READING THE SUPERHUMAN, EMBODIMENTS OF MULTIPLICITY IN MARVEL COMICS

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this project is to identify, analyze and historicize the operation of embodied multiplicities within superhero comics from the postwar era using the example of comics produced by the Marvel group between 1961 and 2005. This project argues that the superheroes created during this era reflect major social and cultural upheavals that continue to reshape the postwar era; this includes the dawn of the Atomic Age as well as the rise of the Civil Rights movement, second-wave feminism, the sexual revolution, and liberal multiculturalism. This project furthermore argues that superhero comics are especially useful vehicles for exploring both the practice of polysemy in popular texts as well as the ongoing evolution of popular bodily desires and fantasies within postwar American society and culture. Reading superhero comics as a "body genre," this project offers a formally and visually driven analysis focusing on evolving representations of gender, race, sexuality, and disability, and the fantasies and anxieties those representations reflect, resist, and negotiate. Ultimately, this project argues that superhero comics' embodied multiplicities offer especially rich opportunities for subverting hegemonic narratives that would devalue the meaning of bodily expression and the diversity of bodily experience. It also argues, however, that superhero comics possess especially sophisticated tools for negating such subversion, routinely mobilizing seeming resistances to hegemonic narratives in ways that in fact reassert those narratives in new, bright costumes and fantastical metaphors.

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INTRODUCTION

"When maturity was reached, he discovered he could easily: leap 1/8

of a mile; hurdle a twenty-story building... raise tremendous weights...

run faster than an express train... and that nothing less than a bursting

shell could penetrate his skin! Early, Clark decided he turn his titanic

strength into channels that would benefit mankind. And so was

created... Superman! Champion of the oppressed, the physical marvel

who had sworn to devote his existence to helping those in need!"

      -Action Comics #1 (1938) (Image 1)

On the first page of *Action Comics* #1, the infant son of a scientist escapes in a rocket ship from

"a distant planet destroyed by old age." He arrives on Earth and grows up in an orphanage.[1]

Upon discovering that he possesses a "physical structure... millions of years advanced of [our]

own," the boy makes the heroic decision to use his super-abilities to help the less fortunate, and

serve the greater good. From day one, page one, the world's first superhero incorporates a

multitude of potential points of identification: he is an orphan, an immigrant, an alien, an

American, a scientific marvel, a physical marvel, a grand individualist, and a scion of the

community. By page three, when he changes, for the first time, from Superman into Clark Kent,

he is also centrally identified with transformation, as well as metamorphosis—with the ability to

be and become multiple people, with different spheres of influence and even different bodily

contours.

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[1] Clark Kent's adopted parents did not exist in the original story. They were first added in the re-telling of
    Superman's origin in *Superman* #1 (1939), in which they were indicated to have died upon Clark reaching
    maturity.

Of course, all popular texts include multiple points of identification. Even popular texts that, like superhero comics, are produced primarily by men for a male audience, are not "efficient commodities" unless they are "polysemic, speaking or not speaking to different audiences in different ways" (Tasker 61). As John Fiske describes: "Popular culture... always bears within it signs of power relations, traces of the forces of domination and subordination that are central to our social system and therefore to our social experience. Equally, it shows signs of resisting or evading those forces: popular culture contradicts itself" (4). To be expert in generating popular pleasure is to be expert in generating diverse registers of meaning and possibilities for engagement, and genre conventions emerge within and through this multiplicity. As John G. Cawelti describes, genre fiction offers "variations on a theme" (10), with popular story patterns persisting "not because they embody some particular ideology or psychological dynamic, but because they maximize a great many such dynamics" (30). Although the genre conventions of popular texts are repetitive, they always repeat with a difference; genre conventions are not hard and fast rules so much as processes, tensions that are continually (re)negotiated in interactions between creators/producers and readers/consumers.

None of which is not to suggest that popular texts do not have preferred or hegemonic meanings. Despite the multiplicity of its protagonists, the superhero genre's overarching narratives are nonetheless primarily conservative, activating Manichean conflicts that pit good against evil, right against wrong. Similar to other popular American genres, most notably the Western, the superhero genre constructs its heroic protagonists as preservers of normality, and, consequently, hegemonic values. As Richard Reynolds describes:

> A key ideological myth of the superhero comic is that the normal and
> everyday enshrines positive values that must be defended through heroic

action—and defended over and over against almost without respite against

an endless battery of menaces determined to remake the world for the

benefit of aliens, mutants, criminals, or sub-aqua beings from Atlantis. The

normal is valuable and is constantly under attack, which means that almost

by definition the superhero is battling on behalf of the status quo. Into this

heroic matrix one can insert representatives of any race or creed imaginable,

but in order to be functioning superheroes they will need to conform to the

ideological rules of the game. The superhero has a mission to preserve

society, not reinvent it. (77)

Crucially, though, this ultimate preservation of normality nonetheless depends on an

incorporation of otherness. As Fiske observes, "myth often produces a hero or heroine with

characteristics from... [opposing] categories. The hero thus has excessive meaning, extraordinary

semiotic power, and acts as a mediator between the opposing concepts. (133). Superheroes, Clare

Pitkethly argues, are similarly marked by "a crossing over of… boundaries" and "the

incorporation of… *Otherness*" (216). Writes Pitkethly: "Superman treads the line between

citizen and foreigner, an antagonism which is reconfigured in the comic books as the distinction

between American and alien. Merging together alien physiology and American ideology,

Superman's identity is ultimately undecidable…. [and] it is indeterminate identity that makes

him a Superhero" (216-7). Charles Hatfield additionally argues that "the irresolution of certain

conflicts animates the superhero." Hatfield elaborates these conflicts as follows:

The most obvious [conflicts animating the superhero] are, first, the

contradiction between agnostic individualism, often violently expressed

(*power*), and an altruism that turns violence into prosocial, regenerative ends

(*responsibility*); and, second, the contradiction between the spirit of

antinomianism embodied by the figure of the vigilante (*justice*) and the

spirit of obedience under law (another kind of justice). To these two may be

added a third, less often acknowledged if no less fraught: a contradiction

between self-effacement (Clark Kent) and flamboyance (Superman), the

latter leading easily to the queering of this mostly male-addressed genre and

often tipping over into a knowing, nudging campiness. (110)

Although all genre fictions, and all generic characters, are inherently multiple, different

types of stories and characters negotiate different tensions in different ways. As Hatfield's

description suggestion, superhero comics stage their underlying conflicts in ways that are both

especially obvious and especially ambivalent. In the superhero genre, every seeming inversion is

really a different arrangement of a similar multiplicity, with different types of power and

powerlessness, and different types of justice, existing within the same multi-identitied, multi-

bodied characters. Crucially, the superhero body is at the centre of these representations and

negotiations of multiplicity. Superheroes not only reflect, but also *embody* cultural conflicts,

possessing bodily forms that are both thematically and graphically multiple. Superheroes

embody personal and/or internal conflicts; these conflicts are represented by the convention of

the dual identity, as well as what became, during and after the Silver Age,[2] superheroes'

increasingly fraught struggles to own and control their own abilities and bodily contours.

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[2]American comic book historians typically call the period that begins with the invention of the medium in the mid-to-late 1930s to the early 1950s the "Golden Age" of comics. The advent of the Comics Code in 1954 and/or the resurgence of superheroes beginning with DC Comics' re-envisioning of the Flash in 1956 is generally considered to have inaugurated the Silver Age of Comics, which lasted until approximately 1970. The Bronze Age is generally thought to have lasted from 1970-1985, while the Modern Age lasts from 1985 to the present.

Superheroes also embody social and/or external conflicts; these conflicts are represented through superheroes' physical battles with and against different persons, groups, factions, or objects, including criminals, supervillains, and machines as well as governments, the public, and other superheroes. The form that gave birth to the superhero—the comic book—significantly contributes to the particular multiplicity of the superhero. As Douglas Wolk argues, "cartooning is, inescapably, a metaphor for the subjectivity of perception" (21). Because comic books alter and simplify reality in such extreme and obvious ways, any image of any superhero compels consideration of its metaphorical significance, and provides special access to the design and development of personal and/or public fantasies.

The goal of this project is to identify, analyze and historicize the operation of embodied multiplicities within superhero comics from the postwar era, using the example of comics produced by the Marvel group between 1961 and 2005. With regard to the multiplicity of the superhero genre, the superhero comics produced by Marvel during this period represent a particularly rich subject of analysis. Compared to their predecessors created before and during WWII, the Marvel superheroes are both exaggeratedly conformist and increasingly multiple. The fact that, until very recently, Marvel's superhero comics were all produced under the auspices of the Comics Code, means that they have long been beholden to a standard of conservative morality that superheroes from the 1930s and 40s were not subjected to (at least officially). Yet because virtually all of the Marvel superheroes were created during and after the 1960s, they also reflect major social and cultural upheavals the did reshape, and continue to reshape, the postwar era; this includes the dawn of the Atomic Age, as well as the rise of the Civil Rights movement, second-wave feminism, and liberal multiculturalism. To be clear: despite this project's emphasis on the unique and sometimes radical multiplicity of the comic book superhero, it does not intend

to suggest that superhero comics are any more liberal or revolutionary than other popular texts. This project does argue, however, that superhero comics are especially useful for exploring both the practice of polysemy in popular texts, as well as the ongoing evolution of popular bodily desires and fantasies within American society and culture. Although this project will also explore, as appropriate, comics, images, and characters that offers possible resistances to conservative politics and hegemonic values, such possibilities will always be weighed against the usually greater influence of those selfsame conservative, hegemonic politics and values.

Even though Marvel comics will be the focus of the chapters to come, making a case for the relevance of that focus requires some initial discussion and analysis of the pre-war origins of the superhero genre. Several influential critics (see Andrae, Boney, Bukatman, Coogan, Eco) situate the first generation of superheroes as products of late modernity,[3] reflecting and responding to changing conceptions of identity within early-to-mid twentieth century American life. Thomas Andrae, for instance, argues that, "Although "[m]ythology and epic literature are… replete with descriptions of the superhuman deeds of gods and heroes… the concept of a heroic human being with superstrength and superhuman power is an amazingly modern and uniquely American phenomenon" (85). As Andrae observes, prior to the invention of Superman, scientific superhumans were primarily portrayed as threatening and dangerous; in all of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Robert Lewis-Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, and Phillip Wylie's later novel *Gladiator* (which has often been credited as an inspiration for Superman),[4] the scientific superhuman is ultimately a monster, a symbol of unruly (or unholy)

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[3] As Ben Singer discusses, modernity—as a time period, and as a concept—can be very difficult to define. For the purposes of this project, "late modernity" will be taken to mean a period in American history from approximately 1890 to the end of WWII.

[4] Although Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster consistently denied any connection, Wylie once planned to sue Superman's creators for copyright infringement. For a detailed account of the possible connections between the two texts, see Jones.

science that cannot be allowed to survive.[5] Superman is similarly a monster, inasmuch as he is, as Noël Carroll puts it, "not compossible with what is known of the natural order of science" (8). And yet, excepting a few examples from his early appearances,[6] Superman is not viewed or treated as a monster. Andrae argues that Superman's ability to be desirable and heroic rather than threating and dangerous is inextricably linked to his context. Paul Fussell argues that in the wake of World War I, the word "machine" had become forever associated with the word "gun" (24). The public's trust in the goodness of modernity continued to erode in the decades after WWI, with the economic boom that followed it preceding a bust that crippled working poor and Wall Street elites alike. By the time Superman emerged on the scene, yet another, even deadlier global conflict loomed on the horizon, which would further transform the meaning of modernity. Within such a context, it is unsurprising that the American public was ready to embrace a hero who was both above the law and impervious to bullets, who could both destroy urban squalor (*Action Comics* #8 [1939]) and halt global conflicts (*Action Comics* #2 [1938]) while armed with nothing but his steel hands and iron will. By 1938, such a character had started to seem far less dangerous, and much more like humanity's only hope.

Whereas villainous and/or monstrous scientific superhumans embody the threat of being un-made, the first generation of superheroes embody a fantasy of being re-made. This fantasy responds to but also capitalizes on the increased mobility of late modernity. As Ben Singer describes: "Modernity saw a great increase in both 'horizontal' mobility (i.e., geographic mobility involving migrations from nation to nation, country to city, city to city, neighborhood to

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[5] Emphasizing the popularity of the villainous scientific superhuman right up to the time of Superman's emergence is the fact that Siegel and Shuster first applied the name to a villain, in a 1936 short story called "The Reign of the Superman." For an outline of the plot of this story, see Andrae.

[6] For instance, in *Action Comics* #1, Superman is described by frightened government officials as "not human," and by terrified criminals as "the devil himself."

neighborhood), and 'vertical' mobility (i.e., socioeconomic mobility involving changes in profession, status, class, affiliation, and associated changes in mentalities and constructions of identity" (27). John F. Kasson argues that in the popular American imagination, three key figures particularly highlight the ways in which this new sense of mobility manifested in changing conceptions of, specifically, white, masculine identity; these figures are the bodybuilder Eugene Sandow,[7] the magician and escape artist Harry Houdini,[8] and Edgar Rice Burrough's Tarzan.[9] All of Sandow, Houdini, and Tarzan represent a particular dream of re-making the self by re-making the body. This concept is quintessentially modern; as Mark Seltzer argues, late modernity is particularly marked by "the 'discovery' that bodies and persons are things that can be made" (3). This "discovery" took different forms in different discourses. For instance, industrialized capitalism re-made the body as a cog in the machinery of wealth production, while psychoanalysis re-made the body as a product of cultural and familial influences. For their part, Sandow, Houdini, and Tarzan—whose hard, muscular bodies were capable of spectacular feats of strength, daring, and survival—suggested ways of re-making the body that might resurrect a virile manhood thought lost or damaged by the disempowering or "feminizing" influence of modernity, emblematized, Michael S. Kimmel argues, by the mass migration of men from farms and skilled trades into urban factories and offices (17). Sandow, Houdini, and Tarzan also

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[7] The close connection between bodybuilding and superheroes is evident in the persistent presence of in superhero comics of advertisements for various bodybuilding and body-shaping programs. One of the most famous (or, perhaps, infamous) ads, for the Charles Atlas program, has been running virtually unchanged for more than 50 years.

[8] For a creative exploration of Houdini's influence on the superhero genre, see Michael Chabon's novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (2000). The novel tells the story of a fictional pair of superhero comic book creators, Josef Kavalier and Sammy Klayman, whose defining creation, a WWII-era hero called The Escapist, is modelled after Houdini.

[9] One of the most notable ways Tarzan influenced the superhero genre is via his adaptation into comics. Tarzan's adventures were among the first serialized, action-adventure comic strips; in addition, as Robert C. Harvey observes, the work of Hal Foster, who drew Tarzan comic strips for the United Features Syndicate beginning in 1929, and Burne Hogarth, who drew Tarzan strips for King Features Syndicate beginning in 1937, greatly influenced the superhero comics' approach to drawing the practically naked, heroically muscular human form (Harvey 185).

suggested ways of resisting the determining influence of family, class, or culture; while Sandow and Houdini re-made their bodies in ways that transformed them from faceless immigrant workers into famous and wealthy gentlemen, Tarzan remade himself in ways that repaired and reaffirmed the underlying superiority of the aristocracy.

In their particular ways of re-making the self through the body, all of Sandow, Houdini, and Tarzan represent a modification of masculinity from a set innate characteristics into something that can and must be gained and proved through images and signs. This once again reflects the context of late modernity. By the turn-of-the-century, says Kimmel, American manhood "is no longer fixed in land or small-scale property ownership or dutiful service. Success must be earned, manhood must be proved—and proved constantly" (17). Sandow is particularly emblematic of this shift, in the sense that he was not only a strongman, but also the first internationally famous bodybuilder. As Kenneth R. Dutton describes, because it prioritizes appearance, bodybuilding represents more than a practical goal of improving strength or health (124). Different from the barrel-chested circus strongmen, wrestlers, and boxers who came before him, Sandow was beautiful in both a classical and a modern sense, proving his strength both by posing in the guise of idealized statues and portraits of Greek and Roman gods and warriors, and by posing for scientists who used his body as a guidebook for the study of human anatomy; the artistic and scientific framing of his muscular body also merged lower class virility with upper class asexuality, invoking a dream of accessing, but also redeeming and precisely managing, a reservoir of primitive, essential masculinity (Kasson 46). Sandow was, as Kasson describes, not just strong or beautiful, but also, as both his own advertising and contemporary newspaper accounts declared, *perfect*—artistically, scientifically, and ideologically. Sandow's perfection suggested, in part, a dream of unity, of an outside appearance perfectly aligned with

interior character. In this, Sandow was a supreme example of masculine self-sufficiency, reaffirming masculinity as "natural and universal" (Rutherford 23), a paradoxically obvious and invisible norm that is powerful and appealing precisely because it does not require justification or explanation. Alongside this reaffirmation, though, Sandow also represented a newly demanding framework for achieving and representing masculinity. As Kasson describes, although Sandow "helped to displace the Victorian conception of the body as a moral reservoir and instrument of productive labor with a modern conception of the body as an expression of individual desire and pleasure," he also "raised a new, potentially more punishing 'scientific' standard against which to measure one's inadequacy" (75). Ultimately, Sandow's ability to re-make himself connoted both liberation and obligation; embracing Sandow's perfection meant embracing masculinity as both a set of rigid social responsibilities as well as a set of increasingly demanding bodily performances.

The superhero genre's defining themes of social transformation and physical metamorphosis clearly owe a debt to Sandow's example. Yet compared to a real-life bodybuilder such as Sandow, superheroes offer physical ideals that are both more punishing and more liberating. As much as bodybuilders might aspire to machine-like power and precision, exploiting scientific techniques and technology such as exercise machines and performance enhancing drugs to achieve "Destroyer Delts" or "Nuke Legs" (Klein 141), it is only superheroes who can actually *be* destroyers or nuclear bombs. Superheroes have a long tradition of weapon-based monikers and powers, beginning with Golden Age characters such as Bulletman (and his sidekick, Bulletgirl), the Human Bomb, TNT, Atomic Man, Red Torpedo, the Human Torch, and the Sub-Mariner. Superman, too, is "The Man *of* Steel," not "The Man *like* Steel." Furthermore, beginning with *Action Comics* #1, which demonstrates Superman's strength by showing him

lifting a car over his head, countless early stories compare Superman to modern machines. A survey of early covers is illustrative of this trend: on the cover of *Action Comics* #10 (1939), Superman battles an airplane, and on the cover of #13 (1939), he stops a locomotive with a single upraised hand; on the cover of #15 (1939), he lifts a submarine, and on the cover of #17 (1939), he lifts a tank; on the cover of #21 (1940), he carries a missile onto a battleship, and on the cover of #22 (1940), he halts the progress of an excavator about to crush an injured worked under its massive treads (see Figures 2-5).

Superman's interactions with modern technology present a striking contrast to earlier images of modernity that appeared in turn-of-the-century newspapers and magazines. As Ben Singer describes, turn-of-the-century newspapers "had a particular fondness for 'snapshot' images of pedestrian deaths" at the hands of modern technology, including trains, streetcars, and automobiles. "This fixation," Singer argues, "underscored the sense of a radically altered public space, one defined by chance, peril, and shocking impressions rather than by any traditional conception of continuity and self-controlled destiny" (70). Superman exploits these continued fears and the memory of this imagery, but inverts them, turning the landscape of modernity from a battlefield into a playground. In an opening splash page from *World's Finest Comics* #3 (1941), Superman's pose as he swoops in to stop a train collision almost precisely mirrors a drawing that appeared in the *New York World* in 1896 showing a man being run over by a train (Image 6). Both images evoke the "shocking impressions" of a "radically altered space," but have a very different relationship to "self-controlled destiny"; whereas the man in the 1896 image is a helpless victim of modernity, Superman is a capable and determined perpetrator. This type of imagery is abundant within superhero comics, up to and including the present era. Case in point, the cover of *Daredevil* #95 (2007), showing the titular hero plunging down and at an angle into

the smoke and grime-filled city, could be seen to invert another 1896 image from the *New York World*, this one showing a man, situated against a similarly grimy skyline, falling to his death from a skyscraper (Image 7). Where the 1896 man is obviously terrified, about to pay for his moment of flight with his death, Daredevil is both graceful and calm; Daredevil is, as his catch-phrase states, "The Man Without Fear."

In the context of late modernity, many American men, in particular, felt increasingly supplanted by technology; as Paul Goetsch observes, the literature and journalism that came out of WWI often suggested that "the weapons produced by industry [were] the true protagonists" (320). Within this context, Superman offers a powerful fantasy of asserting, or reasserting, individual power and agency. Importantly, though, Superman also embraces the utopian promise of technology; this is true inasmuch as his interactions with machines tend to emphasize *both* his superiority *and* his similarity to them. Case in point, in the origin story on the first page of *Action Comics* #1 (see Image 1), Superman is described as "faster than an express train." Yet in the image accompanying this statement, Superman's upraised knee and flat face also mimic the shape of the train next to him (or, more accurately, behind him). Although Superman does not always mimic machines quite this explicitly, many of the cover images referenced above nonetheless suggest a degree of equivalency. In each image, Superman's muscular body, which strikes heroic, statuesque poses that are highlighted, smoothed, and stabilized by thick black lines, evokes the hard-but-streamlined shapes of the machines that he holds, lifts, or hugs. In addition, on the plane cover of *Action Comics* #10, the train cover of #13 (see Image 3), and the excavator cover of #22 (see Image 4), the blue and red colours of Superman's costume are echoed by the machines. While this choice was no doubt partly the result of a limited colour palette, the train cover in particular suggests a more complex, deliberate motive. On this cover,

the train precisely mirrors Superman's red, blue, and yellow colour scheme, while a triangular, yellow-outlined chevron on the engine also copies the shape and style of Superman's own crest. Whereas the mass killing fields of WWI seemed, in the words of Fussell, to "[reverse] the Idea of Progress" (8), Superman's ability and willingness to take visual and physical inspiration from modern technology suggests that he also depends on and glorifies it. Although Superman clearly rebels against the dehumanizing aspects of modern technology when he smashes cars over his head and shatters airplanes and tanks with his bare fists, it is, ultimately, the terrific and horrible spectacle of these machines that enables the glory of Superman's resistance; the sometimes-terror of these modern wonders is acceptable, these images of Superman suggest, because they create the conditions for Superman, a refugee from "a planet whose inhabitants' physical structure was millions of years advanced of our own" (*Action Comics* #1).

Seltzer argues that trains emblematize the vexed nature of modern man's dependence on, and identification with, machines. Trains, says Seltzer, "coupled what Chevalier called the American 'passion for movement' and the mechanization of motive power; the relays between passion and mechanization of motive power… On another level, the railway system combined mobility with incarceration, confining still or stilled bodies in moving machines directed by mechanical prime movers" (18). Superman negotiates this conflict by incorporating certain properties of a train, but containing them within an overarching humanity. Even in his most direct instances of resembling a train, Superman is still obviously and beautifully human, as well as obviously and beautifully masculine, the thick, smooth black lines that compose his body depicting steel but still ideally human (or at least human-looking) skin. Superman's machine-ness never truly comes at the expense of his human-ness—or, for that matter, his male-ness. In this, rather than merely mimicking modern technology, Superman more properly consumes and

contains it, becoming more rational, more beautiful, more *perfect* than Sandow could ever hope

to be. Contrary to the "intense mechanization, division of labor, and 'scientific management,'…

[that] endeavored to… reduce the workers' bodies to components in a gigantic machine"

(Klasson 12), Superman, through his proven superiority to machines and his supreme ability to

contain the properties of machines, is able to have his cake and eat it too—to both exploit and

deny the machinic quality of the modern world, as well as the modern body.

Importantly, where both Sandow and Superman are concerned, the pursuit of perfection is

risky inasmuch as it implies an original imperfection. On a basic level, the desire and ability to

re-make the self affirms the very thing it is afraid of: namely, the instability of traditional identity

categories and hierarchies amid the increasing mobile and multiple context of late modernity. To

put it simply: one cannot re-make the self without also admitting that the self has, or could be,

un-made. Kasson argues that Sandow and Houdini negotiated this threat by foregrounding their

re-making as a supreme triumph of the will. It is, Kasson observes, a dream of self-directed

metamorphosis that truly unites Sandow, a man who went from "sickly youth to strongman"

(Klasson 38), and Houdini, the master of escape. In different but ultimately similar ways, says

Kasson, these men "appealed to the drama of masculine metamorphosis, the possibilities for

bodily transformation and, by implication, for a transformation of self and social standing" (223).

