Luthor responds, "Nobody wants war. I just want to keep the threat alive." When Superman is ultimately unable to do more than defeat his nuclear-powered nemesis, he once again addresses the United Nations, conceding, "And there will be peace. There will be peace when the people of the world, want it so badly, that their governments will have no choice but to give it to them. I just wish you could all see the Earth the way that I see it. Because when you really look at it, it's just one world."

Eleven years later, in *Superman: Peace on Earth*, a stand-alone comic from creators Alex Ross and Paul Dini, Superman makes another attempt at saving the world, this time trying to feed the entire human population in twenty-four hours by correcting a historic problem by bringing US surplus food to where it is most needed across the planet. After he saves a starving girl in Metropolis, he decides to research the dilemma of world hunger, concluding that, "It's not my place to dictate policy for humankind. But perhaps the sight of me fighting hunger on a global scale would inspire others to take action in their own ways" (20). Superman begins by addressing Congress, explaining how America has more food than it can use and seeking permission to transport the surplus to hungry people around the world. Eventually, and somewhat reluctantly, they give their approval. He begins by taking a shipment to the American Southwest where Native Americans, the historically displaced indigenous inhabitants of fruitful land, scabble for food in the unforgiving landscape of a reservation. By starting here, the authors acknowledge the disenfranchised population on America's own soil before venturing off

further south “to countries where there is almost no middle ground between wealth and poverty” (28). An over-sized two-page spread pictures Superman flying into Rio de Janeiro supporting a boxcar loaded with food. Beautiful from the sky, the city reveals itself as he draws closer, full of slums, rats, and people living in the gutters. Superman greets the people, who eagerly accept the food, grateful that someone has finally decided not to look away. Later that day, in war-torn Europe, a little boy receiving a box full of food asks, “Will you come back tomorrow?” (32). This time, The Man of Tomorrow looks away.

Superman crisscrosses the globe many times to reach each continent, but in Africa his exceptionalism is not enough to counter a situation born of globalization. A military despot, armed with weapons (no doubt supplied by a sponsoring government from another part of the world with a political agenda), greets Superman and offers to distribute the delivered food. Superman knows this man as a “liar and a thief,” a tyrant who has “built his regime on terrorism, squandered his country’s resources, and kept his people frightened and poor” (42). When Superman refuses, the despot orders his men to train weapons on his starving constituents observing from across a river. The despot tells Superman that he is “a tolerant man, but [Superman’s] attitude verges on a flagrant disregard for his authority and his country’s laws” (44). Superman drops the food, undistributed, with the realization that even he, with all his might, cannot overcome the forces of globalization which created this situation in the first place. In other countries, he is “reviled as a political activist, a usurper, or a fraud,” his presence rejected despite his offers of help, and he is pelted by stones the throwers know could not possibly harm him (47). He faces more dire situations as the day wears on, including one country, again with heavy weaponry probably supplied by a larger sponsoring nation, which chooses to shoot the shipment of food right out of Superman’s hands rather than allow him to land. The volley contains poisons, which they know will not hurt him, but instead is intended to poison the food, rendering it inedible. For Superman, his “mission ends here, incomplete and in failure” (53), realizing that even with authority from the American government and cooperation from many others he is ill-equipped and inadequate to deal with the global problem of world hunger and the generations of forces which have contributed to the problem. As the story concludes, it is Clark Kent, with his knowledge of agriculture from his childhood growing up on a farm, who makes his lasting difference as he travels to communities in need and shows them how to grow their own food. As in *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace*, the Superman character finds that as exceptional as he is, the best solutions to the world’s problems are not forcing his will on others, but instead leading by example and asking everyone from each culture to share his or her best—“Their knowledge. Their time. Their generosity.”—for the hope of a “true peace on Earth” (59).

Up, Up, and Abroad

Making international headlines in 2011, *Action Comics* 900 has Superman visiting Iran in response to a demonstration of citizens against then-regime leader Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Placing himself in Azadi Square between protestors and the Army of the Guardian of the Islamic Revolution, Superman stands for twenty-four hours in an act of civil disobedience, nonviolently resisting the oppression of the army. Later, as he returns to