The re-made bodies of Sandow and Houdini attempt to overcome—or at the very least

disguise—the threat of being un-made be presenting themselves as exemplars of individual

agency; in this, these bodies assert that the threat of being un-made is overwhelmed by the

benefits of being re-made.

Superheroes embrace these general principles and strategies but once again exaggerate

them via bodies and transformations that are that much larger, grander, and more fantastic.

Batman, an otherwise physically normal man inspired by personal tragedy to re-make himself

into a superhuman,[10] is, of course, the superhero genre's most extreme example of self-directed

metamorphosis. This concept is also evident in the story of Captain America, who is effectively

re-made into a superhuman through the strength of his patriotism. Even Superman, whose

physical gifts are largely a birthright, foregrounds this concept, particularly in his early stories.

Originally, Superman was not empowered by Earth's different gravity or sun. Instead, he simply

possesses, as previously quoted, a "physical structure" that is "millions of years advanced of our

own" (*Action Comics* #1). Superman's early stories also include tips for the reader on how they,

too, might acquire super abilities; a cartoon in the margins of *Action Comics* #4 (1938) instructs

readers in how to "[acquire] super-strength" by lifting household furniture, while *Action Comics*

#8 (1939) provides lessons in acquiring "super-vision" that involve staring at close and distant

objects. This fantasy was not limited to men; as Trina Robbins observes, Wonder Woman's early

stories similarly feature her instructing girls in exercise and sports, emphasizing that her

"incredible strength, speed, and agility are the results of superior Amazon training, and with

comparable training any girl or woman could become a wonder woman" (10). Even when

superheroes obtain their abilities through coincidences or scientific accidents, the dream of self-

directed metamorphosis is inherent in the form and genre's ability to design fantastically

modified, enhanced, or otherwise "super" humans.

The particular quality of the superhero genre's defining fantasy of self-directed

metamorphosis is powerfully dramatized through the design and deployment of the superhero

costume. The idea of creating a dual identity and/or special outfit in which to fight crime is a

borrowed convention that incorporates a specific (though always mobile) set of conflicts within

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[10] Although Batman does not have "actual" superpowers, he is still identifiably superhuman due to his vastly
   superior physical and mental abilities, as well as his superior ability to manipulate and use technology.

the superhero genre. In both design and function, the skin-tight, iconically shaped and/or labelled and often brightly-coloured superhero costume is crucially different from the type of outfit worn by non-superheroic avengers such as the Shadow, the Green Hornet, or the Spirit. The outfits worn by these non-superheroic avengers consist of long trench coats and fedoras, with a scarf, faceplate, or domino mask covering the face. Although these outfits do lend their wearers a certain iconic status, they have, in the words of Peter Coogan, "too many specific details to reach the level of [the superhero costume's] abstraction" (34). In addition, these costumes are tools of anonymity, serving to hide and disguise the body and identity of the wearer. The superhero, conversely, does not wear a disguise, but rather a *costume*, a flamboyant ensemble that explicitly displays the body and overtly, even outlandishly identifies the wearer. Even Batman's black and grey costume, which often helps him hide and blend into the shadows, is also explicitly designed to get noticed. In his origin story in *Detective Comics* #33 (1939), Bruce Wayne is inspired to take on the appearance of a bat not, primarily, for the sake of stealthiness, but because such a costume will be able "to strike terror" into the hearts of criminals (Image 8). As Friedrich Weltzein describes, "The superhero costume is not designed to hide the alternate identity... but to display the special authority of the figure. These costumes are the exact opposite of camouflage" (241).

In both conception and execution, the superhero costume serves a powerful and important identifying function. Coogan argues that the superhero's mission is informed by the nature of his or her superpowers or special abilities, which in turn confirms his or her heroic identity in the form of a codename and costume that "expresses his [or her] inner character" and "embodies his [or her] biography" (33). The outfit of a non-superheroic avenger such as the Green Hornet is not related to his codename or biography in in this way; Britt Reid's costume is not hornet-like, and

does not relate in any significant way to his personality or abilities. Bruce Wayne, in contrast, takes inspiration for his method of vengeance from a bat, while dressing up as a bat. In a way that is not true of other, non-superheroic avengers, superheroes wear costumes that reflect and embody what Coogan calls their "MIP": their mission, identity, and powers. Reynolds concurs that within the superhero genre, "Costume is the sign of individual identity—a new identity" (26); the superhero costume "is more than a disguise [because]... it functions as a sign for the inward process of character development" (Reynolds 29). Mila Bongco similarly observes that, "The colours, shapes, and ornaments in the [superhero's] costumes… show the features essential to the hero's identity, powers, and capabilities" (105). Even a seeming "non-costume" such as the Hulk's torn purple shorts serves this identifying function, connoting the trauma and unpredictability of Bruce Banner's metamorphosis into a rampaging monster-hero.

The superhero costume is also a dense site of negotiation. The skintight-ness of the costume furnishes perhaps the superhero's strongest link to the past, highlighting the visual similarity between the body of the superhero and the bodies of the Greek and Roman heroes and gods who were also, of course, a central reference point for the classical era of bodybuilding inaugurated by Sandow. The costume's use of symbols that indicate the wearer's identity and/or reference the wearer's deeds and abilities is also similar to the decorated chest plates of ancient Roman leaders, deities, and warriors. Yet other aspects of the design and deployment of the superhero costume are intensely modern. The superhero costume's incorporation of iconic, simplified colour schemes as well as other visual or explicitly textual identifiers is clearly a form of modern branding, not only indicating, but also *advertising* the superhero's mission, identity, and powers. Thus, just as the shape and features of the superhero body both exploit and attempt to contain the threatening but also empowering properties of modern technology, the superhero

costume exploits and attempts to contain the threatening but also empowering properties of modern consumer culture.

In a sense, superheroes must reflect and negotiate consumer culture, because the advent of the money economy was a crucial force in dictating the terms of modern identity. As Singer describes, the advent of the money economy gave birth to the modern concept of individualism, inasmuch as it enabled people, for the first time, to own their own labour and employ it however and for whomever they chose (31-2). Within the money economy, says Singer, "The ability to acquire material necessities in the marketplace freed the individual from dependence on family, tribe, or commune" (32). And yet, within the context of the money economy in general but especially within the context of advanced capitalism, this individualism is dependent on the "logic of equivalence between bodies and objects, between persons and things, and between the passions and the interests" (Seltzer 57). Although "[m]odern capitalism redefined the basic social unit from the group to the individual," "[i]ndividual independence did not entail literal self-sufficiency, but rather self-sufficiency contingent on the provision of material necessities via the marketplace" (Singer 32). In other words, modern freedom is defined as the ability to sell one's labour (i.e., to become an object within the marketplace), while modern self-sufficiency is defined as the ability to buy labour (i.e., to obtain objects within the marketplace). The consumer culture of modern capitalism, Seltzer argues, "keeps steadily visible the tension between self-possession and self-discipline, between the particular (one's standard) and the generic (standard one's)" (58). In the end, although consumer culture provides very sophisticated and appealing illusions of freedom, it also forces people to situate and define themselves through their codification and commodification as commercial objects, products, and/or images.

The most obvious way in which superheroes embody this tension between "one's

standard" and "standard one's" is through the convention of the dual identity. All of Batman,

Superman, Wonder Woman, and Spider-Man (along with countless other superheroes) combine

heroic identities associated with individual freedom and self-possession with civilian identities

associated with social and industrial demands and restraints. And yet, the costume that represents

the heroic identity nonetheless adheres to the logic of modern capitalism, inasmuch as it asserts

freedom and self-possession *through* the language and tools of consumer culture—through, to

reiterate, the language and tools of branding and advertising. The superhero costume attempts to

manage or negotiate its implication in the standardizing and objectifying impulses of consumer

culture by presenting itself as a *personal* brand. Through their costumes, superheroes are walking

advertisements, with all the benefits that entails: they are instantly recognizable and emotionally

evocative, able to be seen and compete for space within the image-driven, objectifying landscape

of modernity. Yet with the notable exception of certain superhero "families," including the

Marvel family, the Superman family, and the Fantastic Four, the superhero costume represents a

single individual, rather than a clan or specific political allegiance.[11] Thus, what superheroes

ultimately advertise is themselves: their individual mission, identity, and powers. Furthermore,

even though the skin-tightness of the costume creates the illusion of exposure, it also enables the

superhero to exert a great deal of control over the meaning of that exposure. Similar to the

classical heroic statues and paintings they imitate and reference, superheroes are more

suggestively nude than naked. As John Berger describes, extrapolating from Kenneth Clark, "To

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[11] One potential exception to this rule would be patriotic heroes such as Captain America and Wonder Woman, whose costumes were explicitly designed to reflect their national allegiance. Yet outside of the context of WWII, the costumes of both characters have often been re-designed and/or re-contextualized to reflect more individual meanings. Since his resurrection in *The Avengers* #4 (1964), Captain America has sometimes abandoned the stars and stripes, most notably in 1975 when he became "Nomad, the Man Without a Country." Wonder Woman similarly abandoned her stars and stripes in the 1960s. Though both characters later re-adopted their patriotic imagery, Wonder Woman's costume was changed, in 1982, to become more personal, the eagle emblem on her chest becoming a "WW" symbol.

be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized as oneself… Nakedness reveals itself. Nudity is placed on display" (54). Superheroes attempt to overcome the loss of agency that comes with being displayed by recognizing and exploiting the textuality of the body. As much as superhero bodies and costumes can and do embody fantasies of self-contained perfection, they also reveal and celebrate their constructedness, asserting what seems like honesty only through subjective vision, including the subversive manipulations of style. Their processes of textual and visual self-branding reject authenticity in favour of the creative control that can be gained by embracing inauthenticity.

This strategy carries inherent risks. Just as the fantasy of re-making the self admits an original imperfection, the fantasy of re-drawing and/or re-writing the self admits the inherent inauthenticity of all images and identities. To put it simply: whereas the fantasy of re-making the self includes the possibility of being un-made, the fantasy of re-branding the self includes the possibility of being bought and sold. Superhero comics attempt to negotiate this risk by foregrounding the costume as a product and purveyor of agency. Superheroes put on, reveal, and use their costumes to go into action, to assert their will over machines, villains, and other treats to personal and public liberty and justice; the superhero costume symbolizes the transformation and metamorphosis from a nobody—a child, man, or woman in the crowd—into a somebody—a man or woman (often literally) above the crowd. Importantly, though, this agency is always explicitly performative. Inasmuch as their (super)heroism emerges through the performance of changing from one suit of clothes into another, superheroes are empowered as much by "real" abilities—such as super-speed, strength, or endurance—as by what Weltzein calls "a superior ability in masking" (Weltzein 242). As Weltzein observes, in the iconic image of Clark Kent ripping open his shirt to become Superman, "No skin can be seen under the garment, no 'real

man' of flesh and blood, only another costume is revealed" (235). On the one hand, this persistent denial of real flesh in favour of a branded second-skin protects the superhero's agency; as discussed above, the revealing-but-concealing superhero costume enables the superhero to protect and preserve their particular identity against the threat of commodification and consumption.[12] On the other hand, the denial of real flesh ensures a perpetual sense of uncertainty and/or instability; when perpetually shrink-wrapped, the superhero's body is always an image rather than a provable fact—a shape and a set of symbols rather than a material reality. Ultimately, the superhero costume emphasizes that superheroes, much like the rest of us, cannot truly transcend the psychologically and practically threatening aspects of modern identity. Superheroes do, however, offer powerful fantasies of transcendent subjectivity—of being the best there is at becoming.

The comic book form offers unique tools for capturing the superhero's repeated enactment of self-directed metamorphosis. Jared Gardner argues that the early newspaper comic strips that inspired the comic book form are particularly suited to representing and confronting the challenge of modernity. Early newspaper strips, says Gardner, starring the likes of Happy Hooligan:

> ... are not escapist or transcendent; they are not predictably entertaining nor are they conceived as fit objects for contemplation. They are instead experiments with mass-mediated personality—a personality that emerges through serial repetition. Extending Muybridge's experiments with the

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[12] The costumes of female superheroes are often denied these protective features. Because they are often derivative of the costumes of male superheroes and/or inspired by lingerie rather than athletics, the transformation of a female character into her superhero alter ego can, as Reynolds observes, "(at least potentially) be viewed as the performance of an uncompleted striptease" (37). For a more thorough analysis of the ways and means of this difference and its consequences, please see Chapters One, Two, and Four.

moving body to the social, the hyperkinetic space and time of modernity can

be broken down in terms of its repeated cycles, its patterned fragments….

The fantasy engendered by the comic personality is that in thrusting

ourselves repeatedly into the gears of the machine we might... emerge

endowed with a new personality which no degree of force, oppression, or

fragmentation could break down—a personality that would be welcome in

any home on any given Sunday in America. (14)

Gardner argues that these comic strips reflect modernity in the ways they reject unity and originality in favour of fragmentation and repetition. He also argues that "breaking down" the body into repeated fragments can be a strategy of exerting control over and within the context of modernity. As Gardner describes, in these comic strips, the plasticity of the cartoon body combined with the sequential nature of the comics' panels and the repetitive quality of their situations, plots, and imagery, dramatizes the protagonist's ability to not only exist within spaces of modernity, but also to survive and thrive within them. According to Gardner, early comic strips were uniquely suited to depicting a new sense or type of identity, one that is, like the comics form itself, newly "mass-mediated" and machine-like, but also newly resilient.

Against a long history of comics being perceived as a derivative and/or hybrid form—an impure or somehow imperfect combination of words and images[13]—Gardner's invocation of

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[13] David Carrier sums up this prejudice as follows: "What identifies the comic book for many commentators is its deficiency, its failure to be either a real text or just a proper image" (69). As Thierry Groensteen observes, the premise that comics are a hybrid form, creating meaning through charged confrontations between text and images, says more about cultural prejudices than it does the specific formal properties of comics (8). Case in point, Ronald Schmitt's argument that comics' cultural value is located in their ability to subvert, via their combination of text and images, traditional reading practices and "the entire notion of literacy" (153), is problematic inasmuch as it requires thinking about comics not as their own specific form, with their own specific ways of representing life and telling stories, but as an always-uneasy cannibalization of other forms; in effect, Schmitt's view of comics as hybrid suggests that comics generate meaning only in relation to other mediums.

Eadweard Muybridge also begins to suggest how comics might feature elements of both text-based stories and image-based stories while still being crucially different from both. Similar to Muybridge's photographic studies of humans and animals in motion, comics magnify single moments within a larger series of movements; in this, they open up visual, visceral actions to the contemplative remove more commonly associated with textual productions. Yet comics also differ from Muybrige's scientifically motived studies in several important ways. Unlike Muybridge's studies, comics are explicitly designed to arouse emotional responses in the reader. Furthermore, these conflicts rarely proceed in a truly linear fashion; instead, they are full of gaps. In comics, the space between the panels—what Scott McCloud calls "the gutter" (66)—encourages and even depends upon the active intervention of the reader. One of the central contentions of McCloud's landmark book *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* is that comics are a uniquely participatory form, first and foremost because they require the reader to spend a considerable amount of energy and imagination closing the very visible gaps between one image and/or moment in time and the next. Importantly, closing the gap in comics—a process that McCloud calls "closure" (63)—does not necessarily mean constructing a coherent, linear whole. The process of closure involves inferring relationships between fragments, and these relationships can be—and often are—both practical as well as thematic or metaphorical. Case in point, McCloud identifies at least six different types of panel transitions in comics; "moment-to-moment" transitions feature very small gaps, while "action-to-action" transitions feature fairly obvious gaps, and "aspect-to-aspect" and "non-sequitur" transitions feature very wide, subjective gaps (70-2). In film, the juxtaposition of obvious fragments is generally considered to be a very experimental, avant garde technique. In comics, which McCloud defines as "[j]uxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence" (9), it is a general principle of

production.

Barbara Postema furthermore argues that the process of reading comics always involves some form of "weaving." According to Postema:

> There is a certain amount of anticipation involved in reading comics, but foremost, it is a continual weaving back and forth, as the reader first 'skips over' the gutter to look at the next panel, and then mentally goes into the gutter to fill in the actions, events, or transitions that took place in the gap between the panels. Sequences in comics signify in a process of reading back and forth. As one reads forwards, details in previous panels become more important (again) or come to signify in different ways. Retroactive resignification may take place based on the reading of more recent panels; but on the other hand, reconsidering previous panels may also then lead to a reevalutation of action in the present panel. Consequently, the creation of action in a comic is an intricate and continuous negotiation and (re)consideration of various panels at the same time, based on visual information that panels, as signifying syntagms, provide. (66)

Ultimately, then, compared to narrative novels and films as well as Muybridge's photographic studies, comics are a particularly subjective, non-linear form. This means that comics are not derivate or hybrid, but are, instead, inherently and productively *multiple*. Within any given series of panels, comics encourage not only different modes of engagement, but also different interpretations of images and movements that are always actively—and sometimes deliberately—subjective.

In superhero comics, as in the early newspaper comic strips discussed by Gardner, this

multiplicity is most often enacted within the space of the modern city; before the Marvel superheroes took up residence in New York City, Golden Age superheroes lived in and protected, and were displayed within and pitted against, a slew of fictional urban centres, including Gotham City, Metropolis, Star City, Central City, and Coast City. Yet whereas comic *strips* often oppose linearity, transcendence, and escapism, comic *books* tend to function a bit differently. The early twentieth century's humorous comic strips are different from the superhero comic books that emerged in the late 1930s at the level of both content and form. Firstly, superhero comic books are more narrative than early comic strips. Although Golden Age superhero comic books were not properly serialized, tending to exist, as Umberto Eco puts it, in an "oneiric climate" that is "deprived of the possibility of narrative development" (931), individual issues nonetheless feature fairly traditional narrative structures, in which a conflict leads to a climax and a resolution. The adventures of Happy Hooligan are far less linear, inasmuch as they tend to consist solely of visual gags and puns. Even after the development of serialized adventure strips such as *Flash Gordon* and *Dick Tracy*, the comic book world of Batman, in which stories unfold over the course of many, full-colour pages, is markedly more spacious and less narratively fragmented than the comic strip world of Tracy, in which stories usually unfold one day at a time, in single rows of black and white panels.

Some critics, including Gardner, feel that the comic book form's more cohesive, sustained narratives, which copied the trajectory of the film industry from fragmented "actualities" to "feature-length" narratives, deprived American comics of something of their uniqueness. And yet, the comic book form does have some advantages. Chief among these is the fact that, whereas comic strips could evoke the fragmentation of modernity, comic books could evoke *both* the fragmentation *and* the monumental *spectacle* of modernity. This capacity is

particularly evident in sequences depicting the superhero within the space of the modern city.

Scott Bukatman argues that, in their original comic book form, superheroes both encapsulate and

embody "the same utopian aspirations of modernity as the cities themselves" (185). This

embodiment is made possible, in part, by fact that the comic book form, similar to the modern

city, provides unique opportunities for manipulating time and space, speed and scale. Within a

comic book, Superman can be impossibly still within spaces that, in reality, might seem

chaotically or threateningly immense and mobile. Although the superhero genre is fast-paced and

action-oriented, superhero comics also typically feature many panels that do not serve an

immediate narrative purpose. The larger, longer format of the comic book relative to the comic

strip means that superhero comic books are able to (literally) draw out their action sequences.

Through drawing them out, they can also blow them up, isolating and dwelling on spectacular

views of spectacular bodies. Relative to comic strips, comic books have the space and time show

Superman not only reacting to and surviving the modern city, but also existing, triumphantly,

within it; Superman can spend multiple panels posed within and against the landscapes of the

modern city, hanging suspended between, and hovering above, its skyscrapers and expressways

(Figures 9 and 10). Superman's powers allow him to jump over skyscrapers and, eventually, to

fly;[14] but it is the comic book form that is truly responsible for Superman's ability to become "a

monument to the modern city, to be gawked at as part of the landscape" (Bukatman 197).

Superman's ability to become a monument emphasizes, in part, his superiority over the

landscape of modernity. As Bukatman describes, in superhero comics, "Enlarging the body or

diminishing the city permit one to 'grasp' the city as a whole," allowing it to become "a toy, a

pocket city, a dream house"; "[t]he city moves," says Bukatman, "from sublime unknown to

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[14] The comic book version of Superman gained the ability to fly only after he was depicted flying in the first
   Fleischer Studios' Superman cartoon, "The Mad Scientist," released in 1941.

marvelous object, its blocks now children's blocks to be rearranged at will" (196). Yet the desire and ability to be "gawked at" also opens the superhero up to objectification. In any given superhero comic, the panels that make up the story overtly display beautifully shaped and decorated bodies in ways that potentially subject both superheroic men and women to "a controlling and curious gaze" (Mulvey 8). Although the dynamic, athletic poses of the superhero's fantastically clothed and abled body are generally active, rather than passive (at least where male superheroes are concerned), the ways in which those active poses are framed within the grid of both the comic book page and the modern city renders them spectacular—that is, meant not only to be seen, but also stared at and admired, even in defiance of the flow of the action and/or the narrative. In this, superheroes are not unlike performers in a musical, whose bodies "interrupt, stall, and exceed… the libidinal economy of linear narrative" (Cohan 48). For Superman, as for Fred Astaire, "once he begins performing… his body's energy and motion redefine narrative space in completely visual terms as spectacle" (Cohan 48). And yet, the comic book form can also help superheroes resist—or at the very least negotiate—the pacifying connotations of objectification. As Andrei Molotiu describes, comics produce meaning through "sequential dynamism," "providing the viewer with a visual aesthetic satisfaction that is not the static satisfaction of traditional painting or drawing, but a specifically sequential pleasure, achieved by putting the eye into motion, and by creating specific graphic paths, speeds of scanning, and graphic rhythms to enliven its aesthetic experience" (89). Thus, although superhero comics allow and even compel readers to pause and gawk at specific, monumental bodies in specific, isolated panels, those specific panels also combine to emphasize monumental action and movement—in other words, monumental agency. As Robert C. Harvey describes, in superhero comic books, "the absence of wholly continuous action... actually works to create the

impression of vigorous activity: the key moments of action that are depicted come at us in explosive bursts" (38).

Two pages from *Superman* #11 (1941) (Image 11) exemplify how a typical comic book can depict the superhero as capable of both monumental stillness and monumental speed. On these pages, the tendency to centre Superman's body within individual panels interrupts the eye's movement across the page, encouraging the reader to stare at and potentially objectify Superman's body; the copious text narrating and describing each movement further slows down the action, virtually forcing the reader to linger on the individually framed images of Superman's attractive, heroic body. However, the action-to-action transitions from one dynamic pose to the next—which move immediately from an image of Superman catching a bomb to the aftermath of him throwing it, and from an image of Superman sailing upward to images of him diving down, right, and left—also emphasize Superman's tremendous speed and mobility. As Postema describes, in comics, "The interest of sequences of panels comes from the flexibility and expanse of action that can be left out between panels, not from capturing the minutest details of these actions." As such, says Postema, "The most effective ways in which comics evoke action have less to do with literally showing movements and actions in full detail, and more to do with implying action through the gaps that are left" (59). To close the gap between one of Superman's dramatic motions and the next, the reader is compelled to imagine his superheroic speed and power. The wider or more dramatic the gap—that is, the more Superman's position has changed from one panel to the next—the more imagination is required, to the point of producing mental and/or physical disorientations that mirror the impossibly fast motion of the superhero. The fourth and fifth panels on the first page of this example are particularly effective in terms of emphasizing Superman's superheroic mobility. In these panels, Superman transitions from

soaring straight up to zooming straight down, chasing the bomb that appears, suddenly, in front of him; in this instance, the 180 degree rotation of Superman's body from one panel to the next produces a jarring sensation that mirrors and substantiates Superman's movements and even his emotions (in the form of Superman's surprise at encountering the bomb). And yet, just as Superman might mimic a train yet never truly stops looking beautifully human, his mobility can mimic the impossible yet never stops being legible. In this and countless other superhero comic book sequences, the reader is encouraged to experience some of the thrill of superheroic mobility, but as a superhero—that is, someone for whom moving faster than a bullet is possible and thrilling rather than terrifying and impossible.

These pages from *Superman* #11 is also exhibit a highly subjective time signature. Although time is always subjective in comics, it tends to be especially so in superhero comics. This is true firstly because of the aforementioned tendency to dwell on the spectacle of the superhero body, and secondly because superhero comics are typically produced quickly, using assembly line methods in which the writer, penciller, inker, and colourist are not necessarily in close communication; this production process often results in noticeable dissonances between text and image, story and layout. This seems to be the case with the *Superman* #11 pages; in this example, the size and placement of the panels seems largely arbitrary, and much of the text is extraneous, as though over-compensating for, or competing with, the images.

Even in comic books that are more carefully and deliberately assembled, different time signatures can still compete and co-exist on the same page. As Postema describes, reading comics always involves some degree of weaving back and forth, and up and down, which also, of course, means weaving backwards and forwards in time. A more contemporary example from *Amazing Spider-Man* #306 (1988), pencilled by Todd McFarlane (whose style is one of the

central focuses of Chapter Three) demonstrates this principle very well (Image 12). In the fine detail of its line work and the experimentalism of its overlapping panels, this page is very different from the page from *Superman* #11 discussed above. Yet its demonstration of the superhero's ability to manipulate time and space within the modern urban landscape is remarkably similar.[15] In the first panel, Spider-Man hovers above the city but angled down, conveying the speed and force with which he is about to penetrate it. Panel two, depicting the most intense pose of the sequence, conveys a momentary pause between the buildings. The next panel shows Spider-Man propelled up again over the skyscrapers. This sequence once again epitomizes the union of monumental, spectacular, and impossible speed and stillness that is at the core of the superhero. Movement is generated within this sequence by the staging of individual panels and poses, but also by their combination via changing views, perspectives, or "camera angles": in this sequence, the reader moves from looking up at Spider-Man from the front, to looking down at him from above, to looking up again, this time from behind. The transition between panels two and three, in particular, produces a thrilling swooping motion that echoes the motion of Spider-Man's body. McFarlane uses Spider-Man's webbing to further enhance this swooping effect, the irregular, fluid trail of webbing that Spider-Man leaves in his wake in each panel once again evoking the rhythm and shape of his movements through (and above) the city. In addition, the webbing that exceeds the final panel connects the three panels together; one stand of webbing even appears stuck to the first panel, while also crossing over and through the second panel at a downward angle. The webbing thus leads the eye through the sequence, and

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[15] Interestingly, the cover of this issue is a tribute to *Action Comics* #1, depicting Spider-Man throwing a car over his head. This tribute also, however, enacts a significant reversal. While Superman threw a car full of gangsters, Spider-Man throws a police car, emphasizing Spider-Man's identity as a "freak" and "menace" juxtaposed Superman's more supposedly black and white morality and/or uncomplicated goodness. For a detailed analysis of Spider-Man's difference from Golden Age superheroes such as Superman, see Chapter One.

produced continuity between the three irregular, overlapping panels. In this example, McFarlane's depiction of Spider-Man's webbing especially emphasizes the superhero body's ability to manipulate the grid; it is almost as though Spider-Man uses the grid to propel himself through the sequence, and through the city, which he finally exceeds in his last swooping motion. Spider-Man's webbing also emphasizes the weaving back and forth that Postema argues is a fundamental property of comics reading. Although this page encourages a certain path, it also creates an especially close relationship between the panels by literally weaving them together; in this, this page creates conduits to travel backward as well as forward.

Ultimately, whether they do so deliberately or accidentally, scenes of the superhero in action routinely nurture a productive multiplicity, allowing and encouraging different possibilities not only for interpreting the story, but also for the practical task of reading and/or viewing its progression of actions and events. Within this multiplicity, stillness and speed are both concurrent and interdependent; the contemplative joy of stillness is depicted within the narrative and thematic context of speed, and the visceral joy of speed is depicted through the formal deployment of stillness. Bukatman argues that comic book superheroes are depicted within the space of the modern city in ways that emphasize their ability to "negate the negation of the grid" (189). However, superheroes must also *use* the grid to negate the grid. Superheroes can never truly negate—or transcend—the grid, since it is the juxtaposition of images within the grid that is the true source of their power, which is highlighted by their ability to manipulate the graphic and practical nature of time and space. Whereas the comic strip protagonists discussed by Gardner become powerful by embracing their fragmentation, comic book superheroes use and manipulate their fragmentation to suggest something better than wholeness—namely, multiplicity.

Admittedly, the defining tensions of the superhero genre are not new; superhero comics were not, for instance, the first popular texts to pit humans against objects, products, or cities. Yet the preceding examples demonstrate some of the ways in which comic book superheroes uniquely represent and negotiate familiar tensions on and through their fantastically multiple, fantastically mobile bodies. Importantly, though, because genre conventions are always changing, and because superheroes are centrally defined by their ability to change, these modes and strategies are, in turn, always changing, always multiplying. Since the Golden Age, superheroes have continuously diversified and multiplied, becoming increasingly monstrous, persecuted, hysterical, and textual—incrementally, and then all at once, as multiple versions and realities now exist side-by-side. The graphic and sometimes radical nature of these ongoing metamorphoses makes superhero comics an excellent vehicle for viewing and interrogating cultural changes; it also makes them especially worthy of a thorough, historically and culturally situated analysis.

To date, a small but important branch of scholarship has begun to address the functions and implications of the superhero body's multiplicity. In one of the first essays specifically analyzing the representation of the body in superhero comics, Bukatman describes superhero bodies as not only multiple, but ever-multiplying:

> Superhero comics present body narratives, bodily fantasies, that incorporate
> (incarnate) aggrandizement and anxiety, mastery and trauma. Comics
> narrate the body in stories and envision the body in drawings. The body is
> obsessively centered upon. It is contained and delineated; it becomes
> irresistible force and immoveable object. The body is enlarged and
> diminished, turned invisible or made of stone, blown to atoms or reshaped at

will. The body defies gravity, space, and time; it divides and conquers, turns

to fire, lives in water, is lighter than air. The body takes on animal attributes,

merges with plantlife, is melded with metal. The body is asexual and

homosexual, heterosexual, and hermaphroditic. Even the mind becomes a

body: it is telepathic, telekinetic, transplantable, and controllable. Brainiac's

body sticks out the top of his head, on display as part of a visible, external

body. The body is an accident of birth, a freak of nature, or a consequence of

technology run wild. The superhero body is everything—a *corporeal*, rather

than a *cognitive*, mapping of the subject into a cultural system. (49)

In a more recent essay, Richard Harrison sounds a more modest tone than Bukatman, but

similarly describes the superhero body as fundamentally multiple, as well as mobile: "Not only is

the superheroic body different from the normal body, it is different from itself as the character

moves, as his body is redrawn, from panel to panel, scene to scene. The superheroic body is not a

body, it is a meaning. Posed between believable bodies and fantastic ones to combine the

qualities of each" (125). In another recent essay, Aaron Taylor argues that the continually

evolving multiplicity of the superhero body makes it inherently subversive. There is ample

evidence, says Taylor, to read the superhero body as "a culturally produced body that could

potentially defy all traditional and normalizing readings. These are bodies beyond limits—

perhaps without limits" (345).

  In effect, Bukatman, Harrision, and Taylor's analyses lay a foundation for reading

superhero comics within the context of what Linda Williams (borrowing a term from Carol

Clover) describes as a "body genre." Like the horror films, musicals, melodramas, and

pornography discussed by Williams in her seminal essay "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and

Excess," superhero comics centre upon and make meaning out of the spectacle of the body, in exertion, pleasure, pain, and trauma. However, while Bukatman, Harrison, and Taylor's work is immensely valuable in beginning this conversation, it is limited by its lack of historical scope and detail; all of Bukatman, Harrison, and Taylor's analyses either consider a very small selection of texts from a specific era, or else offer select examples from across different eras to make general observations about the superhero genre as a whole. This limited scope and detail informs some shared theoretical limitations. All of Bukatman, Harrison, and Taylor's analyses present incomplete or problematic conceptions of what it does, can, or *should* mean for bodies to have or produce meaning. Taylor, for instance, argues that the superhero body's multiplicity renders it "beyond" or "without" limits, asserting that as the superhero genre ages, and its bodies grow more diverse, "What may be emerging is the ultimate androgyny of the superbody" (346); according to Taylor, the subversive potential of the superhero body's multiplicity resides in its ability to dissolve biological and social categories altogether. Another critic, Edward Avery-Natale, takes a different route to arrive at a similar conclusion, arguing that superheroes can only challenge gender and sex(ual) inequality through their potential to "embrace... postmodern humanity"; according to Avery-Natale, the superhero genre can only be subversive when and if its fantastic bodies are exploited to "transcend embodiment," striving not to be "limited by archaisms such as gender and anthropic principles" (99).

However inadvertently, both Taylor and Avery-Natale's assertions that superheroes are moving, or should move, "beyond" sex or gender reaffirms the logic of mind/body dualism. As the work of Susan Bordo, Elizabeth Grosz, Genevieve Lloyd, and Margrit Shildrik and Janet Price, among many others, has amply demonstrated, from the ancient world to the present, Western philosophy, and by extension Western politics, science, and culture, "places the mind in

hierarchical superiority over and above nature, including the nature of the body" (Grosz 6).

Various manifestations of mind/body dualism configure the body as irrational, an impediment to

thought, and/or as a "thing" or "fact," distinct from the reasoning, transformative properties of

the mind. As Grosz describes, within the logic of mind/body dualism, "Body is… what is not

mind… It is what the mind must expel in order to retain its 'integrity.' It is implicitly unruly,

disruptive, in need of direction and judgment, merely incidental to the defining characteristics of

mind, reason, or personal identity through its opposition to consciousness, to the psyche and

other privileged terms within philosophical thought" (Grosz 3). Bordo similarly argues that

within Western culture, "That which is not-body is the highest, the best, the noblest, the closest

to God; that which is body is the albatross, the heavy drag on self-realization" (5). Taylor and

Avery-Natale's analyses are complicit in the logic of mind/body dualism inasmuch as they

suggest that physical or visual manifestations of selfhood are not "proper" topics for philosophy

or art, or capable of legitimate meaning or cultural value; the assumption that sex and gender are

always "limiting" as either experiences or topics dangerously simplifies bodily expression as a

productive effect and/or potential site of resistance to universalizing or essentializing narratives.

Harrison's contention that the superhero body is "not a body, but a meaning," and

Bukatman's assertion that superheroes offer "a *corporeal*, rather than a *cognitive*, mapping of the

subject into a cultural system," similarly risk reaffirming mind/body dualism by assuming the

incommensurability of meanings (the cognitive) and bodies (the corporeal). Despite his emphasis

on the superhero body's multiplicity, Bukatman strongly evokes mind/body dualism when he

concludes that, "The hypermasculinity of… superhero-fantasy represents an attempt to *recenter

the self* in the body, a reductive conflation of body with subjectivity" (61). While decrying the

essentialist logic that allows hyper-sexed bodies to confirm the supposed naturalness of gender,

Bukatman's analysis nonetheless fails to offer a real alternative to dualistic understandings of identity. In the end, Bukatman falls back on an either/or proposition in which the body is an incorrect or impossible site of subjectivity, and thus, an incorrect and impossible vehicle of meaning.

In proclaiming the mind the true location of the self, the logic of mind/body dualism suggests that bodily fantasies—if they exist at all—can only be about escaping or overcoming the body, rather than embracing or celebrating diverse experiences or possibilities of embodiment. Although working in close contact with the analyses of Bukatman and Taylor, in particular, this project argues that in order to properly interrogate the full nature and range of the bodily fantasies and fears at play within superhero comics, it is necessary to appreciate the ways in which the body can be thought of as a dynamic force or location in its own right. In this, this project aligns itself with Judith Butler's characterization of the body as "power's most productive effect" (xii). "Bodily contours and morphology," Butler argues, "are not merely implicated in an irreducible tension between the psychic and the material but *are* that tension" (36). In Butler's formulation, the body is not a wholly chaotic force nor an essential fact; instead, the form and substance of the body is the tangible manifestation of the active tension between power and its subversion, the malleability of flesh evincing the body's constructedness (and thus its potential for re-construction). If our perception and understanding of our own flesh is always socially constructed and mediated, the body cannot be a "false" location of subjectivity or meaning. As Butler describes, the body is never, and can never be, a separate site or surface, but is instead the product of "*a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface*" (xviii, emphasis in original).

Elizabeth Grosz similarly advocates "regarding the body as the threshold or borderland

concept that hovers perilously and undecidably at the pivotal point of binary pairs." Writes

Grosz:

> Bodies themselves, in their materialities, are never self-present, given
>
> things, immediate, certain self-evidences because embodiment, corporeality,
>
> insist on alterity, both that alterity they carry within themselves (the heart of
>
> the psyche lies in the body; the body's principles of functioning are
>
> psychological and cultural) and that alterity that gives them their own
>
> concreteness and specificity (the alterities constituting race, sex, sexualities,
>
> ethnic and cultural specifities). Alterity is the very possibility and process of
>
> embodiment: it conditions but is also a product of the pliability or plasticity
>
> of bodies which makes them other than themselves, other than their 'nature,'
>
> their functions and identities. (209)

As Grosz describes, flesh is an always already socialized field of action, as multi-layered and

mobile as the psychic realm. Grosz's work particularly stresses that, inasmuch as flesh is the

fraught, ever-mobile site of ongoing negotiations between nature and culture, analyzing our

production, consumption, and deployment (and re-production, re-consumption, and re-

deployment) of the body allows us to re-think what meaning is, and where and how it might be

located and produced. According to both Butler and Grosz, reading the body as a text—as a

product and force of culture—can illuminate dominant cultural narratives not because the body is

somehow beyond or outside ideology or social construction, but instead because the body is, in

whole or in part,[16] a graphic and material sign of culture.

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[16] Butler and Grosz differ on whether the body is capable of acting outside of culture. Whereas Butler views the

Of course, both Grosz and Butler are talking about "real" bodies. They not talking about superhero bodies, which are very extravagantly *un*real. This is where the concept of the body image is helpful. As Grosz describes:

> The body image is as much a function of the subject's psychology and sociohistorical context as of anatomy. The limits or borders of the body image are not fixed by nature or confined to the anatomical 'container,' the skin. The body image is extremely fluid and dynamic; its borders, edges, and contours are 'osmotic'—they have the remarkable power of incorporating and expelling outside and inside in an ongoing interchange." (79)

Moria Gatens furthermore argues that, "This conception of the imaginary body may provide the framework in which we can give an account of how power, domination, and sexual difference intersect in the lived experience of men and women. Gender itself may be understood on this model not as an effect of ideology or cultural values but as the way in which power takes hold of and constructs bodies in particular ways (70). If the body is an effect of power, with limits and borders that are constituted (and re-constituted) by the body image, then "real" bodies are always already representations—imaginative constructions that manifest and contain, in various ways and assemblages, hegemonic and resistive ideas, values, and impulses. Within this understanding of bodies and body images, superhero comics' central focus on fantastical bodily feats and

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body as limited by our perceptions of it—and thus, constructed and limited by culture—Grosz claims that flesh can and does have a productive quality of its own. In a 2008 article, Grosz emphasizes her opposition to Butler in her focus on "the virtualities, the potentialities, within biological existence that enable cultural, social, and historical forces to work with and transform that existence" (24). As this project solely deals with fantastical images of bodies—that is, cultural constructs, rather than real flesh—it does not directly weigh-in on this debate.

metamorphoses does not *replace* the cognitive with the corporeal, so much as posit the cognitive *as* corporeal, offering, in the process, a unique context to explore different ways we might experience, imagine, and build our embodied selves (and of course to re-construct, re-build, and re-imagine them). Even though superhero comics do not offer practical, tactile experiments with the nature of bodies or body images, their depiction of formally and narratively multiple (and ever-multiplying) bodies do offer meaningful experiments with the nature of the body *as* image, that is, as a vehicle and source of fantasy, representation, and meaning.

Grosz and Butler's theories of the body are especially important to considering the superhero genre's many evolutions, from the Golden Age to the Silver Age, and from the Silver Age to the present. Although the genre does typically depict the bodies of its heroes as "powerful and perfect" (Jennings 60), this perfection includes, as previously discussed, the ability to incorporate otherness—in other words, the ability to exploit, but also manage and contain multiplicity. Furthermore, although the superhero genre is also "preoccupied with the ideal body" (Bolton 9), these ideals change over time, and do not always precisely align with mainstream or hegemonic standards of beauty or normality. Case in point, the classically heroic "chin up, chest out, and back arched" pose that John Jennings describes as characteristic of superheroes as a whole (62) does not properly describe the lithe, crouching, insect-like body of a postwar superhero such as Spider-Man, let alone actual man-monsters such as the Thing or the Hulk. Since the Golden Age, changing art styles have also produced various ruptures between the ideal and the normal. Appreciating the inherent textuality of the body, and the always co-productive, rather than necessarily adversarial, relationship between the mind and the body as locations and producers of meaning, is crucial to understanding the superhero genre in general, but especially how and why postwar superheroes such as Spider-Man or the Thing can still be considered

perfect or ideal despite certain obvious—and sometimes dramatic—differences from the Golden Age characters such as Superman.

In the immediate postwar era, the most fantastic change in the superhero genre was a new and different emphasis on the fantastically changeable nature of its landscapes and bodies. From the late 1940s through to the early 1960s, superheroes found themselves in increasingly bizarre and fanciful worlds; even Batman, a quintessential urban avenger, traded in his customary landscapes of bank robbers and organized crime for science fictional landscapes filled with decidedly inhuman creatures. In addition, this era's superheroes began to spend nearly as much time fighting villains as navigating their own increasingly unpredictable bodies. During the 1950s alone, stories would appear wherein: Batman transformed into a giant ape-like monster (*Batman* #162 [1964]), became a "bat baby" (*Batman* #147 [1962]), and a towering "colossus" (*Detective Comics* #292 [1961]); Superman acquired the head of a lion (*Action Comics* #243 [1958]), transformed into a merman (*Superman* #139 [1960]), was replaced with a melon-headed future version of himself (*Action Comics* #256 [1959]), and suffered countless temporary physical and psychological changes under the effects of Red Kryptonite. Inter-species transgressions were also a common theme: Wonder Woman/Wonder Girl had her affections torn between Mer-Man/Mer-Boy and Bird-Man/Bird-Boy; and Supergirl had a long-term, unrequited love affair with her horse.

Certainly, some of the changes that came over the superhero genre in the 1950s can be attributed to the Comics Code, and to the postwar cultural values it reflected. In part, these stories can be seen as a move to divorce superhero comics from the sex and violence that Fredric Wertham and other reformers found most objectionable, and make them more similar to the only genres Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* did not explicitly attack: humorous and funny

animal comics aimed explicitly at young children. Alternatively, these changes might be read as an attempt to reinvent the superhero genre, which began to struggle immediately following the end of WWII. The War had usefully justified the superhero genre's depiction of retaliatory megaviolence while also providing a seemingly endless supply of absolutely evil Nazi and Japanese villains; deprived of this righteous context, superheroes experienced a significant drop in popularity, while new genres, such as crime, horror, and romance, which were more inherently suited to the depiction of domestic, local, and psychological drama, rose in prominence.

The immediate postwar era's increasingly outlandish metamorphoses and transgressions can also be read as either/both metaphors for anxieties surrounding puberty—which would be particularly relevant to the children these comics were primarily aimed at—or radiation, which would be relevant to postwar culture more generally. Notably, though, superhero comics from the 1950s rarely (if ever) reflected on or openly acknowledged that their stories might have any basis in, or relevance to, reality. Characters in these stories sometimes experienced distress concerning their metamorphoses, but the nature of that distress was almost always temporary. In stories from this era, Superman might be unhappy about becoming a lion, and might even shed a tear over his predicament. Yet he would always return to his normal shape by the end of the issue, never to discuss or think about the experience again. Admittedly, the absence of consequence and continuity does not, in and of itself, diminish the value of these comics. As Gardner's analysis of Happy Hooligan demonstrates, the ability of comics characters to survive unchanged from strip to strip, or comic book to comic book, can be read as (among other things) a fantasy of defying the fits and shocks of modernity. Yet the psychological complexity of 1950s superhero comics is affected by their refusal, evident in the temporary and consequence-free nature of the characters' metamorphoses, to draw comparisons between the fantastical and the real. Whereas Happy

Hooligan did face challenges inspired by the real turn-of-the-century urban milieu, superhero comics from the 1950s tended to both neglect and downplay the social, psychological, and/or ideological implications of their characters' often-wild metamorphoses.

The first of Marvel's postwar superheroes, the Fantastic Four, were, as their name suggests, no less fantastical than the superheroes of the 1950s. During the 1960s and after, the Fantastic Four operate as often in New York City as in outer space and alternate dimensions; and although they battle some human villains with political connotations (for instance, the Soviet-identified Red Ghost), they more often face-off against inhuman aliens and robots. And yet, the Fantastic Four were also importantly different from their predecessors, beginning with the fact that their primary and long-term metamorphoses are graphically monstrous and, in the case of the Thing, traumatic and even undesirable. The overt, sustained monstrousness of these characters allowed the superhero genre, for the first time, to depict something of the social and psychological consequences of physical metamorphoses that were, also for the first time, centrally linked to radiation. While superheroes created before and during WWII tend to mimic the properties and/or capabilities of 19th and early 20th century technologies such as cars, trains, aeroplanes, and skyscrapers, as well as various forms of gunpowder and/or projectile-based weaponry, nearly all of the Marvel superheroes are empowered—and transformed—by radiation. Arriving in the wake of not only the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but also the nuclear tests at Bikini Atoll, the first nuclear power plant, and the first nuclear submarine, the first Marvel superheroes reflected a world in which the vast productive and destructive capabilities of atomic energy were truly enacted and spectacularly displayed for the first time. With bodies and powers that are nearly as dangerous and frightening as they are heroic and desirable, the Marvel superheroes embodied both the thrill and threat of a brave new world in which science was

newly and dramatically able to isolate and unlock the very building blocks of life.

M. Keith Booker argues that the birth of the Atomic Age is a key factor in America's transition from modernity into postmodernity. As Booker describes, "Postmodernism participates in a general crisis [of] belief" in what Jean-François calls "totalizing narratives" (23), resulting in, among other things, a "schizophrenic sense of a loss of individual temporary continuity," "a weakening of the utopian imagination," and "a collapse of belief in polar oppositions." As Booker relates, this "crisis" can be attributed to a diverse set of factors, including but not limited to: "the traumas of World War II; the final realization of the West soon after the war that colonialism had been immoral, brutal, and unethical all along; and the rapid growth of technology during and after the war" (23). Yet all of these factors were meaningfully impacted by the development and use of the atomic bomb, followed by the widespread use of atomic energy. Although many of the Golden Age superheroes who survived into the Silver Age and beyond would also find ways to meaningfully respond to these anxieties,[17] the Marvel superheroes inherently respond to them because they are created from and within them. And it is for this reason that they are ideal vehicles for analyzing the nature and evolution of bodily fantasies within postwar American culture.

This project consists of four chronologically and thematically organized chapters and a conclusion. Chapter One, The Monstrous Superhero, focuses on comics produced from 1961 to 1968 starring newly created superheroes the Fantastic Four (created in 1961), Spider-Man, and the Hulk (both created in 1962). These influential characters depart significantly from the superheroes who came before them, particularly through the ways in which they are literally and

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[17] One notable example would be the decision to change the destruction of Superman's home world from being somehow natural (the result, as the origin story in *Action Comics* #1 states, of "old age"), to some form of "holocaust" (*Superman* #61, 1949); Superman's famous weakness, the radioactive substance known as Kryptonite, is a remnant of this holocaust.

graphically monstrous. Case in point: whereas Superman was like a train but still ideally human, Spider-Man is like a spider, but also *resembles* a spider—in his poses, actions, and sticky secretions. The Fantastic Four and the Hulk, too, have bodies that are excessive and/or unstable—bodies that cannot be seen, bodies that are too large for the world around them, and/or that burn and melt objects (and presumably people) through simple proximity. This chapter will consider how this newly emphasized monstrousness reflects the anxieties of the Atomic Age and the Cold War. To that end, this chapter will argue that these comics significantly reimagine and even critique the superhero genre's themes and conventions, particularly its depictions of patriarchal masculinity; time and again, all of the Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, and the Hulk render masculinity visible and unstable, and thus, capable of being interrogated and revised. This chapter will also interrogate the terms and limits of such possible and actual revisions by examining the ways in which these comics' comparisons between male bodies and female bodies, as well as heroic bodies and villainous bodies, uphold aspects of the status quo; in these comics, monstrousness and multiplicity are only acceptable or desirable to the extent that they can be used to preserve—or contain—normative values and relationships within both the (literally) nuclear family and the nation.