American soil, he informs a government agent that he is renouncing his US citizenship in front of the United Nations (Goyer). The entirety of “The Incident” was only nine pages in a ninety-six page comic book with multiple and separate storylines, but Superman’s apparent repudiation of his Americanness quickly made headlines and caused quite an upset. While a close reading of the text reveals a marginal story and what amounts to a mere blip in the entirety of the *Superman* saga, the fact that those few words, “I am renouncing my US citizenship,” in or out of context, remains a stark political statement. When pressed, Superman relates that as he was flying away from Azadi Square, he looks back to witness the Iranian soldiers advancing upon the protesters. A lone protestor steps forward, offering a rose. The scent of massacre in the air, the tide turns when the soldier accepts the flower. Superman recognizes the bravery of those on both sides and realizes that by *not* “saving the day” in his typical American show of force, he makes a difference.² Conversely, the same month another Superman comic featured the hero making very pro-American, borderline jingoistic statements including: “That’s what America is about, really. That’s the American way. Life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness—and second chances. None of us are forced to be anything that we don’t want to be” (Straczynski and Roberson 711). A story similarly disseminated by the press, the new comic seemingly contradicted the *Action Comics* depiction and restored America’s faith in the Superman character as he re-pledged allegiance to the flag. However, when one considers the delay in publication of a comic book, it becomes obvious that no conscious effort was made to rebuke a public outcry that had not yet happened. What it does reveal is the tensions of an “American” icon like Superman who has achieved “globalization” and now must represent something . . . more.

The Man of Steal (and Glocalization)

In *Globalization: A Very Short Introduction*, Manfred B. Steger explores cultural globalization as “intensification and expansion of cultural flows across the globe” (71). Examples of Superman’s pervasiveness in this respect are reflected in the trajectory of the character’s influence on other cultures as they create Superman-esque characters. The globalization effect had major impacts not just on Superman’s exploits in various medias at home and abroad, but how other cultures appropriated the character and made him, or a version of him, their own. For example, in the region disguised in the comics as UMEC, the Superman format has been culturally adapted for readers in Egypt. While comic books produced in other countries are hardly a new phenomenon, the Egyptian Superman reveals the complexities of a Western hero translated into a role which serves an ancient culture and a vastly different world-view. In order for that translation to occur, however, the appropriating agent needs a functional delivery system, the essence of the successful Superman construction:

Comic strips are not new to the Middle East. Some of the Egyptian artists we spoke to refer to the scrolls of the Pharaonic era as a distant predecessor. Superheroes have a long history too, as is discussed in Eco’s celebrated essay on Superman (1976). But, whatever its antecedents and whatever happened to them since antiquity, it is perhaps fair to say that the modern superhero comic strip is an American invention.

— (van Leeuwen and Suleiman 234)

While the tradition of “comics” is arguably an ancient one in Egypt, the advent of the comic book hero, heralded by Superman, brings a profound influence which, as it becomes a global force in places like Egypt, is articulated and subsequently repackaged for local consumption. Ultimately, while Middle Eastern publishers would create characters sharing an image of the American superhero, they did not necessarily share ideology. An example is Zein, “a superhero in the mould of Superman,” who is “the last descendant of the Pharaohs” and whose parents put him in a “special capsule that allowed him to live forever” and “protect the Ancient Land of the River” seeking to “rebuild the ancient civilization” (van Leeuwen and Suleiman 236). In the context of globalization, what is of particular interest is that Superman’s background, written by the sons of Jewish refugees, references the tradition of Moses who was placed in a basket and sent down the Nile to ultimately be rescued by Pharaoh’s daughter and raised as royalty. Moses would one day lead his native people *out* of Egypt to the “promised land.” In the twenty-first century, the story comes in full circle as Zein brings the action back to the ancient land of the Pharaohs, perhaps returning the favor for the rescue of baby Moses.

Enrique Dussel in “World-System and ‘Trans’-Modernity” recognizes the trend of cultures assimilating Western culture and cautions them against surrendering themselves to its influence. However, he does recognize the pervasiveness of the Western world and does not entirely discount its advances, proposing hybridization which takes the positive elements, eliminates the imperial qualities, and promotes a discourse which serves an undiminished cultural narrative:

All of this outlines a multipolar twenty-first century world, where cultural difference is increasingly affirmed, beyond the *homogenizing* pretensions of the present capitalist globalization and its supposedly universal culture, and even beyond the postmodern affirmation of difference that finds it difficult to imagine the cultural universalities from a millenary tradition outside of Europe and the United States. This ‘trans’-modernity should adopt the best that the modern technological revolution has to offer—discarding antiecollogical and exclusively Western aspects—and put it at the service of differentiated valorized worlds, ancient and actualized, with their own traditions and ignored activity. (Dussel 236)