Chapter Two, The Minority Superhero, focuses on comics produced from 1966 to 1983 starring the world's first black superhero, the Black Panther (created in 1966), a slew of newly created female superheroes, including The Cat (created in 1972), Spider-Woman (created in 1977), Ms. Marvel (created in 1977), and She-Hulk (created in 1980), and finally the X-Men, as re-envisioned in 1975 as a multi-ethnic, multi-racial superteam. This chapter's central concern is the availability and applicability of superhero metaphors for non-white and non-male bodies. Via analysis of the Black Panther's early appearances in the pages of *Fantastic Four* and *The*

Avengers, as well as in his first solo series, *Jungle Action: Featuring the Black Panther* (1973-1976), this chapter will argue that the Panther's spectacles of passive suffering and battles against animals and racially caricaturized supervillains circumscribe his ability to resist racist narratives and ideologies. This chapter's analysis of The Cat, Spider-Woman, Ms. Marvel, and She-Hulk will consider these characters' conflicted relationships with the development, and backlash to, second-wave feminism; although these characters importantly revise some of the tropes that had dominated the portrayal of female superheroes, they are also required to prove and represent themselves within a sexist framework that assumes female bodies should not—or cannot—be individual, active, or strong. Whereas all of the Black Panther, The Cat, Spider-Woman, Ms. Marvel, and She-Hulk had, by the early 1980s, either disappeared or slipped into obscurity, 1975's "All-New, All-Different" X-Men would become one the postwar era's most successful comic book franchises. This chapter will argue that the secret to this success is the adaptability of the mutant metaphor, which enables both productive intersectionality as well as more destructive appropriations of minority identities. Ultimately, this chapter will argue that the "All-New, All-Different" X-Men resonates with contemporary ideologies of liberal multiculturalism, in which "Those cultural forms that are 'more acceptable' are precisely those that may look different, *but are in fact the same underneath*" (Ahmed 106).

Chapter Three, The Excessive Superhero, focuses on comics produced from 1985 to 1996 that highlight the most significant (or at least, the most dramatic) artistic revolution in superhero comics since the creation of the form. During this era, a new generation of superstar artists, including Todd McFarlane, Jim Lee, and Rob Liefeld, helped usher in a newly extreme style, in which proportions and actions are exaggerated to previously unseen degrees. This chapter will examine how the distinctive, but also broadly similar, styles of McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld

reconfigure the superhero in ways that reflect and negotiate the cultural context of the 1980s and early 1990s, an era that witnessed many important changes in popular representations and understandings of the body. In particular, this chapter will interrogate intersections between McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld's work and the rise of a fitness culture that both encouraged gender dimorphism and facilitated the increased blending of connotatively male and female characteristics; this chapter will argue that McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld's extreme exaggerations of the superhero body are attempts to negotiate this combined blending and increased difference, but that this negotiation also results in the superhero body displaying its instability in newly obvious ways. This chapter will further interrogate the nature of the bodily fantasies at play in the work of McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld by analyzing a text that perhaps represents the pinnacle of this era's privileging of their extreme style: the annual *Marvel Swimsuit Special*, a largely non-narrative collection of superhero pin-ups that was published between 1991 and 1995. Both parodic and erotic, the *Marvel Swimsuit Special* provides unique access to the shape and substance of bodily fantasies within an increasingly self-aware superhero genre and an increasingly body and image-conscious American society and culture.

Chapter Four, The Critical Superhero, focuses on the ongoing series *Alias* written by Brian Michael Bendis with art by Michael Gaydos, which was originally published from 2001 to 2004 under Marvel's MAX imprint. *Alias* follows Jessica Jones, a superhero turned foul-mouthed private investigator as she engages in drunken one-night stands and solves various superhero-related cases while navigating the trauma that led to her retirement from superheroics. *Alias* is a revisionist text, telling Jessica's origin in a series of flashbacks that insert her into Marvel continuity as a former classmate of Peter Parker and a largely forgotten member of the Avengers. It is also a self-consciously critical text; throughout the series, Jessica's negotiation of

her trauma and her role within the superhero community also involves negotiating the meaning and function of female identity and power within a genre historically dominated by the male gaze and masculine fantasies. This chapter will examine the substance of this critique and interrogate the extent to which it benefits from and/or is risked by the increased multiplicity of 21st-century superhero comics, a multiplicity that this series also typifies. Ultimately, this chapter will argue that although *Alias* mounts many powerful critiques of the superhero genre's historical and ongoing sexism, the further multiplication of Jessica into more traditional publishing contexts tends to undercut those critiques, suggesting the superhero genre's continued inability or unwillingness to address its foundational prejudices and exclusions in a truly widespread, meaningful way.

Chapter One, Chapter Two, and most of Chapter Three employ modes of analysis appropriate to the specific formal and narrative properties of their subject matter. Analyzing serialized superhero comic books can be challenging, inasmuch as the meaning of such comics is rarely accessible through close readings of individual issues or series of panels. This is true, firstly, because superhero comics, similar to other body genres, privilege spectacle above the straightforward (re: strictly logical or linear) progression of narrative, but also because their stories can span dozens and sometimes hundreds of issues. While individual comics can be, as Luca Somigli describes, "limited in scope, developing, in Aristotelian fashion, through a beginning, a middle, and an end," the development of serialization also ensures that "the Aristotelian pattern… does not quite work" (286). Continues Somigli: "even if an episode is self-contained (and this does not happen very often in contemporary comics), it is usually part of a larger narrative that spans the whole of the series of a specific character, and in many cases other series by the same publisher, with plots and subplots carrying over from episode to episode"

(286). Inasmuch as a serialized story "consists of all its versions," (Somigli 288), its meaning is cumulative rather than localizable, mythic rather than literary. Ultimately, then, the structuring tensions of any serialized superhero comic book or character cannot be properly identified or analyzed by looking merely at certain issues in isolation from others. Instead, it is necessary to survey large samples of issues and observe which themes or dynamics are repeated, and how. To this end, this project attempts to locate and analyze the evolving operation of the superhero genre's structuring tensions by identifying patterns across large samples of texts within specific eras. Although this project's analysis does feature close readings of particular examples, these examples, much like the examples from Superman comics used throughout this Introduction, are selected on the basis that they exemplify the typical.

Importantly, too, although this project is organized chronologically, it does not adhere to what Rick Altman calls the "developmental" model of genre, in which "genres are regularly said to develop, to react, to become self-conscious, and to self-destruct" (21). According to Altman, this developmental model is at play within a number of influential genre models, notably Christian Metz's "'classic-parody-contestation-critique model,'" and John Cawelti's assertion that genres generally move "'from an initial period of formation and discovery, through a phase of self-conscious awareness… to a time when generic patterns have become so well-known that people become tired of their predictability'" (qtd. in Altman 21). These understandings of genre, says Altman, employ "a human developmental scheme… whereby genres are regularly said to develop, to react, to become self-conscious, and to self-destruct" (21). The drawback of such teleological models is that they impose a timeless universalism that neglects the importance of cultural and historical specificity, as well as the importance of changing contexts of production and distribution and the tendency of genres to employ multiple dynamics within the same era.

The common grouping of superhero comics into "ages," such as the Golden Age, Silver Age, Bronze Age, etc., reflects the influence of the developmental model; the book-length studies of the superhero genre by Geoff Klock and Peter Coogan explicitly align these ages with theorists whom Altman identifies as proponents of the developmental model. In contrast, Henry Jenkins argues that, "Rather than thinking about a genre's predetermined life cycle, we might describe a perpetual push and pull exerted on any genre; genre formulas are continually repositioned in relation to social, cultural, and economic contexts of production and reception" (19). This project will embrace this conception of genre, and in so doing, provide a counterpoint to the developmental model. Although this project does argue that certain eras may be characterized by different sets of fantasies and anxieties, and that the deployment of these fantasies and anxieties may be informed by previous eras, it will also argue that genres can move laterally—or even "backwards"—as well as up, between eras or within the same era.

In its analysis of the themes and evolution of the superhero genre, this project will consider both what is possible and what is probable. As Fiske describes, where popular culture is concerned, "The role of the critic-analyst... is not to reveal the true or hidden meaning of the text... rather, it is to trace the play of power in the social formation, a power game within which all texts are implicated" (36). This project analyzes the politics of the superhero body by reading the "power games"—in other words, the sets of competing possibilities—within the aforementioned particular examples of the typical. In its unique multiplicity, the superhero genre can be self-critical, but is more often recuperative; its defining multiplicity means that is has particularly complex and sophisticated tools at its disposal that allow it to reaffirm traditional values and prejudices related to (for instance) gender, race, class, disability, and sexual orientation, even as it seems to revise or repudiate them. In the end, however, even if superhero

comics are primarily hegemonic and conservative, examining the deployment and evolution of their fantastically mobile bodily fantasies nonetheless provides an invaluable opportunity to study American popular culture's ongoing struggle to shape and define (and re-shape and re-define) the body and the self within an increasingly visual, mass-mediated world.

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CHAPTER ONE: THE MONSTROUS SUPERHERO (1961-1968)

"... an hallucination resulting from the fears that plague our nuclear

society..."

-*Fantastic Four* #1 (1961)

Anyone glancing at the cover and initial pages of *Fantastic Four* #1 for the first time in 1961

might have thought it was something other than a superhero comic. The cover of this comic is

similar to many of the covers of the horror-tinged science fiction comics that Marvel[18] was

publishing at the time, with one notable exception: the urban public, craning their necks upward

and cowering in fear, seem to be reacting as much to the giant, inhuman creature bursting

through the middle of the street as to they are to the smaller monsters attacking it (Image 1). The

first pages of *Fantastic Four* #1 introduce the members of the titular four in ways that explicitly

situate them as both frightening and dangerous. On page one, a "Fantastic Four" signal flare is

launched into the sky, interrupting each team member amid his or her "civilian" life. Sue Storm,

a.k.a. the Invisible Girl, sees the summons while "having tea with a society friend" and promptly

vanishes. Running into the busy street, the Invisible Girl carelessly knocks over anyone who

stands in her way. The gaggle of men and women she leaves in her wake scramble to collect

dropped hats and briefcases, and clutch their faces in disbelief and horror. One man, sitting

stupefied where he fell, declares, "Some—something rushed past me! Something *unseen*!" while

another man shouts, "It's—it's *a ghost*!" In another part of town, Ben Grimm, a.k.a. the Thing,

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[18] Before settling on its name in 1962, the company that is now known as Marvel Comics went by several different names, including Timely, Atlas, and Marvel. For the sake of simplicity and clarity, this and future chapters will refer to all comics produced by this group as Marvel Comics.

sees the summons while trying (in vain) to buy clothes to fit his massive frame. Tearing off his hat and overcoat to reveal a hide of lumpy, orange rocks, the Thing smashes through a doorway, causing bystanders flee in terror yelling, "Holy smoke!! A—a—*monster*!" When the police shoot at him, the Thing tears a hole in the street and drops into the sewer. On his way back to the surface a few panels later, he tears another hole in the concrete (mimicking the monster on the comic's cover) and smashes a car about to run him over; the erstwhile occupants of the car flee in terror shouting, "It ain't *human*! It's too big... too strong!! It's—it's a *Martian*!" Johnny Storm, a.k.a. the Human Torch, sees the summons while surveying repairs to his sports car. He immediately bursts into flame, melting through the roof of his own car as a gaping mechanic says, "What's *happening* to you?... You're turning into... *gasp* a—a *human torch*!" Taking the air as a streak of flame, the Torch is attacked by the Air Force, who miss his humanity, and see only a mysterious "flying flaming object." The Torch's desperate pleas of, "No! No! *Stay back*!" fall on deaf ears; in trying to avoid the Air Force's attack, he inadvertently burns through a jet aircraft, forcing the pilot to eject. Finally, a hunter missile with a nuclear warhead is fired, from which the Torch is saved by Reed Richards, a.k.a. Mr. Fantastic, whose elastic arms pluck the missile out of the air and capture the body of the injured teenager in a sling, carrying him through an upper window of a high rise to where the rest of the team is waiting.

In these opening scenes, the transformation of Sue, Ben, Johnny, and Reed into their superheroic alter egos is different, in both degree and articulation, from the typical transformation of a Golden Age superhero such as Superman. Whereas Clark Kent removes his baggy suit to reveal the ideally hard and attractive shape of Superman, Sue, Ben, Johnny, and Reed's bodies lose and change shape, trading human (or, in Ben's case, human-like) forms for flesh that graphically imitates the properties of air, earth, fire, and water. Though only one

witness explicitly uses the word "monster" to describe the members of the Fantastic Four in these opening scenes, all of the terms used to describe the Four evoke monstrousness. Laura K. Davies and Cristina Santos argue that monsters are defined by their "unnaturalness," which is frequently the result of transgressing and/or incorporating states and categories that are considered naturally separate—such as alive and dead, human and animal, etc. Because monsters threaten the natural order, they also threaten cultural order. Monsters, says Noël Carroll, "are un-natural relative to a culture's conceptual scheme of nature. They do not fit the scheme; they violate it. Thus, monsters are not only physically threatening; they are cognitively threatening" (34). As the Introduction discussed, all superheroes are monstrous to the extent that they are, to paraphrase Carroll, incompossible with known science.[19] However, whereas Superman is beloved by the public and contains his alien-ness and unnaturalness within an ideally human form with clearly defined borders, the Fantastic Four are graphically and obviously monstrous, to the extent that they possess radically multiple, excessive, and ultimately unstable and destabilizing bodies that cannot be seen (and thus cannot be policed or inspected), bodies that are too large for the world around them, and that burn and melt objects (and presumably people) through simple proximity. Whereas Superman's monstrousness is implicit, the monstrousness of the Fantastic Four is explicit and self-consciously foregrounded as a significant, and arguably central, aspect of the characters' meaning and appeal.

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[19] Other Golden Age did have explicitly monstrous origins and forms. The original Human Torch, for instance, was an android whose ability to burst into flame was actually a hazardous malfunction. In *Marvel Comics* #1 (1939), the inventor of the android decides, at the urging of his peers, that his creation is too dangerous to exist, so he encases the Torch in concrete and buries him deep underground. An air leak in the Torch's coffin allows him to escape, after which he wreaks havoc throughout the city, variously joyous, confused, and frightened by his inability to control his flaming body. However, the original Torch largely ceases to be a threatening outsider following this introductory issue. By the end of his first appearance, the Torch learns to control his flame, and by his second appearance, he is a respected member of the police force. Though the Torch is still monstrous by virtue of his human-machine hybridity and his graphically monstrous body, the comics rarely, if ever, foreground or reflect on this monstrousness following the characters' initial introduction.

Monsters threaten the unity of the body and challenge the primacy of the mind as the true location of the self. As discussed in the Introduction, the mind/body dualism that underpins Western science and philosophy reflects a desire for unity in the form of a "rational" mind that can transcend, or at the very least establish primacy over, the "chaotic" body. The original theoretical framework of psychoanalysis is a case in point, describing human cognitive development as a "fall into difference" (Colebrook 28), and associating "normal" psychology with a well-ordered (re: intellectually rationalized) body, in which, "Organs and functions, desired and 'proper' objects... [are] 'joined' in socially acceptable assemblages" (Braidotti 123). Although it is obviously impossible for human beings to achieve unity, the dominant (re: male, white, heterosexual) discourses of Western science and philosophy reflect a *desire* for unity and/or singularity, in conjunction with a rejection or fear of disunity and/or multiplicity. It is the pervasiveness of this desire for unity that defines the monster as an amalgam of inappropriate parts and goals, an unacceptable assemblage. "The monster," writes Rosi Braidotti, "is the bodily incarnation of difference from the basic human norm: it is deviant, an a-no(r)maly; it is abnormal... a normally formed human being is the zero-degree of monstrosity, i.e., zero negative difference" (215-6). Even if monsters reflect aspects of our "real" selves, they clearly do not reflect Western culture's preferred or privileged self, which is generally considered interchangeable with the "normal" self. As Margrit Shildrick puts it: "In those discourses where corporeality is scarcely considered a proper component of identity, then the potential of corporeal irruption into consciousness—an irruption that is a feature of all bodies—constitutes and understandable threat to self-containment" (4-5). At the very least, writes Shildrick, monsters "evoke opposition to the paradigms of a humanity that is marked by self-possession" (5).

As Judith Halberstam describes, the unstable and potentially destabilizing multiplicity of

monsters is textual as well as physical. Monsters, writes Halberstam, are "meaning machines" (21) and "narrative technologies" (22). The monster "never stands for a simple or unitary prejudice, it always acts as a 'fantasy screen' upon which viewers and readers inscribe and sexualize meaning" (Halberstam 10). Braidotti concurs: "Being situated as a signpost at the crossroads of the supernatural with the earthly, the monstrous body is a textual body" (220). Davies and Santos argue that the multiplicity of monsters makes them powerful symbols and vehicles of subversion:

> The monster can threaten the very foundations upon which out values rest: it can challenge the stability of the nuclear family, for instance, and it can contest bourgeois ideologies. Because we understand our own existence and identity in relation to such structures and established values, the monster has the potential to disintegrate the Self, our very core. Monsters challenge the homogenerity of society and Self by revealing inconsistencies, gaps, and the unknown. (x)

And yet, as Halberstam observes, monsters also have the less progressive or subversive tendency to "confirm that evil resides only in specific bodies and particular psyches," and is "not generalizable across a society or culture" (162). The Marvel Age's monstrous, atomic-spawned superheroes posses the tools to resist, or at least complicate, this tendency. As John Donovan describes, in contrast to Victorian era monsters such as Dracula, Mr. Hyde, and the Invisible Man, Atomic Age monsters are not local, personal problems, confined to isolated villages or laboratories, or to a single person of family (77-81). Often enormous and frequently invading major American cities, Atomic Age monsters are instead public spectacles and public problems,

emphasizing, as Susan Sontage describes, that the scientist's "sphere of influence is no longer local, himself or his immediate community. It is planetary, cosmic" (46). Similar to other Atomic Age monsters, the Marvel Age's atomic-spawned superheroes are public and sometimes planetary spectacles and threats. There are, however, also important differences between the Marvel Age superheroes and typical Atomic Age monsters. Whereas Atomic Age monsters typically "[bear] little or no relationship to humanity" (Poole 122),[20] and are "clearly Other and clearly evil" (Booker 144),[21] the Marvel Age superheroes always embody aspects of the same monstrous threats that their status as heroes and inspirational ideals would seem to oppose. While this is implicitly true in Atomic Age science fiction films in which the same scientist who causes a monster to be born is also responsible for defeating it, it is emphatically true in stories featuring the Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, the Hulk, and others, in which the scientist-protagonists literally become monstrous, and routinely transform back and forth—sometimes randomly and against their will—between human and monstrous forms. By locating monstrousness not only within the self, but also within a heroic self that (ostensibly) protects the public and safeguards hegemonic norms, the Marvel Age superheroes embody a newly destabilized condition of selfhood that cannot be escaped or destroyed in the final frame (or panel), one that constantly exposes itself re-negotiation and self-reflection. As Leslie Fiedler puts it, the Marvel Age superheroes evoke "a new mythology in which Freaks and monsters represented no longer the Other, but the Secret Self" (307-8).

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[20] There are some notable exceptions to this rule; in films such as *The Fly* (1958) and *The Leech Woman* (1960), the monsters are mutated humans. However, both Poole and Booker assert that the total inhumanity of monsters is nonetheless a dominant trend in films from this era.

[21] As a representative example of this tendency, Booker cites the film *Them!* (1954), in which giant, radioactively mutated ants converge on Los Angeles. According to Booker, in a typical Atomic Age science fiction film such as *Them!*, the implacability and absolute otherness of the monster reflects anxieties about atomic energy as well as Cold War rhetoric that "[made] Russia seem as foreign as possible, thus distancing Americans from the negative characteristics associated with Russians while making the Soviet menace seem more terrifying as a threat to the American way of life" (144).

This chapter will explore the nature and function of this internalized monstrousness as it manifests externally—through the design and display of the Marvel Age's atomic-spawned superhero bodies. Three main examples will serve this analysis: Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's run on *Fantastic Four* (#1-102), Lee and Steve Ditko's run on *Amazing Spider-Man* (#1-38), and various comics from the period in question starring the Hulk. These particular characters and texts have been chosen because their long-term popularity attests to the appeal and effectiveness of their metaphors, but also because they reflect three key subjects of cultural anxiety during the postwar, post-atomic era—namely, the nuclear family, the teenager, and the nuclear scientist. This chapter's analysis will explore the ways in which these characters' bodily spectacles evoke and potentially subvert and/or critique popular fantasies and fears. The radical possibilities of these characters and texts will be weighed, however, against their conservative impulses. In this, this chapter will examine the ways in which these characters' specific articulations of monstrousness also recuperate and reinstate traditional values and hierarchies. In these comics, types, degrees, and uses of multiplicity, excess, and instability always matter, with various subtle and obvious differences delineating between good (re: heroic) monstrousness and bad (re: villainous) monstrousness. Examining how these comics depict and judge different types and forms of monstrousness highlights the ways in which the postwar, post-atomic culture adapted old ideas to new conditions, acknowledging and incorporating change while also building defenses against it.

The Marvel Age's depiction of superheroes as newly multiple, excessive, and unstable, reflects changing conceptions of science, power, and identity within the Atomic Age and the Cold War. As the Introduction discussed, superheroes created before and during WWII tend to mimic and resemble comparatively "solid" or "hard" objects and forms, consuming and

incorporating (for instance) the properties and/or capabilities of trains, aeroplanes, and skyscrapers, as well as gunpowder and/or projectile-based weaponry. Nearly all of the Marvel Age superheroes, however, are empowered—and transformed—by radiation. Although it was not unusual, both prior to and after the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, for popular comic book adventurers such as Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers, as well as many different comic book superheroes, to use and encounter various atom-powered rays and even bombs,[22] these heroes did not embody atomic energy in the same way, or to the same degree, as the Marvel Age superheroes.

As Spencer R. Weart relates, from the very early days of its discovery, atomic energy was described as vaguely magical, an intervention—or trespass—into the secret heart of existence. For instance, in 1901, when Frederick Soddy and Ernest Rutherford realized that, "A pulse of radiation signals that an atom is changing into a different kind of atom, a different element with its own chemical properties," they borrowed language from alchemy to describe their discovery, calling it the science of "transmutation" (Weart 5). The Fantastic Four and the Marvel Age's other atomic-spawned superheroes are products of this science of transmutation; arriving in the wake of not only the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, but also the nuclear tests at Bikini Atoll, the first nuclear power plant, and the first nuclear submarine, the Fantastic Four and their brethren explicitly react to, reflect, and embody a world in which the vast productive and destructive capabilities of atomic energy were truly enacted and spectacularly displayed for the first time. Significantly, atomic energy had often been perceived as monstrous to the extent that it seems to disrupt the natural order. As Alan Nadel describes, atomic energy "coupled unnatural

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[22] For instance, Superman's Achilles Heel, Kryptonite, a radioactive substance from his homeworld, was introduced in 1946. Superman's backstory was also updated during the 1950s to show Krypton being destroyed in a nuclear conflagration.

and universal destruction with the most natural source of universal power" (13), and could only emerge if "'unnatural' acts... [were] performed; nature must be violated and its power spent in some exterior way" (23). Atomic energy, like a man who is half-wolf or half-fish, made up of reanimated corpses, or who drinks blood for sustenance, de-naturalizes and thus de-stabilizes nature. To this end, M. Keith Booker argues that the Atomic Age fundamentally altered the American public's conception of biological and technological and thus social development, from a (relatively) linear progression into a series of unpredictable fits and starts, moving either/both forward and backward: "Vaguely aware that evolution was driven by mutation and that mutation could be cause by radiation, Americans in the 1950s put two and two together and concluded that radiation could cause evolution, or... degeneration" (10).

During the 1940s and 50s, it became relatively commonplace to link the splitting of the atom to changes in postwar American society. Case in point, N. Megan Kelley highlights a *Time* article from 1945 which states: "'With the controlled splitting of the atom, humanity, already profoundly perplexed and disunified, was brought inescapably into a new age in which all thoughts and things were split—and far from controlled'" (qtd. in Kelley 11). As Kelley observes, during the postwar, post-atomic era, the combined real and existential threat of atomic energy, as well as the invisible threat of radiation, intersected with and fed anxieties about the threat of "the enemy within" (11). Following the defeat of enemies abroad and the re-shaping of the political and natural order in the wake of WWII, America turned its attention to domestic threats, hunting and persecuting deviant beliefs and behaviours such as Communism and homosexuality within its own borders. These deviant beliefs and behaviours did not merely threaten the unity of American society and culture; they also, again similar to atomic energy, threatened that society and culture with degeneration. As Kelley describes, in the postwar, post-

atomic "culture of fear," America became a "body politic," in which threats such as Communism were described as "contagions" and "viruses" that might "spread through America like a disease" (12).

The newly multiple, excessive, and unstable nature of the Marvel Age's monstrous superheroes clearly evokes the threat of the enemy within. Yet these comics' merging of the heroic and the monstrous also suggests a self-critical treatment of this threat, one that highlights the fallibility of perceptions and the difficulty of separating good and/or positive personal and physical characteristics from bad and/or destructive ones. This self-critical treatment is clearly on display within the Marvel Age superheroes' various rejections and modifications of the classic dual identity convention.[23] Different critics have proposed different ways of reading the classic dual identity. Alan Klein, for instance, argues that the often extreme dichotomy between the wimp and warrior roles within the classic dual identity formula ensures that superheroes remain essentially simplistic and conservative. According to Klein, the classic dual identity formula means that comic book superheroes lack "the ability to tap into a wider range of emotions, to depend on others without feeling less of a man, to be softer, wiser, and so on—all of which would, we assume, make for a less interesting story" (268). Thomas Andrae similarly argues that the classic dual identity prohibits growth, reflection, subversion, or protest. According to Andrae, the classic dual identity formula "both exposes the powerlessness of the individual in modern society and effaces it at the same time by affirming an escape into a realm of fantastic adventure beyond the repressions of daily life. By identifying with both the impotent Kent and the

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[23] In superhero comics, the classic dual identity formula involves a well-defined set of binary oppositions. Generally, this binary is some variation of "wimp versus warrior." In their original, Golden Age incarnations, all of Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman exploit this classic formula. Both Clark Kent and Diana Prince wear glasses (the classic code for wimpy-ness), and adopt meek personalities within their relatively low-ranking (that is, non-managerial) civilian jobs. Though Bruce Wayne is an independent, wealthy industrialist rather than a low-ranking everyman, he is nonetheless effete and ineffectual compared to Batman; in public, Wayne depicts himself as a dilettante and playboy specifically in opposition to the more decisive, aggressive Batman.

invincible Superman, the reader can acknowledge the facts of power in daily life but need not confront the painful necessity of changing his/her situation and achieving power within it" (103).

Greg M. Smith offers a slightly different reading, arguing that the dichotomy between the wimp and warrior roles enables superheroes to dramatize negotiations between competing social demands. According to Smith, the classic dual identity "is not necessarily… a simple fantasy split or an irreconcilable difference between two orientations: instead, the classic secret identity acknowledges the interconnection between two necessary modes of heroism" (136). Smith's argument makes the most sense within the context of the genre theory discussed in the Introduction, which asserts that popular texts are always polysemic. And yet, amid this polysemism, some interpretations and possibilities are always more available than others. Although the process of actively negotiating between wimp and warrior—or, as Smith puts it, between "Organization Man and individualist hero" (136)—can usefully illuminate the limits of those highly stereotyped and circumscribed roles, within stories that employ the classic dual identity formula, such negotiations do not necessarily yield a transformative synthesis; in such stories, the wimp and warrior roles do not substantively change (except over very long periods of time), and cannot be inhabited in the same moment.

In different ways, each of the Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, and the Hulk, rupture the stasis of the classic dual identity convention; in each case, these ruptures are self-critical, and are intimately bound up with the newly multiple, excessive, and unstable nature of these superheroes' atomic-spawned bodies. Of the three, Spider-Man/Peter Parker comes closest to embodying the classic formula. Peter Parker is, similar to Clark Kent and Diana Price before him, a glasses wearing wimp—or, as a classmate describes him in his debut in *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (1962), "midtown High's only professional wallflower." However, whereas in the classic

dual identity formula, "the reader is set up to be simultaneously impressed by the superhero and dismissive of the alter ego" (Klein 267), Lee and Ditko's Spider-Man stories subvert any easy hierarchy between superhero and civilian identities. In Spider-Man's stories, the dichotomy between wimp and warrior roles is troubled, first and foremost, by the ways in which Spider-Man's superheroic exploits extend outwards from and intersect with his especially fraught personal life. Unlike nearly every superhero before him, Peter Parker is poor, teenaged,[24] and has a parental figure in the form of his Aunt May. Many Marvel Age stories demonstrate that Spider-Man would often defeat villains far more easily, and have a better reputation, if Parker were wealthy (like Bruce Wayne), or at least a gainfully employed adult (like Diana Prince and Clark Kent), and if he did not have a paternal figure who depends on him, and on whom he depends in turn. The dichotomy between wimp and warrior roles is also troubled by several deliberate reversals in the way each identity is treated and valued relative to the classic dual identity formula. For instance, while in the classic formula the love interest typically adores the superhero and hates the civilian, the only person who truly loves Spider-Man is Parker's worst enemy, the class bully Flash Thompson; furthermore, the people who love Parker, such as Aunt May and early love interest Betty Brant, hate Spider-Man. Spider-Man's famous motto, "with great power, there must also come great responsibility," might usefully be rewritten as "with great power, there must also come great consequence," to the extent that Spider-Man's stories always showcase the burden of superpowers alongside, and sometimes even in excess of, their benefits.

Another aspect of this consequence is reflected in the fact that Spider-Man's body is not conventionally warrior-like. Superman and Wonder Woman are, as their names suggest, ideals to

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[24] Before Spider-Man, teenager superheroes almost always operated as the sidekicks of adult superheroes.

aspire to, with their superiority to "normal" men and women partly confirmed by the ways in which they adhere to ideal standards of physical fitness and beauty. Spider-Man's body is, in contrast, less ideal. Although both Batman and Spider-Man take on the names and certain of the physical characteristics of small, supernaturally inflected, and generally disliked animals, Batman (at least in his pre-Code stories) tends to scare people, while Spider-Man (in his Lee/Ditko stories) tends to scare as well as disgust people. The opening splash page of *Amazing Spider-Man* #1 (1963) (Image 2) makes this disgust obvious, showing members of the public as well as the news media (represented by Daily Bugle publisher J. Jonah Jameson) pointing at Spider-Man while labelling him a "freak" and a "public menace." The public's perception of Spider-Man as a freak and menace ensure that Parker's superheroic alter ego does not provide a true "escape into a realm of fantastic adventure beyond the repressions of daily life." Especially when read in combination with the troubled dichotomy between superhero and civilian identities discussed above, Spider-Man's freakishness questions whether escape of that sort can exist at all. Spider-Man's freakishness also questions the directionality of such escape. Does the normal, dutiful Parker redeem the freakishness of Spider-Man? Or is Spider-Man the American teenager's true self? Whereas Superman suggested that an ideally attractive strongman might lurk under the baggy, conformist suit of the Organization Man, Spider-Man invokes that decidedly more unsettling notion a half-animal freak might lurk within the typical American teen.

Whereas Spider-Man's comics from this era debate the nature and terms of the wimp/warrior dichotomy, the Fantastic Four's comics eschew it altogether by having the Fantastic Four reject secret or dual identities. When the Fantastic Four deal with real life problems such as money, marital discord, pregnancy, and the consequences of celebrity, they do

so as superheroes. Admittedly, this gives their real life problems a decidedly fantastical bent.

Case in point, although there are realistic elements to the plot of *Fantastic Four* #9 (1962)—in

which the team is evicted from their home in the Baxter Building after Mr. Fantastic looses the

team's savings in the stock market—the resolution of this plot is decidedly unreal; in this story,

the team earn back their wealth by starring in a Hollywood film about their superheroic exploits.

These and other early plots do not represent the trials and tribulations of "real people" so much

as those of "real superheroes." In a sense, the Fantastic Four are superheroes all the time; they

are supermen and women without Clark Kents or Diana Princes. And yet, because they are

presented not merely as a team, but also as a family, and because their headquarters is both a

workplace and a home,[25] the Fantastic Four are decidedly human superhumans; the fact that the

Fantastic Four originally fight crime in their civilian clothes (only acquiring traditional superhero

costumes in issue #3 at the urging of fans) especially highlights an intention to merge, dissolve,

or simply reject, previously established conventions separating the wimp from the warrior, and

the civilian world from the superheroic one.

Within an era obsessed with rooting out hidden threats to both national security and

hearth and home, it is significant that the Fantastic Four's lack of secret identities also merges

and dissolves boundaries between the private and the public. This creative choice both

domesticates the superhero and debates the costs and benefits of full disclosure. On the one hand,

the Fantastic Four's disclosure is shown as positive, inasmuch as it rewards them with the

public's trust (at least compared to the public's rampant distrust of the more secretive Spider-

Man[26]). On the other hand, however, the Fantastic Four pay a price for their openness; they often

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[25] At the beginning of the series, Sue and Johnny are depicted as having a separate home "in the suburbs," presumably to avoid showing the unwed Sue and Reed living together. After Sue and Reed's wedding in *Fantastic Four Annual* #3 (1965), the team lives together in their headquarters.
[26] In the comparison between the Fantastic Four and Spider-Man, full disclosure is not necessarily privileged above

find themselves beholden to the military (as when they are recruited in *Fantastic Four* #12 [1963] to corral the Hulk), and the public, who mob them like celebrities and hold them accountable when things go wrong (as in *Fantastic Four* #68 [1966], in which the public turns against the Four after they are initially unsuccessful in fending off the world-eating alien Galactus). *Fantastic Four* adds further complexity to its depiction of the costs and benefits of disclosure via the fact that the team members' openness is not necessarily a choice. Just as the Fantastic Four's unstable bodies cannot truly be controlled, they cannot truly be hidden. The Thing, in particular, cannot avoid being seen. Even when he tries to hide, putting on sunglasses, a trench coat, a fedora, and a scarf, he resembles an iconic monster—namely, Universal's Invisible Man (Image 3). The Thing is as much "outed" as he voluntarily "comes out of the closet," and his misery at being watched and policed not only shows the consequences of full disclosure, but also potentially critiques the type of society that demands it.

Where the Hulk/Bruce Banner rejects the classic dual identity formula, he does so, in part, by adhering to it too closely. The Hulk is the ultimate warrior: huge, strong, violent, and aggressive. He is also, however, *too* huge, *too* strong, *too* violent, and *too* aggressive, to the point where neither Banner nor the public generally considers the Hulk to be positive or desirable. Within the classic dual identity formula, although the difference and separation between Superman and Clark Kent is pronounced, it is not generally depicted as violent, traumatizing, or problematic. As Michael S. Kimmel describes, "Superman and Clark Kent sanitized the gendered schizophrenia that had been the stuff of masculine fantasy for some time, making this version of Mr. Hyde every bit as respectable as Dr. Jekyll. (140). The relationship between the Hulk and

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secrecy, the reader being assured that different characters makes the choices they do for different reasons; for instance, Spider-Man lacks the financial acumen and institutional authority of Richards et al, and thus has a definite reason to hide—namely, for the sake protecting himself and his loved ones (as the infamous "The Night Gwen Stacy Died" storyline in *Amazing Spider Man* #121-2 [1973] makes especially clear).

Banner both reinstates this "schizophrenia" and rewrites it. Although the Hulk/Dr. Banner is an obvious takeoff of Mr. Hyde/Dr. Jekyll (with the aesthetics of Universal's Frankenstein's monster and the Wolfman's susceptibility to the moon thrown in), there are notable differences between the two stories. One of the key differences is that, despite his primitive features and his unbridled (re: uncivilized) aggression, the Hulk less obviously or simply embodies degeneration than does Mr. Hyde. Because he is a recuperably heroic product of atomic science, a "monster who could become an ally of the national security state" (Poole 118), the Hulk represents both a technological and/or evolutionary step forward and a technological and/or evolutionary step backward, embodying, in a single form, the aforementioned "dual nature" of atomic energy.

The most crucial difference, however, between the Hulk/Banner and the examples of both Hyde/Jekyll and the classic dual identity formula, is that the nature of the relationship between the Hulk and Banner is always changing. The early stories featuring the Hulk depict Banner and his faithful sidekick Rick Jones waging a constant battle to keep up with the always-changing rules, boundaries, and forms of Banner's transformations.[27] Initially, Banner transforms into the Hulk every day at dusk, and the Hulk's violence is not so much mindless as (variously) hedonistic and apathetic. But by *The Incredible Hulk* #3 (1962), Banner is trapped as the Hulk, and the Hulk is truly mindless; in this issue, the Hulk is under the mental control of Jones, who must remain conscious at all times to prevent the Hulk from going on a rampage. In *The Incredible Hulk* #4 (1962), Banner invents a ray that allows him, for a time, to control his transformations, as well as maintain his intelligence and at least some semblance of his personality while in his Hulk form. However, the ray frequently does not work as intended, or at

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[27] The Hulk's initial indeterminacy can potentially be explained as creator indecision; the Hulk was the only Marvel superhero who was not immediately successful, having his solo series cancelled at issue #6. However, the theme of constant change would survive the Marvel Age to become one of the defining features of the character; the current Hulk continuity includes the possibility of Banner housing an infinite number of different Hulks.

all. For instance, in *The Incredible Hulk* #6 (1963), the ray transforms Banner's body, but leaves his face intact, forcing him to wear a Hulk mask to preserve his secret identity. Later in the same issue, the ray fails to transform the Hulk back into Banner, causing the Hulk/Banner to have what can only be described as a panic attack. This panic attack causes the Hulk to revert to Banner, leading Banner to believe that his transformations are caused by spikes in adrenaline (Image 4). Although the Hulk is often thought of as a simple character (Coogan dismissively calls him "a walking erection" [15]), his constantly changing rules and forms may ultimately make him one of the most complex Marvel superheroes. At the very least, the Hulk is the most conflicted and contradictory of all the Marvel Age superheroes—a power fantasy and warning, hero and villain, occupying many different and unpredictably changing bodies.

The ways in which the Marvel Age superheroes variously react to, interact with, and reject the classic dual identity formula makes them both revisionist and self-reflexive. Even though many of the Marvel Age's innovations were no doubt motivated by a need to create more story opportunities which might in turn create more space in the market for new characters from a new publisher, they also open up possibilities for active reflection and commentary—not only on and of the superhero genre, but on and of the society that produces it. For instance, in *Amazing Spider-Man* #1, J. Jonah Jameson's condemnation of Spider-Man evokes the moral panic about juvenile delinquency that led to the adoption of the Comics Code, echoing—and ridiculing—Werthamite assertions about the corrupting influence of comic book superheroes. At a "public lecture," Jameson says: "We cannot allow that masked menace to take the law into his own hands! He is a bad influence on our youngsters! Children may try to imitate his fantastic feats!... The youth of this nation must learn to respect *real* heroes—men such as my son, John Jameson, the test pilot! Not selfish freaks such as Spider-Man!" (Image 5). The presence of these

critiques of institutional authority represents a significant departure from the typical superhero comics of the 1940s and 50s. Although Superman did battle corrupt politicians and capitalists in his very early stories, typical superhero stories from the Golden Age and early Silver Age tend to avoid proposing or even mentioning institutional causes of inequality or law-breaking. As Roberta E. Pearson and William Uricchio observe, in typical Batman stories from the Golden Age well into the Silver Age, "The narratives deal with the crime rate; they deal with criminal brutality, but not the brutalizing slum landlords; they deal with the greed of petty theft but not poverty and hopelessness—in short, they deal with the transgressions of the underclass but not the conditions that give rise to these transgressions" (127).

Importantly, the nature of Spider-Man's body is a central aspect of this critique. In the above-described scene, Jameson is also—and even primarily—targeting and/or threatened by Spider-Man's animal-like, excessive, or otherwise monstrous body. Throughout the scene, Jameson's words are accompanied by background images of Spider-Man swinging on his web and towering over the city, encircling it in his dangling, seemingly elongated arms; these images of Spider-Man are in turn contrasted with a head shot (*not* a body shot) of John Jameson,[28] whose handsome face is exposed inside a space helmet. J. Jonah Jameson's language (especially his invocation of "freakishness"), combined with the images of Spider-Man's insect-like body juxtaposed John's attractive human face, suggests that Jameson—and the public he represents— fears not only Spider-Man's actions as a vigilante, but also the unruly nature of his body and the effect that unruly body might have on the vulnerable, and thus similarly volatile, bodies of the nation's youth. For Jameson, as for those who fought to censor or ban comic books, the battle for the souls of the nation's youth is also a battle for their bodies, which Jameson, like Wertham

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[28] Although the character of John Jameson seems to be a clear reference to John Glenn, it is unlikely that Glenn is implicated in this comic's critique; the issue depicts John as heroic, and he later becomes a friend of Peter Parker.

before him, believes face grave (but unspecified) danger simply by being exposed to Spider-Man's freakish example. As Ramzi Fawaz observes, Spider-Man is both a "cultural outsider" and a "biological freak." According to Fawaz, this combined cultural and bodily freakishness makes Spider-Man "capable of upsetting the social order in much the same way that racial, gendered, and sexual minorities were seen to destabilize the image of the ideal U.S. citizen" (4).

This challenge is emphasized visually through Ditko's artwork. As mentioned earlier, Spider-Man is similar to Batman in the sense that both superheroes are named after small, supernaturally inflected, and generally disliked animals. Batman, however, is not actually half-bat. This is true both functionally (Batman is not, like Spider-Man, a mutated human) and graphically. Even though he puts on a cape and ears, Batman does not particularly move or act like a bat; he does not, for instance, fly under his own power, use echolocation, or hang upside down by his feet from the rafters. The shadows Batman often makes with his bat-wing cape are his most bat-like characteristic, yet even this does not reference the form and movement of real bats so much as filmic depictions of Dracula (potentially the German *Nosferatu* [1922] but almost certainly Bela Legosi's turn as the Count in Universal's *Dracula* [1931]). While Batman makes additions to his decidedly human body, Spider-Man wears a streamlined body stocking that highlights his actually spider-like body. Ditko's very first images of Spider-Man, in the opening splash pages of *Amazing Fantasy* #15, and *Amazing Spider-Man* #1 (1963) (see Image 2), depict him with unnatural-seeming joints that bend at awkward angles; in the image from *Amazing Spider-Man* #1, he is even depicted within a spider's web, highlighting his connection to the animal (or, more appropriately, insect) world. Ditko's Spider-Man artwork goes to great lengths to emphasize the hero's distinctly spider-like body; using doors for windows and just as comfortable right-side up as upside down, Ditko's Spider-Man tents his long fingers to climb

walls, uses his hands interchangeably with his feet, and positions his web line as often overhand (a la Tarzan) as between his legs, mimicking—as closely as a non-eight-legged body can—a spider extracting silk (Image 6). As Douglas Wolk observes, Ditko's work on Spider-Man subverts norms of superhero representation, inasmuch as it is "often crude and unpretty... full of crabbed, ugly characters.... [with] imperfect bodies" (156-7). "Peter Parker," observes Wolk, "in or out of his costume, is a scrawny kid with insectoid body language" (157).

Spider-Man is, in addition, depicted as a polluting presence. As Scott Bukatman observes, Spider-Man is "a more tactile hero than Superman or Batman" (207). While Superman soars effortlessly through and above the urban grid, Wonder Woman glides unseen in her invisible plane, and Batman cuts through the streets and sky in his Batmobile, Batplane, and Batcopter, or swings on a rope attached to his reassuringly technological Batarang, Spider-Man clings to and crawls on and across the city, touching and mapping every building, awning, and flagpole with his hands, his feet, and with his sticky webs. Spider-Man's tactile-ness establishes his limits, his grounding in the "real" space of New York city. It also, however, emphasizes his dirty-ness. Spider-Man's sticky touch pollutes the city, leaving behind gooey spiderwebs that, although they are actually technological, seem to onlookers (and readers) to emerge from his body. The fact that Spider-Man's costume covers his entire face and body adds to the boundary-breaking, excessive monstrousness that is already suggested by his poses and polluting touch. Unlike Superman and Wonder Woman, who wear masks (i.e. glasses) in their civilian identities and uncover their faces in their ideally beautiful superhero identities, or even Batman, whose exposed lips and lantern-jaw testify to his ideal masculine attractiveness, Spider-Man's full face mask conceals not only his identity, but also his humanity. As Wolk observes, Spider-Man's full face mask means that he can only convey emotion through body language (158). Consequently,

to an even greater degree than many of his predecessors, Spider-Man's body speaks, extravagantly collapsing in anguish and exploding in triumph, with even his long, narrow feet and thin, tapered fingers (a Ditko speciality) taking part in his insectoid poses. Spider-Man's body is powerful to the extent that it grants him super-strength, speed, and agility, a combination that allows him, like Superman before him, to transcend and conquer modern urban spaces; but in his moments of power, Spider-Man also always connotes a monstrousness located in the breaking of boundaries between the human and animal, as well as an ability to pollute, or perhaps infect, the world (and specifically, the urban space) around him. Making Spider-Man's body actually insect-like risks confirming the biological reality of cultural prejudices; after all, Spider-Man's capacity to infect or pollute the world is exactly what Jameson warns of. Yet Spider-Man's ultimate heroism—the fact that he uses his monstrous body to save lives and enact justice—also situates his boundary-breaking, excessive monstrousness as potentially liberating, ideal, and powerful, as well as socially useful and thus, redeemable. In short: Spider-Man is monstrous, but his example also suggests that some characteristics and combinations that have erstwhile been perceived as monstrousness might not be so bad after all.

To the extent that Spider-Man's fluidity and/or leakiness are connotatively feminine, he can additionally be read as gender deviant.[29] This capacity for gender deviance is shared by virtually all of the Marvel Age's male superheroes, even in those cases where such deviance might initially seem less obvious. Case in point, the hardness and impenetrability of Marvel Age superheroes such as the Hulk and the Thing might seem, at first inspection, to be obviously and indelibly masculine. There is, however, a potential disruption of gender norms in the depiction of the Hulk and the Thing's large, hard transformations as highly unstable as well as excessive. As

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[29] Given the typical conflation of gender, sex, and sexuality during the era in question, he can also be read as potentially sexually deviant.

Dawn Heinecken describes, male action heroes are traditionally defined, above all, by their ability to control themselves and the world around them, an ability that their hard, disciplined graphically connote bodies. The hardness of the male action hero's body marks him "as master over his environment," showing that he "has a control over his own body that has historically been denied to women, the weaker, 'softer' sex" (Heinecken 1). Mark Gallagher concurs that "the ability to assert control over threatening situations virtually defines the action hero" (50). Significantly, however, the Hulk and the Thing are emphatically denied this control. In a typical sequence from *The Incredible Hulk* #2 (1962), Banner can be seen to gag on his transformation, desperately trying to hold his body together with his hands while a breathless panic overwhelms his speech: "I'm changing! Heaven help me, I can no longer stop it—no longer control myself! I—I—" If, as Friedrich Weltzein argues "The successful performer of masculinity, as displayed in the superhero genre, is the one who is able to stay in control throughout the transformation" (244), the Hulk/Banner does not successfully perform masculinity.