Such transmodernity is not easily accomplished. Steger grapples with such hybridization, predicting that, “Given the complexity of cultural flows, one would actually expect to see uneven and contradictory effects” (77). Citing sociologist Roland Robertson, he argues that “cultural globalization always takes place in local contexts” creating “‘glocalization,’ a complex interaction of the global and local characterized by cultural borrowing” (76–77). As predicted, comics which became successful were glocalized for distribution abroad. “At the same time commercial ventures such as AK Comics began to ‘globalize the local’ instead of ‘localizing the global,’ and to translate from Arabic into English instead of doing it the other way around” (van Leeuwen and Suleiman 235). Other efforts followed, including another Arabic company collaborating with Marvel Comics creating a venture which is “even more globalized than at AK Comics, penciling and inking being outsourced to the United Kingdom and coloring to the United States, while writing is divided between the US and Kuwait” (van Leeuwen and Suleiman 235).³

Man of Steel

Despite the character's transnational pervasiveness, the shift from exceptionalism has not been a smooth transition, particularly for his American/Western audience; a recent *The Journal of Popular Culture* editorial points out that, "As a product of commercial media, Superman has always been caught between the cyclical imperatives of myth and the pressures of the romantic, novelistic story" (Larabee 686). 2013's *Man of Steel* grapples with these tensions with the globalization of Superman in ways which are both meant to respect the last seventy-five years of Superman mythology and simultaneously break with them to "reboot" the character for a twenty-first century, post-9/11 audience. Crouching in a closet, an adolescent Clark Kent, growing into his powers of x-ray vision and super-hearing, desperately tries to block out the sensory overload. In a nod to the audience, he cries out to his mother, "The world's too big, Mom!" Martha Kent, speaking soothingly through the locked door, says, "Then make it small. Focus on my voice." Clark will attempt to make the world small, learning how to handle and hide his powers, following the voices of both his adoptive parents. After a young Clark saves a school bus full of children, Jonathan Kent tells him, "There's more at stake here than our lives or the lives of those around us. When the world . . . When the world finds out what you can do, it's gonna change everything; our . . . our beliefs, our notions of what it means to be human . . . everything" (*Man of Steel*). While Clark will spend thirty-three years quietly existing in the outskirts of civilization, as an adult traveling incognito and performing miracles only to disappear afterwards, his father knows that eventually Clark will need to assume his role as a hero, predicting the transition he will have to make from a domestic to a globalized hero. Clark never forgets Jonathan's warning, "You just have to decide what kind of man you want to grow up to be, Clark. Whoever that man is, he's going to change the world."

As an adult, he discovers an ancient Kryptonian scout ship and plugs into its systems a "key" his adoptive parents discovered with him when he initially landed on earth. The key contains a computerized consciousness of his birth father who reveals, "Born on Krypton and raised on Earth, you had the best of both and were meant to be the bridge between two worlds" (*Man of Steel*). Jor-El's words signal the transition not only of Clark to Superman, but of the inevitable globalization Superman will need to embrace to fulfill his destiny. The transition is risky, juggling the memory of dozens of iterations of the character with which the audience is familiar, and the filmmakers know it is a hard sell. Departure from American exceptionalism has created negative press in the past, as in the *Action Comics* 900 citizenship revocation controversy. The film addresses this tension as Superman is approached by an American army general who asks, "How do we know you won't one day act against America's interests?" Superman replies, "I grew up in Kansas, General. I'm about as American as it gets." Clark Kent indeed did grow up in the American heartland, and Superman still bears the colors and creed of American exceptionalism. Yet circumstances have already forced the character into globalization, and his simple assurance is not enough to assuage either the general or the audience at large.

While the *Man of Steel* attempts to have the best of both worlds, self-consciously preserving Superman's exceptionalism while forcing him out into a globalized adventure, we recognize that the character must meet the needs of a globalized world or else face

irrelevancy. Superman has to give himself up to save the world. He claims to be American, but his sacrifice includes abandoning his solely American identity. This surrender does not come easily, either for the character or for the audience. In *Man of Steel*, the heavy-handed lesson is that while Kryptonians are genetically engineered to serve a single purpose—for example, Jor-El to be a scientist or General Zod to protect the interests of Krypton—Kal-El is born in a natural pregnancy. On Earth he will be able to choose his own destiny, a tenant of the “American Dream.” The film suggests that while the Kryptonian invaders are compelled to act as they do, not unlike a terrorist motivated by the extremism of a religious affiliation, Superman makes his own choices, and by either direct or indirect action, he essentially destroys all of the Kryptonians, including his controversial neck-snapping of General Zod. In a sense, much like the American military making life and death decisions for American interests through tactics like drone strikes, Superman also decides to kill, albeit for the greater good and with the implication that he is forced to do so. Still, Superman’s actions rest uneasily with the greater backdrop of the story in which he must also save the entire world from being terra-formed to a Kryptonian atmosphere. He must fly to the Indian Ocean, literally on the other side of the world from Smallville. His presence on Earth has global consequences, attracting the conquering Zod, and as the invasion force attacks the planet, Superman’s strength and sense of American exceptionalism is inadequate; instead, he must rely on an internationally coordinated effort to repel the alien invaders. The uneasy marriage of exceptionalism and globalization ultimately distorts the Superman character in ways that must be resolved in order for the audience to have a clear image of his mission. At his father’s gravesite, Superman asks Lois Lane, “My father believed that if the world found out who I really was, they’d reject me out of fear. He was convinced that the world wasn’t ready. What do you think?” The audience is left to assume that *Man of Steel* fumbles both Superman’s inner conflicts and his evolved stature in the twenty-first century globalized world.