The Hulk's performance of masculinity is additionally disrupted by the fact that his transformations have both connotatively masculine and connotatively feminine characteristics. Different critics, even within the same critical school, have ascribed different gender connotations to bodily spectacles that involve changing size or shape, and particularly growing larger. The psychoanalytic analysis of Anthony Easthorpe, for instance, argues that the ability to grow is specific to the male body, and invariably represents phallic power. Within both sports and popular texts, writes Easthorpe:

> Not only is the masculine body invariably portrayed erect... but it seems to
> be able to inflate itself. When the body moves from relaxation to tension,
> the muscles grow in size, as they do for example when the ordinary little

man turns into the incredible hulk or when Arnold Schwarzenegger plays

Conan the Barbarian. Defying gravity in the high jump or the pole vault,

puffing itself up like a bullfrog in the weightlifting, the masculine body can

impersonate the phallus. (54)

Barbara Creed, however, also employs psychoanalysis to argue that the capacity of the body to change size and shape is just as often horrific as desirable. Creed additionally argues that horrific transformations—that is, those transformations that are viewed by the subject of the transformation or members of the public as frightening, disgusting, or otherwise undesirable— tend to have strong feminine connotations, stemming from "the very nature of horror as an encounter with the feminine" (121). Referencing Julia Kristeva's theorization of the abject, Creed argues that: "The prototype of the abject body is the maternal body because of its link with the natural world signified in its lack of 'corporeal integrity'; it secretes (blood, milk); it changes size, grows, and swells; it gives birth in 'a violent act of expulsion through which the nascent body tears itself away from the matter of maternal insides'" (122). Although Easthorpe and Creed's analyses target different types of bodies—Easthorpe is discussing stereotypically attractive athletes while Creed is discussing horror movie monsters—their very different characterizations of the gendered quality of "changing, growing, and swelling" nonetheless demonstrates that such metamorphoses can be either—or both—connotatively masculine or feminine depending on context and articulation.

The articulation and context of the Hulk's transformations affords them a great deal of gender fluidity. Any attempt to read the Hulk as a straightforward male power fantasy is complicated not only by the fact that Banner's transformations are traumatizing, but also by the *ways* in which those transformations are traumatizing. The large, hard Hulk can never emerge

without a corresponding image of a much smaller and more realistic—and thus, potentially more identifiable—male body in anguish, crumpled and defeated in mysterious (and thus vaguely hysterical) pain (Image 7). Time and again, the Hulk literally explodes out of the terrified Banner's smaller body, like a violation of the flesh or a painful birth; the Hulk also leaves Banner, in the aftermath of his rampages, exaggeratedly empty and deflated, a state that seems as akin to postpartum depression as post-orgasm quietude (Image 8). The fact that the Hulk's power is not only dangerous and frightening but also emerges through a painful violation of Banner's body routinely complicates masculine individualist fantasies with femininized forms of hysteria, penetrability, and even pregnancy and childbirth. At the very least, even if the Hulk is "a walking erection," it is highly uncertain whether such an erection is gloriously complete and desirable or embarrassingly premature and detestable.

Of course, the fact that Banner—the wimpy, and thus already feminized half of the Banner/Hulk equation—bears the brunt of the duo's feminization suggests that the Hulk may read as triumphing over the threat of femininity. And yet, Banner's Hulk form also performs masculinity in multiple, sometimes contradictory way—because of his excess and instability, but also because of his undesirability. Robert Genter argues that the Hulk can be read both as a critique and as a celebration of essential masculinity. On the one hand, says Genter, the Hulk's destructive aggression "shed[s] light upon the self-destructive impulses inherent within modern man, revealed most emphatically through concentration camps and atomic bombs"; on the other hand, however, it "also [signals] the exuberant energy residing at the core of man that might protect him from psychic or physical subordination" (964). In other words, within the context of largely wordless spectacles of an atomic-spawned, excessively phallic monster-hero destroying both American army bases and communist spies, the Hulk—and the gamma bomb that creates

(or releases) him—critiques and affirms primitive, essential masculinity as being both (negatively) destructive and (positively) transcendent. In both readings, the Hulk is uncontrolled and uncontrollable, yet this uncontrollability is simultaneously dangerous and exuberant, with the dangerousness both enhancing the exuberance and vice versa.

Although the Hulk's ultimate heroism strongly suggests the redeemability of the destructive aspects, individual scenes and images evoke an almost radical indeterminacy. A typical example occurs in *The Incredible Hulk* #1 (1962) (Image 9), in which the Hulk responds to a soldier's attempt to shoot him by seizing his gun and crushing it in his hands, declaring, "*So! This* is what puny humans fear!" When the stunned soldier protests, "*No*! It's *impossible*! You— you aren't *human*!" the Hulk hoists him into the air and says, "*Human*?? Why should I want to be human?!?" In this scene, the Hulk both rejects traditional violence and is better than it, both rejects humanity and is better than it; he is both a potential force of resistance to human (re: masculine) aggression and social mores, and represents a manifestation of personal power that reifies traditional masculinity. This indeterminacy is furthered by the Hulk's overriding nihilism, which is on display later in the same issue, during a scene in which Banner transforms while driving a Jeep. In this scene, when Rick Jones shouts at the Hulk/Banner to watch the wheel, the Hulk replies, "*Wheel*? Who cares about the wheel?? Who care about... *anything*?!!" The Hulk then crashes the Jeep, demonstrating a lust for wanton destruction or an apathy for life in general. Actively passive and/or passively active within the same moment, the Marvel Age Hulk is a true rebel without a cause.

In fact, such multiplicity and indeterminacy may *be* the Hulk's cause. This possibility is highlighted by the format and content of the Hulk stories following the cancellation of the character's initial solo series at issue #6. When the Hulk's ongoing adventures move to the *Tales*

to Astonish anthology, his first story, which appears in issue #60 (1964), advertises itself as "the only comic mag super-hero soap opera in existence." In keeping with this promise, each story marries dramatic violence with dramatic emotions and ends on a cliff-hanger, often related to a new complication or twist on the Hulk/Banner's unpredictable transformations. For instance, *Tales to Astonish* #62 (1964) ends with the Hulk imprisoned by the military, coming ever-closer to transforming into Banner as his pulse rises in the struggle to break free. *Tales to Astonish* #72 (1965) similarly ends with the Hulk struggling not to transform, this time because there is a bullet lodged in Banner's brain that will kill him if the change occurs. The cliff-hanger for *Tales to Astonish* #80 (1966) involves the Hulk transforming randomly and unexpectedly into a very confused and disoriented Banner, who is left posing anguished questions to a deserted landscape: "But *where*?? *Why*?? And—*for how long*??" (Image 10). In these stories, the drama comes as much from fights with supervillains as from the Hulk/Banner's ongoing efforts to negotiate his ever-increasing multiplicity and instability. This is furthermore a challenge, put to both the Hulk/Banner and the reader, to understand the ever-changing boundaries between Banner and the Hulk, which is also a challenge to understand not only the relationship between brains (represented by Banner) and brawn (represented by the Hulk), but also the boundaries and difference (if, in fact, there is a difference) between the heroic and the monstrous, and between positive and negative manifestations of connotatively masculine displays of strength and aggression. In this, the Hulk's multiplicity compels the reader to reflect on the meaning of masculinity in the post-atomic age.

The Thing does not transform as often as the Hulk, being largely stuck (or imprisoned) in his monstrous form. Yet his transformations are similarly unpredictable and traumatic. A typical transformation scene in *Fantastic Four* #2 (1962) (Image 11) shows the Thing/Ben Grimm

reverting randomly to his human form and experiencing a fleeting moment of confusion and joy before transforming again (as he always does) back into the Thing. In this scene, as Grimm does not rise in triumph as he transforms into his larger, harder self, but rather crumples to the ground in defeat, his voice becoming an anguished whisper as he utters his chosen superhero moniker like a curse. In both conception and execution, the Thing's tragic situation is intensely gendered. Throughout the Marvel Age, the Thing's efforts to (variously) deny and accept his monstrous body are also struggles to define and understand the shape and substance of his masculinity and/or maleness. This struggle plays out, in large part, though the Thing's relationship with his girlfriend, blind sculptress Alicia Masters. Beginning in the first issue she is introduced (*Fantastic Four* #8 [1962]), Alicia prefers the Thing's monstrous shape to his human one. Embodying a timeworn stereotype, the blind Alicia can "see" the truth of people's souls, and thus perceives, as the Thing/Grimm does not, that the Thing represents Grimm's best self. Alica's preference seems to be rooted in the fact that Grimm's Thing form possesses a potential for humility and self-awareness that the often arrogant, selfish Grimm is often shown to lack. In the words of Charles Hatfield: "Ben's doppelganger [i.e. the Thing], an exaggeration of the original's alienation and self-pity, is the monster, though more so when he looks like a man. He becomes a true 'man' only when he takes a monster's guise" (159).

Grimm, however, is unable to appreciate this truth, precisely because he associates his monstrous form with metaphorical and perhaps actual impotence. Ignoring the advice of his teammates, who continually assure him of Alicia's unconditional love, the Thing bemoans what he perceives as his inability to marry Alicia (re: become a nuclear patriarch and/or have sex with her), believing he can only do so once he finds a way to permanently regain his human form. In general, and especially through his relationship with Alicia, the Thing complicates Susan Willis'

assertion that where male superheroes are concerned, "physical strength and super-powers imply the penis and give expression to the power and domination associated with the phallus" (29-30). Certainly, the Thing's largeness and hardness connotes the penis; this form interferes, however, with Grimm's achievement of phallic power, in the sense that it helps deny him access to women and marriage. In a sense, becoming like a penis exposes the Thing's lack; in becoming a shape that connotes the penis, the Thing either/both loses full access to phallic power and/or his "actual" penis. Even if the Thing's impotence is all in his head, his example nonetheless emphasizes the social construction of masculinity, and even maleness; the Thing foregrounds masculinity as a process, and illustrates the potential deceptiveness of its interconnected performative and material signs.

Furthermore, the fact that the Thing's ability to accept and navigate his changed and ever-changing body is partly dependent upon the insight and support of a physically disabled woman suggests some of the ways in which the Thing's body might be read as disabled. Both graphically and narratively, the Thing's body has much in common with Rosemarie Garland Thomson's characterization of the disabled body. "The disabled body," says Thomson, "stands for the self gone out of control, individualism run rampant: it mocks the notion of the body as compliant instrument of the limitless will and appears in the cultural imagination as ungovernable, recalcitrant, flaunting its difference as if to refute the fantasy of sameness implicit in the notion of equality" (43). According to Thomson, just as the spectacular body of the monster or the freak is often mobilized to confirm the terms and boundaries of normality, the disabled figure "operates as the vividly embodied, stigmatized other whose social role is to symbolically free the privileged, idealized figure of the American self from the vagaries and vulnerabilities of embodiment" (7). Particularly within civilian settings, the Thing's body

similarly becomes a spectacle, always causing chaos, and routinely stopping traffic. This is especially true of those occasions when the Thing's body is exposed, as in *Fantastic Four* #66 (1967), in which the Thing wanders, depressed and despondent, through the park wearing only his blue shorts (Image 12). Although the Thing provokes primarily admiration in this scene, his subjectivity and agency is nonetheless threatened by a gawking public who identify his freakish body as an issue or problem that requires a reaction and an opinion. Over the course of two pages: a police officer questions the Thing's (lack of) attire (re: draws attention to the abnormality of his body); a group of teenagers ask him to bend a lamppost (re: demand a performance from his body); and a woman shoos the teenagers away before kissing him and reciting his virtues (re: defines his body, and tells him who he is). In addition, Thomson argues that, "Many parallels exist between the social meanings attributed to female bodies and those assigned to disabled bodies." For instance, "[b]oth the female and the disabled body are cast as deviant and inferior; both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life; both are defined in opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority" (Thomson 19). The Thing's male body is similarly policed in ways commonly associated with female bodies. For instance, in his very first appearance, the Thing is depicted in a clothing store, where he is shamed and humiliated because he does not fit into any of the store's clothes (Image 13). In general, however, as in the scene from *Fantastic Four* #66, the Thing's body resonates more with disability than femaleness, inasmuch as he is less gazed upon than stared at. According to Thomson, "If the male gaze makes the normative female a sexual spectacle, then the stare sculpts the disabled subject into a grotesque spectacle. The stare is the gaze intensified, framing her body as an icon of deviance" (26).

On the one hand, reading the Thing as a disabled figure usefully problematizes the

conception of disability as an absolute form of difference that defines and delimits normality. The Thing's unexpected and random transformations from a normal (re: able-bodied) human to a stared-at super-monster suggests the disabled body's ability to disrupt traditional (re: hierarchal and exclusionary) definitions of selfhood. The Thing's random transformations, like the spectre of disability, "suggests that the cultural other lies dormant within the cultural self, threatening abrupt or gradual transformation from 'man' to 'invalid'" (Thomson 43). Similar to the disabled body, the Thing's body "exposes the illusion of autonomy, self-government, and self-determination that underpins the fantasy of absolute able-bodiedness" (Thomson 46). On the other hand, however, the Thing can be read as problematically insisting on a compensation model of disability. As Thomson describes, the compensation model of disability asserts that "disability is a loss to be compensated for, rather than a difference to be accommodated"; in this model, "'disabled' connotes not physiological variation, but the violation of a primary state of putative wholeness" (49). The compensation model stands in opposition to what Thomson calls "[t]he logic of accommodation," which "suggests that disability is simply one of many differences among people and that society should recognize this by adjusting its environment accordingly" (49). Whereas the logic of accommodation de-stigmatizes disability by regarding it as a normal variance, the compensation model sees disability as a form of abnormality or deviance that must be overcome.

José Alaniz argues that metaphorically or actually disabled superheroes inherently adhere to the compensation model. According to Alaniz, superheroes are similar to the real-life example of the "supercrip." Emblematized by paraplegic athletes who earn the admiration of the able-bodied by "conquering" their disabilities, "the supercrip, in the eyes of its critics, represents a sort of overachieving, overdetermined self-enfreakment that distracts from the lived daily reality

of most disabled people" (Alaniz 31). The supercrip stereotype, says Alaniz, is "a figure obsessively, indeed manically, over-compensating for a perceived physical difference or lack" (33). Superheroes with real or metaphorical disabilities are similar to supercrips inasmuch as they also seem to obsessively overcompensate for a perceived lack, their bodily deviance always being paired or identified with tremendous physical power that ultimately makes them superior to normal people—including normal disabled people. It is worth noting, however, that because the Thing is always ultimately stuck with his monstrous form, he can never truly overcome his difference, and/or truly compensate for his disability. Inasmuch as the Thing's overarching and defining narrative involves a never-ending struggle to accept his monstrous/deformed/disabled body, he connotes aspects of both compensation and accommodation.

Although it is tempting to describe both the Thing/Grimm's bodily spectacles and anxieties about impotence as well as the Hulk/Banner's bodily violations and bouts of hysteria as forms of feminization, the exaggerated, connotatively masculine shapes of these heroes suggests that they might more accurately be described as *making masculinity visible*, both metaphorically and literally. Similar to the heroic male bodies appearing in 1980s action films, in the case of both the Thing and the Hulk, "[c]onflict is literally inscribed in the hysterical (overdetermined/overdeveloped) male body" (Tasker 87). At all times, the excessively visible, excessively hard bodies of both the Thing and the Hulk are inscribed with conflict and, subsequently, conflicting meanings. However, because the hard bodies of the Thing and the Hulk are deliberately overdetermined to the point of monstrousness, they make the construction of masculinity not only visible, but actively unstable, and thus, available for investigation, and, potentially, critique. As Easthorpe describes, "Masculinity tries to stay invisible by passing itself off as normal and universal." (1). As such, rendering masculinity un-normal—even or especially

through an unnatural excess of masculine signs—can render it visible, which in turn makes it capable of being re-imagined and re-drawn; in effect, making masculinity visible exposes gender as a cultural rather than strictly biological state of affairs. To a certain extent, all of Marvel's prominent male superheroes, from the Marvel Age to the present, make masculinity visible, inasmuch as they all struggle to negotiate public and personal reactions to hyper-visible bodies that are, or are perceived to be, in some sense monstrous.

There are, nonetheless, ways in which the comics in question also limit the deconstructive potential of such visibility. These limits emerge most dramatically when different bodies are pitted and measured against each other. In every era, the abilities and identities of superheroes emerge and are confirmed through bodily interaction and conflict. In the Marvel Age, these interactions and conflicts occur between both superheroes and supervillain as well as between superheroes and other superheroes, who often fight each other before teaming up to combat a larger, shared threat. During the Marvel Age and afterwards, the Fantastic Four's routine domestic squabbles—about whose turn it is to use the bathroom, borrow the car, or sweep the lab—routinely become physical battles with metaphorical meanings. In these interactions, the Torch's flame pitted against the Invisible Girl's force-field compares aggressive powers to defensive ones, and tests the impetuosity of a teenaged brother against the disciplining, moralizing force of his older sister. Similarly, Mr. Fantastic's frequent physical battles with the Thing debate, in different moments and in different ways, the efficacy and meaning of (for instance) flexibility versus solidity, and/or creativity versus single-minded determination. When the entire Fantastic Four team battles the X-Men in *Fantastic Four* #28 (1964) (Image 14 and 15), the multiple pages of their physical encounter depict fantastically-abled and weaponized bodies entangled and thrown into and against each other in ways that sometimes confirm and

sometimes subvert expectations; for instance, although the Torch's flames and Cyclops' energy beams are shown to be equal, the mental powers of Marvel Girl are (at least momentarily) superior to the physical powers of the Thing.

Such battles might be read as examples of what Gail Weiss terms "intercorporeality." As Weiss describes, intercorporeality "emphasizes that the experience of being embodied is never a private affair, but is always already mediated by our continual interactions with other human and nonhuman bodies" (5). Of course, because they are imaginary, impossible, and necessarily two-dimensional, superheroes do not, and cannot, actually *enact* intercorporeality. But they can usefully illustrate it. Somewhat paradoxically, battles between superbeings render the constitutive nature of corporeal interaction both literal and metaphorical. The literalism of superhero bodies and battles once again suggests a similarity to the exaggerated bodies and spectacles of action films. As Lisa Purse argues, the heroic body of the filmic action hero "acts out fantasies of empowerment that are inherently literalized and physicalized, rather than abstracted" (3). However, the bodies of superheroes are also crucially different from those of filmic action heroes, in part due to fundamental differences between comic book action and film action. Purse suggests that, "When we watch an affecting action sequence [in a film], we are asked not to think of speed in an abstract way but to experience it with the protagonists and for ourselves" (60). Yet as the Introduction discussed, the inherently static comic book form can only depict speed through abstraction, with the appeal and believability of the overtly and actually impossible superhero body rooted in the form's ability to offer, in conjunction and simultaneously, both visceral and contemplative forms of engagement. As such, the comic book battles of superheroes are *both* literalized *and* abstracted. Furthermore, even as the cartoonish, two-dimensional unreality of superhero battles distances them from real intercorporeality, this

combined literalization and abstraction of bodily exchange nonetheless makes the *idea* of intercorporeality visible. In superhero comics, bodily conflicts are always also bodily comparisons and contrasts; in conflicts between superheroes, in particular, the general inconclusiveness of the battles ensures that the involved bodies both fight for supremacy as well as merge and intertwine, defending and accommodating as well as attacking and repelling.

In the sequence of the X-Men battling the Fantastic Four from *Fantastic Four* #28, Kirby's art style contributes to this especially multiple sense of intercorporeal exchange. Matthew J. Costello argues that Kirby's Marvel Age artwork "is characterized by very clear lines, stark contrasts, and a formal, contained look." This style, says Costello, "suggest a perspective of certainty in the narrative, reinforcing the moral certainty of the texts" (68). However, this characterization of Kirby's artwork fails to take into account the ways in which clear lines and stark contrasts can facilitate comparison and interaction. As Hatfield describes, Kirby—especially in his mature artwork from the Marvel Age onwards—depicts bodies that "shade toward the abstract and diagrammatic." Continues Hatfield: "Kirby draws characters with their legs splayed five feet apart, not because this is how these characters as supposed to look at rest but because, clearly, they are *not* at rest. Kirby is not about rest. He treats bodies as bodies in *time* or vectors of *force*, as well as abstract design elements" (45). Kirby's artwork also breaks down superhero bodies into assemblages of parts. The Thing is perhaps the ultimate Marvel Age Kirby design: an image of man as geometric abstraction, built out of rectangular, pentagonal, and hexagonal rocks fused together in a kind of chaotic symmetry.

There is, to be fair, a contained quality to Kirby's Marvel Age artwork that is quite different from his WWII era output, in which, as Robert C. Harvey observes, "[Kirby's] characters seem to ignore the panels, their limbs extending beyond the border lines" (33). Yet

the containment of Kirby's Marvel Age artwork is part and parcel of his particular aestheticizion of the body during this era. In the example from *Fantastic Four* #28, the clear, square borders of the panels crowd dramatically outrageous bodies into tightly composed tableaus of action and reaction. As Hatfield describes, "Kirby's handling of movement and action continually urges his iconic renderings of form toward the symbolic," "evoking movement in static form" that do not recall cinema so much as "Futurism in its decomposition of movement and Cubism in its all-at-once depiction of different perspectives." "Though Kirby's drawings," writes Hatfield, "may seem to represent discrete and explosive instants of action, in fact they capture expended spans of action in synoptic tableaus" (45-6). The first panel of the third page of the Fantastic Four's battle with the X-Men (top left, Image 15) is typical of this symbolic interaction of abstract bodies amid confined, "synoptic tableaus." The long, narrow rectangular frame of this panel forces into interaction and comparison bodies that are abstracted into circular, square, and fluid shapes. Although Kirby's bodies rarely truly blend, their borders are nonetheless graphically and metaphorically established around and against each other, as an ice-body encases a rock-body, a rubber-body curves around a laser-body, and a fire-body engulfs and encircles itself and other kinds of bodies. Ultimately, Kirby's Marvel Age style both blows up and breaks down the body, producing static, contained images of larger-than-life figures that mimic the interaction of stars, gases, and matter in outer space, and/or of cells and particles under a microscope.

Certain hierarchies do, however, emerge through and within these bodily conflicts, especially as they repeat themselves and patterns develop. For instance, although the Thing sometimes defeats Mr. Fantastic in individual battles, Mr. Fantastic—befitting and reinforcing his role as the team's (actual) leader (symbolic) father—is always ultimately capable of neutralizing the powers of his teammates. Partly, Mr. Fantastic's superiority is established though

cultural assumptions embedded in the narrative: he is superior to the Torch because he is older; he is superior to the Invisible Girl because he is her fiancé-turned-husband; and he is superior to the Thing because he is of a higher class (both culturally/creatively and economically). However, it is nonetheless significant that among his teammates, Mr. Fantastic does not have the most connotatively masculine body. In fact, Mr. Fantastic explicitly contrasts Easthorpe's description of the stereotypically ideal masculine body: "The most important meanings that can attach to the idea of the masculine body are unity and permanence... Very clear in outline and firm in definition, the masculine image of the body appears to give a stronger sense of identity" (53).

There are some ways in which Mr. Fantastic's body can be read as hard despite its apparent softness; for instance, he is made of an impenetrable industrial material, and can make himself take up a great deal of space. Yet there are also many chinks in Mr. Fantastic's masculine armour. While the transformations of his most obvious predecessor, Plastic Man, are always magical and effortless, Mr. Fantastic often overextends his body and has to reign himself in manually, struggling with one solid hand to gather and pull floppy lengths of wilted, wrinkled arms and legs back into place (Image 16). Time and again, Mr. Fantastic's body graphically dramatizes potentially terrifying losses of integrity; as it explodes and recoils in pain, Mr. Fantastic's body produces radical, un-human swirls and tangles of limbs that are re-humanized by the finer points of their expression—by the whiplash bent of Mr. Fantastic's head and neck, and by the way his eyes squint tightly above a grimacing mouth, fingers splayed and tensed with shock (Image 17). In addition, there is something suggestively feminine, and specifically motherly, about Mr. Fantastic's defensive and protective postures. At least as often as he uses his body to attack, Mr. Fantastic uses his body to help and comfort his teammates, transforming into a parachute, a protective bubble, a human bridge, and a safety net (Image 18). As in *Fantastic*

Four #1, when he rescues the injured Johnny from the Air Force, Mr. Fantastic can often be seen lovingly cradling the bodies of his teammates, swaddling them, comforting them, and keeping them safe—a practical and literal security blanket.

Crucially different, however, from the Thing or the Hulk, when Mr. Fantastic adopts a connotatively feminine role or posture, it is most often by choice, and carries a minimum of risk; Mr. Fantastic can *choose* to be a security blanket in one panel, because he can be a bullet in the next; similarly, he can be assaulted (or penetrated) by bullets in one panel because he can use his elasticity to repel them in the next (Image 19). Similar to the body of Clint Eastwood in the action films discussed by Paul Smith, when the heroic, patriarchal male body of Mr. Fantastic suffers, "the possibility of transcendence must be kept available" (87). In Eastwood's action films, as in Lee and Kirby's *Fantastic Four* comics, the graphic suffering or torture of Mr. Fantastic's body "must be no more than a temporary test" (Smith 87), a ritual of initiation and/or a dramatization of his ability to overcome or transcend the threat of feminization. In the end, Mr. Fantastic's losses of control and integrity are never as threatening as they might be because of the simple fact that it is a fundamental property and privilege of his body to bounce back (sometimes, by becoming an actual spring).

Importantly, though, the example of Mr. Fantastic also dramatizes a cultural and ideological shift from power being rooted in hardness to power being rooted in adaptability. While the Torch and the Invisible Girl can choose between two forms, and the Thing cannot choose at all, Mr. Fantastic can transform his body into nearly infinite forms, sizes, shapes, and uses. Ultimately, Mr. Fantastic is the team's most powerful member—and thus its leader and patriarch—not because he has the greatest physical strength or because his body evinces the most traditionally masculine characteristics, but instead because he is the best at incorporating,

consuming, and negotiating threats to the integrity of himself and his team (re: his family); in short, Mr. Fantastic is the most powerful member of the team because he has the most control over the most multiplicity. This privileging of adaptability is typical of the era in question. As Susan A. George relates, Atomic Age science fiction films—as well as the same era's film and television Westerns—evince a move away from the heroic archetype of the lone warrior in favour of "good team players" whose heroism is associated with leadership and fatherhood—that is, with the ability to earn and maintain the trust and respect of the community and the family (44). Mr. Fantastic clearly embodies this shift: in contrast to eternal orphan-bachelors such as Superman and Batman, Mr. Fantastic is at once a hero and a leader as well as a practical and (from *Fantastic Four* #74 onwards) actual father. Importantly, however, in keeping with the superhero's ability to exceed its influences and references, Mr. Fantastic also *overcomes* the need to truly humble himself, to have a presence in the domestic sphere or curb his sometimes-destructive individualistic tendencies; certainly, he does not fulfil the social obligations of either fatherhood or leadership when he leaves the Invisible Girl on her own during her pregnancy and after she gives birth, and when he engages in many secretive experiments that nearly doom the team and the Earth itself. Mr. Fantastic can be both a team player and a lone wolf, both a master negotiator and a deadly weapon, both a doting mother and an absent father, because his body speaks for him; his masterfully embodied multiplicity allows him to not only incorporate but also to overcome contradictions, as well, if not better, than any superhero before or since.

Significantly, Mr. Fantastic's particular ability to incorporate and overcome contradictions makes him a supremely gifted vehicle of, and metaphor for, containment. Nadel argues that containment was the dominant political ideology and cultural narrative of the Cold War era:

Although technically referring to U.S. foreign policy from 1948 until at

least the mid-1960s, [containment]... also describes American life in

numerous venues and under sundry rubrics during that period: to the

extent that corporate production and biological reproduction, military

deployment and industrial technology, televised hearings and filmed

teleplays, the cult of domesticity and the fetishizing of domestic security,

the arms race and atoms for peace all contributed to the containment of

communism, the disparate acts performed in the name of these practices

joined the legible agenda of American history as aspects of containment

culture. (2-3)

During the Cold War, the containment of communism necessitated the containment of the home

front, which needed to be unified against the threat of invasion or corruption; in this, external

threats necessitated the containment of internal threats to (for instance) traditional gender roles

and family structures, which were destabilized by WWII and the increasingly post-industrial

economy as well as changing conceptions of the body and identity prompted by (among other

things) a sense of powerlessness within and against a reality in which humanity had acquired

"the power to destroy itself virtually at the touch of a button" (Booker 2).

In practice, Cold War containment involved both aggressive and defensive action and

rhetoric; for instance, the containment of communism justified wars of liberation, and the

containment of nuclear war justified nuclear proliferation. Mr. Fantastic's body is similarly gifted

at cloaking aggression as defence in the service of containment. In his battle against the Super

Skrull in *Fantastic Four* #18 (1963) (Image 20), Mr. Fantastic's body becomes, from one panel

to the next, a straightjacket, a protective bubble, and a sledgehammer. Importantly, the Super

Skrull's retaliation at the bottom of the first page, which causes Mr. Fantastic's protective bubble

to explode and fracture into a thin elastic string at the top of the next, sanctions Mr. Fantastic's

escalated violence. The demonstrated seriousness of the Super Skrull's threat renders Mr.

Fantastic's subsequent aggression actually defensive; this in turn emphasizes that when Mr.

Fantastic shapes his body into a posture of attack, he does so to contain. This is, of course,

similar to how the Truman, Kennedy, and Nixon administrations tried to position interventions in

Korea and Vietnam: as defensive retaliations in the service of containment.

Mr. Fantastic contains not only external threats from the unruly bodies of villains, but

also internal threats to and from the unruly bodies of the teammates, who are also, of course, his

practical and literal family. For instance, when he fights the Sub-Mariner in *Fantastic Four* #27

(1964) (Image 21 and 22), he contains both the Sub-Mariner as well as the Invisible Girl; this is

true inasmuch as defeating the Sub-Mariner effectively forestalls the Invisible Girl's desire and

ability to succumb to the undersea king's virile charms, preserving the Invisible Girls innocence

(or literal virginity) and the Fantastic Four's (comparatively) traditional family unit.[30] In

addition, throughout the Marvel Age, Mr. Fantastic just as often wraps a straightjacket (or

containment dome) around the violence of the Torch or the Thing as around the violence of the

team's external enemies. In a sense, Mr. Fantastic's power of containment enables the instability

and rebellion of his teammates (and the reader's vicarious joy in that rebellion), precisely

because this power of containment is demonstrably capable of recuperating any and all

rebellions; Mr. Fantastic is always ultimately able to stop his hot-headed teammates when they

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[30] Given this project's interest in highlighting the multiplicity of superhero images, it would unwise to ignore the
sexually suggestive nature of this battle, in which a tangle over a woman's body becomes an intensely intimate
tangle of male bodies.

get out of control, and help point their destructive energies in the right direction (that is, against external threats). In the end, when and where Mr. Fantastic sacrifices aspects of his integrity, such moments and gestures only make him stronger, because his sacrifices are in the interests of containment—that is, of preserving the status quo within the nation and the (literally) nuclear family. Thus, when and where Mr. Fantastic seems to act feminine or motherly, he is not reduced by that role or position but rather enlarged by it. Overall, Mr. Fantastic's example suggests that the best mother is actually a father, re-defining but also re-affirming the father as the proper leader of the household and the nation.

In principle, aspects of the Invisible Girl's powers are comparable to those of Mr. Fantastic. For instance, once she is granted the power to generate force-fields—via a device, invented by Mr. Fantastic, that "reveals" her untapped potential (*Fantastic Four* #22 [1964])—the Invisible Girl can generate containment domes. Yet she is also rendered emphatically subordinate to Mr. Fantastic and the rest of her teammates, sometimes in obvious ways, and sometimes in more complex ways. On the level of plot, the Invisible Girl tends to adhere to what George calls the "mystique model" of womanhood prevalent in Atomic Age science fiction films. Similar to the female scientists and adventurers of many Atomic Age films, the Invisible Girl has a certain measure of freedom, responsibility, and power within team settings and the public sphere. However, she is also similar to these filmic women in the ways her power and influence are always lesser than the story's primary male protagonist(s); the Invisible Girl allows adheres to the mystique model by ultimately marrying the more powerful male protagonist. Sometimes, the Invisible Girl is granted even less freedom than her contemporaries in Atomic Age science fiction films. The only member of the Fantastic Four to be depicted cooking or cleaning (with an apron worn over her superhero costume, no less) and a frequent victim of kidnapping and

ransom, the Invisible Girl often seems like less a co-adventurer than a helper figure or plot device for the male characters who propel and resolve the narrative. In the early issues of *Fantastic Four*, the Invisible Girl was so ineffectual that fans demanded she be taken off the team. This fan response was vociferous enough to warrant an in-comic rebuttal in *Fantastic Four* #11 (1963). In this issue, Mr. Fantastic and the Thing defend the Invisible Girl while speaking directly to the readers. Significantly, however, even this defence situates the Invisible Girl not as a hero of equal stature, but rather as a helper and nurturer; in a telling conflation of essential feminine roles, Mr. Fantastic, the Invisible Girl's future husband, highlights her value by comparing her to Abraham Lincoln's mother.

In general, there are several common, fundamental differences between the bodies of the Marvel Age's male superheroes and its female superheroes. Firstly, even when this era's male superheroes are not especially hard or large, they still tend to take up a great deal of space. For instance, Mr. Fantastic can extend his body in all directions; Spider-Man, by virtue of his webs, can do the same, as can the Human Torch by virtue of his flame powers. Female superheroes tend to be softer and smaller than their male teammates. Case in point, the Invisible Girl and her contemporary, the Wasp (the only initial female member of Marvel's second superhero team, The Avengers), are both explicitly small, with superpowers that allow (or force) them to take up less visual and actual space.[31]

In the Marvel Age and afterwards, female superheroes also tend to be more obviously objectified. As a rule, depictions of female superheroes prioritize feminine curves above muscles, and the male gaze (i.e. the ability to be possessed and/or penetrated) above (or at least in conjunction with) individual, heroic agency. The sexualisation of female superheroes is

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[31] Although the Wasp's partner, Ant Man, preceded her as a shrinking superhero, he was tellingly changed to Giant Man shortly after paired with the Wasp.

furthermore typically highlighted by the design of their costumes; whereas the costumes of male superheroes from the 1940s through the 1960s tend to be modelled after the gear of athletes and acrobats, the costumes of female superheroes tend to be inspired by lingerie and glamour photography (Image 23). Although the Invisible Girl wears the same one-piece costume as her male teammates,[32] she is nonetheless considerably more sexualized than her male teammates by virtue of both her body shape and the fact that she often adopts poses that are modelled after pin-up artwork.

Despite this, Fawaz argues that the Invisible Girl's powerset can be read as a critique of 1960s gender roles. According to Fawaz, "Just as contemporary feminist thinkers sought to make visible the taken-for-granted structure of patriarchy in the 1960s, Sue's power similarly made the concept of women's social invisibility an object of visual critique by making invisible bodies and objects conspicuous on the comic book page" (85). Fawaz's argument can be troubled, however, by the ways in which the Invisible Girl typically uses her body relative to her male teammates. As discussed above, the Invisible Girl is often placed in very gender-typical storylines, in which her (male) teammates must rescue her. In addition, even though the Invisible Girl's powers— especially her ability to project force-fields—are not inherently less powerful or useful than those of her teammates, she typically employs these powers in ways that foreground her passivity. As Trina Robbins observes, all of the Marvel Age's prominent female superheroes, including the Invisible Girl, the Wasp, Marvel Girl, the Scarlet Witch, and Black Widow, typically employ their superpowers in non-physical ways, shooting opponents from a distance, or moving bodies and objects with invisible beams of energy (113). Mike Madrid similarly observes that female superheroes, in general and in the Marvel Age in particular, tend to have "'strike a

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[32] Sue Storm briefly acquires a miniskirt costume during the Marvel Age; however, this change only lasts four issues.

pose and point' powers," that allow them to "keep their looks intact in the heat of battle" (292).

The Invisible Girl's beauty and/or sexiness contributes to her passivity inasmuch as it prioritizes the male gaze above, or at least in addition to, her capacity for physical dynamism and athleticism. Yet her beauty also, somewhat paradoxically, makes her less visible than her male teammates. To be fair, there is an element of monstrousness to the Invisible Girl's superheroic embodiment. In *Fantastic Four* #1, she frightens the urban public by breaching boundaries; she is a physical substance that cannot be seen, which leads the public to describe her as a "ghost," something neither living nor completely dead. In contrast to her teammates, though, the Invisible Girl's monstrousness is defined by absence rather than presence. Fawaz argues that, "By physically manifesting invisibility as a material skin," Lee and Kirby are able to "make [the Invisible Girl's] body *matter* to audiences but also to *matter forth* on the page through the extension of her powerful body into space" (86). And yet, it remains significant that, unlike her male teammates, the Invisible Girl does not evince any additions or expansions to her ideally attractive human body. Although her ability to vanish and generate force-fields challenges definitions of matter and perception, the dotted outline that denotes her invisibility is not visually monstrous; nor is her generation of force-fields, which, as Madrid observes, allows her to always maintain her ideal feminine beauty. The body of the Invisible Girl might be more powerful, larger, more mobile, and even more penetrative than the body of a normal (i.e. non-superpowered) American woman, but it is still much less powerful, large, mobile, and penetrative than the bodies of her male teammates. And in the intercorporeal world of superhero comics, such comparisons matter a great deal.

In another sense, though, the gendered hierarchy between the Invisible Girl and her male teammates is complicated by the fact that it seems to depend upon reversing traditional

associations of men with the mind and women with the body. As Elizabeth Grosz describes, Western culture has traditionally defined and explained women's lower social status by designating women as more visibly and practically corporeal than men. Writes Grosz:

> Relying on essentialism, naturalism, and biologism, misogynist thought confines women to the biological requirements of reproduction on the assumption that because of particular biological, physiological, and endocrinological transformations, women are somehow *more* biological, *more* corporeal, and more natural that men. The coding of femininity with corporeality in effect leaves men free to inhabit what they (falsely) believe is a purely conceptual order while at the same time enabling them to satisfy their (sometimes disavowed) need for corporeal contact through their access to women's bodies and services. (14)

Yet in the pages of *Fantastic Four* and throughout the Marvel Age, it is instead men who are more emphatically associated with the body. As discussed throughout this chapter, many of the Marvel Age's male superheroes are defined by narratives of bodily trauma, and virtually all of the Marvel Age's male superheroes possess highly visible, unstable bodies. The Invisible Girl is far less involved in these bodily narratives and conflicts. Even when she engages in superheroic combat, the nature of her powers and the depiction of her body as an unimpeachably beautiful pin-up means that she does not participate in intercorporeality in the same way or to the same degree as her male teammates. Her force-fields and invisibility metaphorically and literally shield her from the possibility of actively intermingling with other bodies, and thus, of measuring and testing her own limits and borders against other bodies and types of embodiment.

Interrogating the meaning of this seeming inversion of gendered corporeality means looking more closely at cultural conceptions of the male body as a function of male privilege. As Judith Butler describes, Western culture has historically constructed and viewed "the man" as:

> a figure of disembodiment, but one that is nevertheless a figure of a body, a bodying forth of a masculinized rationality, the figure of the male body which is not a body, a figure in crisis, a figure that enacts a crisis it cannot fully control. This figuration of masculine reason as disembodied body is one whose imaginary morphology is crafted through the exclusion of other possible bodies. This is a materialization of reason which operates through the demateralization of other bodies, for the feminine, strictly speaking, has no morphe, no morphology, no contour, for it is what which contributes to the contouring of things, but is itself undifferentiated, without boundary. (22)

This characterization of the male body as a "disembodied body" and the female body as an "undifferentiated" body highlights men's privileged rationality, which is also their privileged access to discourse. When and where men are capable of being "less bodily," it is through this privileged access to discourse, which includes, of course, discourses of and on the body, which might also be described as *fantasies* of and on the body. Consequently, men's ability to situate themselves apart from, or in opposition to, the physical reality of the body foregrounds their privileged ability to (re)write bodily discourse, which is, in turn, their privileged ability to (re)imagine and (re)enact bodily transformation. Ironically, men's ability to perceive themselves as less bodily is precisely what makes their bodies more like real bodies, since even the ability to

pursue a fantasy of controlling or overcoming the body means recognizing that relations between mind and body can be altered, which, in effect, admits that the body is a product of culture. Conversely, women are perceived as more bodily precisely because their "undifferentiated" bodies are less like real bodies, inasmuch as they are perceived as things rather than processes, facts rather than ideas.

Although the Marvel Age's male superheroes significantly trouble male disembodied-ness by possessing bodies that are visible, unstable, and painful, it is the same privilege that allows men to imagine themselves as disembodied bodies that allows the Marvel Age's male superheroes to maintain their masculine superiority despite and through their bodily instability and trauma. Within the context of the Marvel Age, monstrousness is a male curse as well as a male privilege. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau observes, "the articulation of 'soft' masculinities... need not necessarily have much to do with the relinquishment of the privileges of patriarchy, and need not have anything to do with female emancipation, empowerment, or liberation" (76). Even though men are shown to be the biggest sufferers within the Marvel Age, they are also the biggest victors, because the introduction of bodily suffering also introduces the possibility of imagining and designing new strategies to confront and negotiate that suffering—that is, to re-write and re-draw bodily discourse to account for, incorporate, and consume the shocks and threats of the Atomic Age and the Cold War. To put it simply: the curse of instability allows the gift of rebirth. This characterization of the male superhero conflicts with Clare Pitkethly's argument that superheroes incorporate difference only in service of "synthesis into a higher unity" (218). Although male superheroes embody a comparative unity in certain moments and contexts (for instance, during conflicts with supervillains), it is precisely their rejection of unity in favour of multiplicity that ultimately guarantees their power and superiority.

As Butler would be the first to admit, no discourse can ever fully contain its own inevitable contradictions. However, men's privileged access to bodily discourse nonetheless affords them tremendous power to stay one step ahead of every challenge. In contrast to the flexible borders of the Marvel Age's male superheroes, the Invisible Girl has, to paraphrase Butler, no morphe, no contours; she is defined by being undefined, except in relation to the powers and movements of the men around her. Her comparable stability and lack of trauma is, ultimately, a greater curse than the men's instability, because it means she is denied the ability to challenge the terms and limits of her own body. While the Fantastic Four's male members constantly test and challenge their capabilities and contours, the Invisible Girl's primary function is to assure the men that no matter how much or how often they change, they are still definitely men, because she is even more essentially a woman. When and where the Invisible Girl is a vehicle of containment, she is a passive one: as male bodies burn and liquify and shrink and grow and weep around her, she is the reassuring calm at the eye of the storm, the unmoveable, undifferentiated object men write dreams against and upon, but never about. In the end, the Invisible Girl is contained by her very function of containment, hemmed in by the needs and desires of men whose ever-changing borders contain her borderless-ness even as her borderless-ness contains those changes. These deep, ingrained differences between the Invisible Girl and her male teammates highlight one of the most important limits of the Marvel Age's revisionism as a potential vehicle for a critique of either superheroes or society: while the Marvel Age puts some significant cracks in traditional conceptions of gender, these cracks tend to come at the expense of preserving and reinforcing certain underlying and ultimately un-crack-able physical boundaries and gender hierarchies.

In the Marvel Age, femininity only really becomes visible as a constructed and revisable

cultural concept when it manifests on, through, and between male bodies. This fact is not a terribly unusual or surprising. As Michael S. Kimmel describes, Western masculinity is often more concerned with the *concept* of femininity than with its manifestation on and through the female bodies in and through which it supposedly originates. Writes Kimmel: "Women are not incidental to masculinity, but they are not its central feature, either. At times, it is not women as corporeal beings but the 'idea' of women, or femininity—and most especially a perception of effeminacy by other men—that animates men's actions" (5). Femininity that appears on or through female bodies is perhaps less interesting to Western culture's male-dominated discourse because the biological essentialism that still informs so much of that discourse views this state of affairs as a given—something natural, rather than cultural. Femininity that appears on or through male bodies, however, is viewed as a cause for concern because it suggests the permeability of borders and categories—and so, the unnaturalness of nature. This chapter has already discussed some of the ways in which Marvel Age comics attempt to limit, justify, and account for connotations of femininity that appear on and through the bodies of male superheroes, all of which exploit and privilege the logic of containment. For instance, although Mr. Fantastic's fluidity has certain feminine connotations, his ability to *use* that fluidity as a vehicle of containment confirms his patriarchal masculinity; conversely, the fact that the Invisible Girl only ever functions as a passive vehicle of containment foregrounds her comparatively natural, stable femininity. However, in order to fully understand how the logic of containment plays out in these comics, it is necessary to examine the construction and operation of supervillains, as supervillains, in general and particularly during conflicts with superheroes, offer the definitive limit point and proving ground for superheroes' bodily fantasies.

Sometimes, the difference and hierarchy between superheroes and their foes can seem

obvious. More often than not, superheroes are pitted against mindless robots and equally mindless monsters whose shapes are so animalistic and/or grotesque that they seem to bear little or no relation to humanity; such villains are little more than excuses for the visual spectacle of the superheroes unleashing their awesome powers. As Matthew J. Costello observes, the difference and hierarchy between superheroes and their foes can also seem obvious when dealing with Nazi villains or (during the Cold War) communist and/or Soviet villains, whose ideological affiliation is a taken-for-granted badge of evil. It is, however, reductive to argue, as David A. Pizarro and Roy Baumesiter do, that, "In tales of superhero versus supervillain, moral good and moral bad are always the actions of easily identifiable moral agents with unambiguous intentions and actions" (20). Coogan's argument that, "Just as a hero represents the virtues and values of a society or culture, a villain represents an inversion of those values" (61) is similarly reductive.

Supervillains cannot be absolute inversions of superheroes for the simple reason that superheroes are not singular, but multiple, and thus cannot occupy one half of a binary opposition. The difference and hierarchy between superheroes and supervillains is not produced and articulated through absolute inversion, but rather through different arrangements, negotiations, and embodiments of a shared multiplicity. This is especially true from the Marvel Age onwards, during which time superheroes acquire certain villainous characteristics and tendencies such as selfishness, hubris, and physical/social monstrousness. In many cases, Marvel Age comics deliberately emphasize the similarities between superheroes and supervillains. Spider-Man's arch nemesis, Doctor Octopus, for instance, is introduced as an overtly sympathetic character. In his origin story in *Amazing Spider-Man* #3 (1963), Dr. Otto Octavius is a respected scientist basking in the admiration of his peers before his mind is "permanently damaged" in a random atomic accident that also fuses six mechanical arms to his body. Initially,

Octavius' only potential crime is hubris, which is suggested by his dialogue while handling radioactive materials just prior to the accident that makes him Doctor Octopus. "Though others fear radiation," says Octavius, "I alone am able to make it my *servant*."

The bodies of Doctor Octopus and his primary antagonist, Spider-Man, are also practically and symbolically similar; both characters are named after and associated with eight-legged/armed creatures, with Doctor Octopus' mechanical limbs mimicking and mirroring Spider-Man's climbing, grabbing, and reaching abilities. Yet aspects of Doctor Octopus and Spider-Man's bodies, abilities, and personalities are also very obviously different. Whereas Parker and Octavius are both identified as scientific geniuses, Parker is young with very little institutional power; this signals that, relative to Octavius, he is not tainted by the military industrial complex. In addition, while Octavius' transformation is primarily mechanical and external, Parker's transformation is primarily biological and internal. As discussed earlier, although Spider-Man's web-shooters are actually mechanical, they appear to emerge from his body; in contrast, Doctor Octopus' mechanical arms appear grafted onto an otherwise normal—and specifically unattractive, un-athletic, and middle-aged—human body. As a rule, the villains in Spider-Man's comics are noticeably older than the young protagonist. As such, Spider-Man's more seamless incorporation of his augmentation may represent and celebrate youthful fluidity in opposition to the stagnation that (supposedly) comes with middle-age; in this sense, Doctor Octopus' comparative instability and excessiveness may represent the sad desperation of a middle-aged man trying (and failing) to recapture the power and possibility associated with youthfulness. Importantly, the Marvel Age does not condemn older bodies across the board; Mr. Fantastic, for instance, manages to be both extremely fluid and adaptable while also sporting grey hair at his temples and being, similar to Doctor Octopus, an established, institutionally

powerful scientist. This comparison suggests that Doctor Octopus' age is not characteristic of

villainy on its own, but rather acquires connotations of villainy within the context of the Doctor's

conflicts with Spider-Man.