While the scope of this essay omits Superman’s collaboration with other superheroes in the peripheral lore, the impending sequel to *Man of Steel*, proposed as a Superman and Batman “team-up,” may serve to rectify the imbalances of the first film. In an interview with Zach Snyder, director of *Man of Steel*, BBC journalist Francine Stock questions why the film preserves Superman’s Americanization in contrast to General Zod who “gets” globalization. She mentions that Zod, arriving in Earth’s atmosphere in a giant Kryptonian spaceship, sends out a message in all the world’s languages, in what she describes as “a sort of United Colors of Benetton kind of thing.” Snyder concedes that while his vision sought to establish the “handheld Norman Rockwell” allure of the Superman character, the hero’s evolution toward globalization is inevitable. He cites how Superman throughout the film must evaluate “the demise of his alien birth culture and the culture of his raising” to gain perspective in defeating Zod, admitting that while Superman is “quintessentially an American creature and creation,” he conversely “has no choice but to become global.”

Superman: The Global Cosmopolitan

In the 1980 film *Superman II*, the President of the United States kneels before Terence Stamp’s General Zod, pledging, on behalf of the entire world, allegiance to the villain:

"This is your President. On behalf of my country and in the name of the other leaders of the world with whom I have today consulted, I hereby abdicate all authority and control over this planet to General Zod. Only by following all his directives will the lives of millions be spared . . . Superman! Can you hear me? Superman! Where are you?" Zod demands, "Who is this Superman?" to which the President replies, "You'll find out and when you do. . . ." Zod responds, "Come to me, Superman! I defy you! Come and kneel before Zod! Zod!" In a scene which perhaps is the epitome of American exceptionalism in the *Superman* universe, the American president presumes to speak for the rest of the world, even in the act of surrender. This display is perhaps the last instance of Superman's sure footing as American icon in a world experiencing intensified globalization. Six years later, "Whatever Happened to The Man of Tomorrow" would recount, from Lois Lane's point of view, how, when Superman's closest friends are murdered by a being of unspeakable evil, he retaliates in kind. In the aftermath, he reflects, "Nobody has the right to kill [. . .] Not you, not Superman. Especially not Superman" (Moore 211). He immediately ends his career, fakes his death, and once again reinvents himself as Lane's blue-collar husband, Jordan. The transition from *Superman II*, which depicts America making decisions for the world, even to its detriment, to "Whatever Happened to The Man of Tomorrow," in which Superman realizes that he cannot force his will on the world and remain true to his democratic sense of justice, is the cementing of a fundamental shift away from the "American Way" in favor of globalization. Steger writes that some researchers predict a world where, "democratic rights will ultimately become detached from their narrow relationship with discrete territorial units," resulting in a "democratic global governance structure based on Western cosmopolitan ideals" which includes a "web of expanding linkages" between various organizations (70). As an emerging global icon, Superman fits the profile for such a link, heralding a "promising scenario indeed comes to pass, then the final outcome of political globalization might well be the emergence of a cosmopolitan democracy that would constitute the basis for a plurality of identities flourishing within a structure of mutual toleration and accountability" (Steger 70).

His credentials toward a global cosmopolitan citizen have, like globalization itself, lately intensified. While in "Is Superman an American Icon," Andrew Terjesen writes, "Superman's decision to renounce his US citizenship seems to reflect a very moderate form of cosmopolitanism" (75), he likewise suggests, "Superman knows that we can't become cosmopolitans overnight, but his symbolic renunciation of his American citizenship can inspire people around the world to come together as fellow human beings and stop treating each other merely as Americans, Russians, Chinese, and so forth" (76).

Globalization, a necessary evolution for the character of Superman, does not erase his long history; instead, it modifies it in ways for the character to remain relevant. Continues Terjesen, "Superman has not rejected America. His renunciation of citizenship is a symbolic denial of American exceptionalism, but it is not an abandonment of America and of the values that it—but not it alone—represents and promotes" (77). Ultimately, a complete abandonment of his American roots is unlikely as his upbringing in Smallville is encoded in his worldview. However, a future Superman, seeking to affirm his identity as a global cosmopolitan, could dispense with his Clark Kent identity altogether and reintroduce himself to the world as Kal-El, Kryptonian immigrant to the planet Earth.

The Man of Tomorrow Today

In spite of Superman's quandaries about his role in the twenty-first century, and despite the nervousness with which his writers (and publishers and filmmakers) proceed, Superman will likely always be identified by the rest of the world as American, even if his own fans worry about his allegiances. They need not. The story of the immigrant overcoming fantastic odds and making good in a new land of opportunity is a contemporary and still very plausible democratic fairy tale which is highly translatable to other cultures with similar ideals. The *Superman* saga, on the other hand, has yet to reconcile itself with a character of unlimited power that represents a country that has long been a global peacekeeping force, for reasons economic or otherwise. As the story of America continues to evolve, whether or not it sheds its exceptionalist paradigm, or whether or not it remains a dominant political and economical force, Superman will adapt with it. Even so, Superman no longer belongs just to Americans, or even the Western world, and his responsibilities extend beyond our cultural borders. Recognizing this, publishers have promoted the fictional Man of Steel as a real service to the world:

That was the case in 1996 when [DC Comics] collaborated with the Defense Department and UNICEF in publishing a special comic book in which Superman swept down and saved two boys about to step on a landmine. The safety lessons were written in Serbo-Croatian, printed in both the Cyrillic characters used by Serbs and the roman ones used by Muslims and Croat, and half a million copies of the comic were shipped to Bosnia and Herzegovina. More of the same lessons, in Spanish, would be shipped to war zones in Central America. Why Superman? "He is a citizen of the world." (Tye 260)

Steger notes that cultural globalization is not a new phenomenon and that such exchanges have been occurring for centuries. However, since the process has intensified over the last few decades, much of what we understand now will be "eventually acquiring new meanings in interactions with global dominant themes" (72). Superman, the once American icon, rides the crest of these interactions, caught in the tensions of an American public who lays claim to him and a world system that already knows better. Regardless of Superman himself making the claim that he is "about as American as it gets," the character has long ago grown beyond simple national representation. Despite generations of successfully fighting off the forces of evil, the forces of globalization have been victorious in dragging Superman into a precarious and uncertain role in the global imaginary. Nevertheless, while the Superman we have inherited is a culmination of all that has come from the last seventy-years, he is a character poised to soar into the next seventy-five leading the charge for not just "truth, justice, and the American way," but also the way for all of us.

Notes

1. Superman, particularly in comics, does not always work alone; however, the scope of this study focuses exclusively on Superman's "solo" escapades and largely ignores any collaborative efforts with other heroes equipped with super powers, with the argument that his role changes in the context of his leadership in the Justice League or other teams of super beings, a topic of study which requires separate and additional research for a future project. By limiting the research to those stories featuring Superman as the only super-powered being, except of course for villains like the Kryptonian General Zod who possess similar abilities,

the focus can remain on Superman's history of perpetuating American exceptionalism, the lone super-powered being on Earth mirroring the lone super power nation on Earth, and the inevitable movement toward globalization.

2. In *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*, Josh Weldon writes concerning the media coverage of the episode, "Notably, these reports failed to mention that Clark Kent would remain a U.S. citizen, or that Superman's decision wasn't intended as a refutation of American policies or the country's direction" (321).
3. Thanks to Dr. Chris Breu, Illinois State University, for feedback and encouragement on my globalization analysis.

APPENDIX

Superman: A Timeline

- 1938: *Action Comics* 1
- 1940: *Look Magazine*, "How Superman Would End the War"
- 1940–1951: *The Adventures of Superman* (radio)
- 1951: *Superman and the Mole Men* (film)
- 1952–1958: *The Adventures of Superman* (TV)
- 1978: *Superman: The Movie*
- 1980: *Superman II*
- 1983: *Superman III*
- 1986: "What Ever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow" (comic)
- 1987: *Superman IV: The Quest for Peace*
- 1993: "The Death of Superman" (comic)
- 1998: "Superman Peace on Earth" (comic)
- 2001–2011: *Smallville* (TV)
- 2006: *Superman Returns*
- 2010–2011: *Superman*, "Grounded" (comic story arc)
- 2011: *Action Comics* 900, "The Incident"
- 2013: *Man of Steel*

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