The meaning and function of these similarities and differences between Marvel Age

superheroes and supervillains are graphically articulated in and through Spider-Man and Doctor

Octopus' spectacular physical conflicts. As in battles between superheroes and other superheroes,

in the battles between superheroes and supervillains, superiority emerges (when it does emerge)

less through cut-and-dried evidence of greater physical might than through a series of bodily

comparisons that are both immediate (visceral or literal) and contemplative (abstract or

metaphorical). As Andrei Molotiu observes, Ditko's Spider-Man artwork often employs

symmetrical page compositions and visual cues, incorporating the sequential dynamism between

individual panels into a larger aesthetic picture. Individual pages engage in what Molotiu calls

"iconostatization," allowing and compelling the reader to consider both individual "moves" as

well as the overall "shape" of the battle (91). A typical sequence is the battle between Spider-

Man and Doctor Octopus from *Amazing Spider-Man* #12 (1964) (Image 24). On this page, the

symmetrical six-panel grid allows the bodies of Spider-Man and Doctor Octopus to mirror each

other as they shift, from one panel to the next, between foreground and background, and from the

top of the frame and the bottom of the frame. A similar effect is achieved in Spider-Man's battle

against the Scorpion in *Amazing Spider-Man* #29 (1965) (Image 25). On this page, although the

vantage point—which is set low, looking up at the battle—consistently keeps Spider-Man in the

foreground, the hero and villain nonetheless embody symmetrical positions and poses, with

Spider-Man starting in the left right corner as the aggressor and ending in the bottom right corner

in a crouching, defensive posture. The top left panel also mirrors the bottom left, with Spider-

Man and Scorpion's positions switched (though not, due to the consistent vantage point, inverted). Although the narrative obviously positions the reader to root for Spider-Man, the visual language of these fight scenes nonetheless showcases the shared and similar beauty and capability of the superhero and the supervillain. It also showcases the superhero and supervillain's shared monstrousness, as the humanity of both is destabilized by mechanical and/or animal motifs, augmentations, and/or movements; neither the battle between Spider-Man and Doctor Octopus nor the battle between Spider-Man and the Scorpion is an upright fist fight; both battles are instead a comparison of different modes and uses of unnatural embodiment.

At the level of plot, Spider-Man often emerges victorious by inventing a scientific formula or gadget which neutralizes the physical advantage of the often larger, more physically powerful supervillain. Thus, while the supervillain often over-invests in his body or his plan, Spider-Man, like Mr. Fantastic before him, is able to be flexible, and adjust his plans on the fly. This ability to adjust suggests Spider-Man's greater control over both his mind and his body. Often, as when he invents a gadget to win, Spider-Man must set aside his physical strength and use his mind. Just as often, he must use his mind to alter his super-powerful body. For instance, rather than punching Doctor Octopus into submission, Spider-Man typically uses his web shooters in combination with his agility to tangle the Doctor's mechanical arms, thus neutralizing the Doctor's size and strength advantage. When Spider-Man fights Electro, different methods are required; Spider-Man cannot contain Electro with his webbing or touch him without being electrocuted, but he can punch Electro once he uses his webbing to shield his hands.

As Salvatore Mondello describes, Spider-Man's superiority is partly rooted in "his ability to dominate himself," which allows him to "master the technology around him" (235). Stanford W. Carpenter similarly observes that, "Superheroes are... defined, limited, and restrained by their

struggle to be responsible, to exercise their abilities and power with restraint" (89). In most instances, supervillains are conversely characterized by a lack of restraint, or, perhaps, by an inability to restrain themselves. As Lee Easton observes, "The very public acts of supervillains are marked as both 'evil' and un-masculine by their *lack* of control, their excessive emotionality and, often, their unpredictability" (318). Supervillains' compulsion to break the law, their love of large gestures and "monologuing," and their need to humiliate rather than merely defeat the superhero, suggests that their continual failure is rooted in their unwillingness or inability to control their emotions or desires. In the context of battles with superheroes, this lack of control often manifests in supervillains being unwilling or unable to adjust or innovate; whereas Spider-Man is able to step back from the battle and formulate new plans, the supervillain typically continues and escalates his emotionally charged, physical attack.

Although this lack of control would seem to clearly associate supervillains with femininity, such an association is complicated by the similarly excessive but differently articulated emotionality of the Marvel Age superheroes. During the Marvel Age, supervillains tend to exhibit excessive "masculine" emotions, such as anger and aggression. Superheroes, in contrast, tend to exhibit excessive "feminine" emotional responses related to fear, self-doubt, loneliness, and vulnerability. As Jason Bainbridge observes, the elaborate suffering of the Marvel Age superheroes often places them, far more emphatically than the previous generation of heroes, "in the melodramatic protagonist's role of the good, passive victim" (68-70). During the Marvel Age, Bruce Banner is very often depicted on the verge of panicked or anguished tears, and even sobs openly in *The Incredible Hulk* #1, in full view of both his sidekick Rick Jones and his love interest Betty Ross; he also pops tranquilizer pills by the handful in a desperate effort to manage his wayward emotions, an activity strongly associated during the early 1960s with

neurotic housewives. Peter Parker similarly weeps on-panel in *Amazing Fantasy* #15 and later suffers numerous panic attacks which Ditko renders with claustrophobic close-ups of Parker's sweating, anguished face. In *Amazing Spider-Man* #24 (1965), the manipulations of Mysterio even cause Parker to suffer an attack of actual hysteria, resulting in his lying prone with emotional anguish on the couch of a psychiatrist; although the psychiatrist is really Mysterio in disguise, this story and imagery still depicts Spider-Man as susceptible to a connotatively feminine form of emotional excess. Even the aggressively masculine Thing frequently succumbs to passive anguish; in the iconic story "This Man, this Monster" from *Fantastic Four* #51 (1966), the Thing is, for all intents and purposes, depicted as crying, the rain pouring on and over the ridges of his face standing in for tears (Image 26).

The Marvel Age's neurotic, emotionally damaged superheroes are, of course, part of larger cultural trends. As Kelley describes, during the 1950s, the "'language of the couch'… altered Hollywood's representation of gender," with numerous films "focusing on indicators of the internal psychological breakdown of secure masculine identities" (140). According to Kelley, the so-called "sigh guys" of the 1950s, such as James Dean, Marlon Brando, and Rock Hudson, "were cast as a new kind of 'hero': sensitive men, often outsiders, who take on feminine characteristics, including being objectified and victimized" (140). Importantly, though, the Marvel Age superheroes routinely triumph over their potentially debilitating neuroses. In virtually every story, the Marvel Age superheroes are still able to control themselves when it matters; although they sometimes lose the first round, they always regroup and recover for the victorious second (or third, or forth) round. Ultimately, just as Superman once triumphed over the threats of mass culture and the modern city, the Marvel Age superheroes routinely triumph over the threat of their own fractured psyches. Supervillains, in contrast, are not able to triumph

over their fractured psyches; the fact that supervillains keep trying to commit the same acts with the same unsuccessful results while often becoming increasingly obsessed with the superhero marks them as obsessive-compulsive and/or stuck in a psychic loop.

How and why superheroes are able to regroup and triumph is located as much in the plot of each story as in the composition and operation of their bodies in contrast with the supervillains' bodies. As discussed in the Introduction, superheroes always *are* bodies even as they transcend them—they always *use* the body to *transcend* the body. Thus, even when he invents a gadget to win, Spider-Man proves his superior control over his body *through* his body—that is, through his superior incorporation and negotiation of his biological augmentations as well through his superior ability to further change or augment his body with new mechanical devices and gadgets.

Owing to the oftentimes similar forms of monstrousness embodied by the superhero and the supervillain, the techniques and processes of this negotiation are rarely simple. On a basic level, Spider-Man (and other Marvel Age superheroes) and Doctor Octopus (and other Marvel Age supervillains) do not clearly adhere to the divisions between what Mary Russo describes as the "classical" versus the "grotesque" body in Western culture. Writes Russo:

> The classical body is transcendent and monumental, closed, static, self-contained, symmetrical, and sleek; it is identified with the 'high' or official culture of the Renaissance and later, with the rationalism, individualism, and normalizing aspirations of the bourgeoisie. The grotesque body is open, protruding, irregular, secreting, multiple, and changing; it is identified with the non-official 'low' culture or the carnivalesque, and with social transformation. (8)

Spider-Man is definitely "sleek" and can be "static," especially inasmuch as his body exists within fragmented (though sequential) boxes. And yet, he cannot properly be described as symmetrical, given his unnaturally bendable, insect-like body. He is also, like Doctor Octopus, "protruding, irregular, secreting" as well as "multiple, and changing," especially inasmuch as his body exists within sequential (though fragmented) boxes. Crucially, what Russo's description does not address is the fact that, because conceptions and understandings of the body are neither timeless nor universal, to secret or protrude, or to be irregular or multiple, does not have the same value at all times, or on every body. There is a situational, cultural, and historical specificity to different degrees, categories, and forms of normality and abnormality, beauty and monstrousness.

As already discussed, one of the most significant differences between Spider-Man and Doctor Octopus is the fact that Doctor Octopus' augmentation is (comparatively) mechanical and external (i.e. artificial), while Spider-Man's augmentation is (comparatively) internal and biological (i.e. natural). This difference does not necessarily indicate that mechanical transformations are always or inherently less pleasing and heroic. There are many examples within the Marvel Universe that contradict such a proposition; for instance, Iron Man manages a (mostly) pleasing/heroic mechanical transformation, and the X-Men are Marvel's most persecuted superheroes precisely because their mutations are biological and natural—embedded in their genes at birth. It is not the fact but rather the specific *articulation* of Doctor Octopus' mechanical-ness versus Spider-Man's biological-ness that asserts a hierarchical difference between them. Firstly, Doctor Octopus incorporates his primarily mechanical augmentation in a much more clumsy and awkward way than Spider-Man incorporates his primarily biological

augmentation. Although, as discussed, Spider-Man's bodily imitations of a spider are significantly monstrous, his body is nonetheless more human-like than spider-like; he does not, for instance, have eight hairy legs, three eyes, or pincers extending from his jaw. Doctor Octopus does not integrate his mechanical augmentations as seamlessly. His augmentations sit on the outside of his otherwise human body, which often hangs limply suspended like a useless vestigial trait between his much larger and more powerful mechanical arms. Compared to Spider-Man's incorporation (or negotiation) of his monstrousness (or multiplicity), Doctor Octopus is both unbalanced and excessive, his larger mechanical half, which extends in all directions and often fills the frame in his battles with Spider-Man, overwhelming both Spider-Man and the Doctor's own residual humanity.

The comparative excess of Doctor Octopus could be read as connotatively feminine. However, there is also a phallic quality to the ways in which the often larger, harder, and longer bodies of supervillains such as Doctor Octopus are able to encompass Spider-Man and penetrate his space, forcing him, more often than not, into defensive or passive postures of reaction and avoidance. As Jared Gardner observes, a survey of the first several years of Ditko's *Amazing Spider-Man* covers "reveals that vulnerability might well have *been* the hero's most distinguishing characteristic... [T]he majority of Ditko's covers present the hero as prone, bound, or cowering in fear" (109)[33] (Image 27). Once again similar to the example of Mr. Fantastic,

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[33] These images of Spider-Man bound or otherwise incapacitated and/or suffering suggest the character's status as a representative of a cultural minority. As Lauren Berlant argues, American abolitionist and suffrage movements generated identification across racial and gender lines by rejecting "a universalist rhetoric of abstract citizenship" in favour of venerating a potential subject's "'capacity for suffering and trauma'" (cited in Williams 43). These poses also potentially femininize and/or homoeroticize Spider-Man by offering his body up for inspection and/or objectification. Chapter Two, however, argues that the degree to which Spider-Man suffers, and the ways in which he suffers, are significantly different from the ways in which black superheroes and female superheroes are often made to suffer. Spider-Man does not suffer as graphically as black superheroes such as the Black Panther, and does not suffer as erotically as most female superheroes. These differences suggest that even through Spider-Man's spectacles of suffering might destabilize traditional conceptions of straight white male heroism, Spider-Man nonetheless benefits from racial and gender privileges that uphold certain traditional value systems and hierarchies.

Spider-Man's superiority is not simply a function of his possessing a more connotatively masculine body, but rather a function of physical power combined with, and articulated through, flexibility and adaptability. This fact is usefully demonstrated through a set of "splash pages" from *Amazing Spider-Man Annual* #1 (1964) which depict Spider-Man triumphing over members of the Sinister Six (Image 28, 29, and 30).

When he battles Electro, Spider-Man's smooth, streamlined shape cuts through Electro's chaotic eruptions; Spider-Man even reclaims Electro's eruptions for himself, using their jagged outline to frame his own heroic pose. Battling Kraven the Hunter, Spider-Man once again crowns his own central, self-contained display with the supervillain's excess; while Kraven's power is partly housed in his trained leopards, Spider-Man's animalistic traits do not (at least in this image) exceed his body's clearly delineated borders. In these images, Spider-Man attacks his enemies from above and below, defying gravity both in the sky and on the ground: when he encounters the Sandman, Spider-Man's firm, solid body plants and roots itself to punch upwards against the supervillain's crushing, fluid weight; and when he fights the Vulture, he hovers miraculously above him, a better flyer without the supervillain's bulky wings; he also soars above the voluminous, heavy cape and swirling smoke weighing down the duplicitous Mysterio.

In these images, the supervillains are literally unbalanced, ducking and stumbling under (and above) Spider-Man's confident attacks. Although Spider-Man's concealed face is, in other contexts, an important aspect of his monstrousness, within the context of these images of victory, it becomes a powerful symbol of control, allowing and foregrounding Spider-Man's composed objecthood against (and in) the mostly visible faces of the supervillains, whose eyes are wide with fear or recoiling in pain. Similarly, although Spider-Man's sleek, web-themed costume

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For a more thorough discussion of these issues, see Chapter Two.

highlights his monstrousness by emphasizing his insect-ness, when pitted against the comparably external monstrousness of the supervillains, it functions as a vehicle and sign of containment. Spider-Man does not merely surrender to animism, but also *wears* it, manipulates it, designs it to (literally) suit his needs; his costume renders his insect-ness textual and totemic, foregrounding his agency and subjectivity, and thus, once again, his superior control. That Spider-Man's body is a superior design is further emphasized by his more dynamic colour scheme; while the supervillains are almost all clothed in muted secondary colours (green, brown, purple, yellow ochre), Spider-Man is clothed in bright primary colours (red and blue). In the final analysis, these images demonstrate that Spider-Man is better at containing but also releasing energy; in each image, energy leaves his body in directed bursts rather than the chaotic, excessive explosions that typify the supervillains. At all times, then, his triumph is a function of his superior powers of negotiation, which are also his superior powers of containment; again like Mr. Fantastic, Spider-Man proves his superiority by being better at containing both himself (i.e. internal threats), and others (i.e. external threats).

Importantly, this battle over who is a better negotiator is seldom a fair fight. Even Spider-Man's most sympathetic supervillains, such as Doctor Octopus and the Lizard, have their bodies transformed in ways that are, compared to Spider-Man, more unstable and excessive; while Spider-Man is, from the very beginning, more human than animal, the Lizard is clearly more animal than human, just as Doctor Octopus is more mechanical than human. There is a biological essentialism and, by extension, a moral absolutism at work in these comics via the suggestion that too much difference automatically makes someone evil or dangerous and/or the suggestion that radiation, for all its instability and uncertainty, ultimately reveals inherent goodness and badness. In the end, even the similarity between the superhero and the supervillain primarily

dramatizes and emphasizes the superhero's ability to reinstate the boundaries between different types of redeemable and irredeemable monstrousness. Within Marvel Age comics, although there are newly emphasized similarities between superheroes and supervillains, there is still very little possibility of true slippage between these categories. Just as Mr. Fantastic has aspects of femininity but is, compared to the Invisible Girl, emphatically not a woman, Spider-Man has elements of monstrousness but is, compared to Doctor Octopus (and the Lizard, the Sandman, the Scorpion, the Vulture, Mysterio, and Kraven the Hunter), emphatically not a monster. Similar to how the Invisible Girl functions in comparison to her male teammates, supervillains exist for the (primarily male) superheroes to measure and test themselves against and upon. But whereas the Invisible Girl is lesser and different because she is less multiple, supervillains tend to be lesser and different because they are more multiple; while the Invisible Girl is essential, supervillains are first and foremost excessive.

In stories featuring the Fantastic Four and the Hulk, teasing out the precise nature of the hierarchy between the superhero and supervillain can become more complicated due to the more overtly monstrous nature of these superheroes' bodies. Yet a similar pattern ultimately emerges, in which heroism is associated with (comparative) stability, balance, and containment, and villainy is associated with (comparative) instability, unbalance, and excess. In each comparison and conflict between superheroes and supervillains, the specific articulation of different forms of monstrousness matters a great deal. For instance, while the Hulk and his arch nemesis the Leader (Image 31) are rendered monstrous through exposure to the same substance (gamma radiation), the Leader's monstrousness takes on a different shape and meaning, especially when compared to the Hulk. At first glance, the Leader and the Hulk seem to be the perfect opposites: Samuel Sterns, a.k.a. the Leader, is a physical labourer who mutates to become extremely intelligent,

while Banner is a nuclear scientist who mutates to become extremely physical. And yet, the Leader and the Hulk are not equal. Although the Hulk, via his chronic instability and propensity for tremendous collateral damage, is a less successful vehicle of containment than either Spider-Man or Mr. Fantastic, he is nonetheless more flexible and adaptable than the Leader. While the Hulk/Banner takes on (at least) two shapes and modes of being—embodying both physical and intellectual roles—the Leader, following his initial transformation, has only one shape and mode of being; the gamma-mutated Leader's weak body and effete managerial attitude are completely divorced from the physical, working class background of the human Sterns. Whereas the Hulk/Banner at least *tries* to become a better vehicle of containment, with Banner constantly struggling to find a way to control the Hulk, the Leader is only ever aspires to be a vehicle of a specifically hands-off, and thus feminized, form of aggression. The Leader and the Hulk are also different on a very basic visual level: although the Leader's body is arguably less radical than the Hulk's, inasmuch as only his skin colour and head are transformed, it is nonetheless more unbalanced, with one prominent feature—his head—overwhelming the others.

Although the bodies of female supervillains are rarely depicted as ugly in the same ways or to the same degree as their male counterparts, they are still depicted as unbalanced and excessive, especially when compared to female superheroes from the same era. Because the aggressive violence of the Marvel Age's female supervillians is almost invariably coupled with or manifested through seduction and sexuality, their villainy is located less in that fact that they are *un*feminine than in the fact that they are *too* feminine. For instance, the female supervillain Lorelei possesses a deadly-sweet voice that hypnotizes men, and the Enchantress possesses magical powers of seduction and manipulation. Medusa, the lone female member of the Fantastic Four's arch nemeses the Frightful Four, is the only prominent Marvel Age female supervillain

who is explicitly physical. More beautiful and seductive than the mythical woman she is named after, Medusa possesses flowing, Rapunzel-like hair that becomes, like Doctor Octopus' arms, a penetrative weapon, assaulting both male bodies and the Invisible Girl's repelling force-field (Image 32). Even though the individual agency (which includes sexual agency) of all of Lorelei, the Enchantress, and Medusa does disrupt gender norms, it is only Medusa who offers a truly graphic disruption. Notably, however, Medusa's unusual combination of individual agency and physicality did not last long. Beginning in *Fantastic Four* #45 (1965), Medusa is significantly domesticated through her supreme devotion to Black Bolt, King of the Inhumans; a bout of amnesia upon her separation from Black Bolt is subsequently revealed as the true cause of her villainy (and thus, most of her gender deviance).

Perhaps the best example of how hierarchies emerge within and despite seemingly similar forms of monstrousness can be seen through a comparison of Mr. Fantastic and the Sandman. Marvel's Sandman was originally introduced as a foe of Spider-Man but also fought the Fantastic Four on a regular basis throughout the 1960s, becoming, along with Medusa, a founding member of the Frightful Four. Although Mr. Fantastic and the Sandman are both fluid, their fluidity is articulated differently. In Western culture, fluidity has historically been associated with female bodies, and used as a primary justification for the female body's abjection. As Grosz describes, "in the West... the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much or simply the phallus but self-containment—not a cracked or porous vessel, like a leaking ship, but a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order" (203). Importantly, it is a specifically porous and leaky form of fluidity that is considered especially feminine and abject, and thus, especially threatening, because it is

porousness or leakiness that poses the greatest challenge to borders, categories, and hierarchies.

Significantly, American Cold War political rhetoric associated the Soviets with a similarly porous, leaky form of fluidity. As Nadel describes: in a 1947 essay, "The Sources of Soviet Conduct," published anonymously in *Foreign Affairs*, George Keenan, director of Secretary of State George Marshall's policy planning staff, "introduced the word *containment* and articulated the philosophical underpinnings of American foreign policy for nearly half a century to follow." "Implicitly equating the body politic with the human body," Keenan's essay "undertakes to delineate the 'political personality' of that body—a difficult task of 'psychological analysis'—so that Soviet conduct could 'be understood and effectively countered'" (Nadel 16). The results of this approach are as follows:

> The 'internal nature' [of Soviet psychology] becomes in Kennan's rhetoric a source of essential fluids and Soviet aggression a form of incontinence: 'Its political action is a fluid stream which moves constantly, wherever it is permitted to move, toward a given goal. Its main concern is to make sure it had filled every nook and cranny available to it in the basin of world power. But if it finds unassailable barriers in its path, it accepts these philosophically and accommodates itself to them.' With incontinence the implicit problem, Kennan recommends we not try to change the essential nature of the fluid, but rather to limit its flow with 'a long-term, patient but firm and vigilant *containment* of Russian expansive tendencies.' (Nadel 16)

Soviet fluidity, as Keenan articulates it, is especially porous and leaky, not just reaching into nooks and crannies but filling and engulfing them. As such, American Cold War political rhetoric

positions the Soviet body in ways that are similar to how patriarchal discourse positions the

female body (or even more specifically, female sex organs)—that is, as something that needs to

be labelled, regulated, and controlled, specifically because of its (perceived) ability to swallow

up or dissolve the borders and bodies of others. Keenan's characterization of Soviet fluidity

identifies communism as a creeping, sapping, enervating influence, which makes it a direct threat

and contrast to America's vigorous, strenuous individualism. The Soviet's porous, leaky fluidity

threatens to feminize American culture and the American men that are regarded as the true

producers and keepers of that culture, transforming them, just as the alien invaders transform the

young, married men of a suburban community in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956), into

impotent, passionless, un-individuated zombies.[34]

That contemporary characterizations of the Soviet threat were both gendered and

sexualized is further substantiated by the ways in which communism was frequently linked to

homosexuality. As Kelley observes, "In public rhetoric, the pink and red menace overlapped;

'increasingly, accusations of homosexual and communist tendencies became interchangeable'"

(20). During the Cold War, writes Kelley:

> Inflammatory speeches by religious and political leaders, parroting
>
> sensationalist exposés in tabloids, linked the "sins" of godlessness,
>
> homosexuality, and Communism. Tabloid magazines like *Confidential* and
>
> *Whisper* published allegations of same-sex scandals, usually about film
>
> stars, but when they exposed people in government agencies, the link
>
> between Red and pink was made clear. Consistently, these political tracks

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[34] In *Body Snatchers*, the association of communism with the threat of feminization is further highlighted by the vagina dentata-like faces of the aliens.

implied that both Washington and Hollywood were dens of deviant

subversion. The State Department directly linked these threats in a 1950

report entitled "The Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in

Government": "Like Communists who would presumably infiltrate and

destroy the society, sexual 'perverts' could spread their poison simply by

association. 'One homosexual can pollute a Government office.'" (20)

These characterizations of Soviet, female, and homosexual fluidity are strikingly similar to how the Sandman functions in combat with the Fantastic Four. As can be seen in a battle from *Fantastic Four* #61 (1967) (Image 33 and 34), the Sandman can, like Mr. Fantastic, switch almost instantly between different shapes and postures of attack and defence. In one panel, he turns his arm into a rock-hard mallet; in the next, this mallet dissolves into fragments that slip through the superheroes' fingers. As the Sandman himself describes: "Just as I can *soften* myself to the consistency of wet, soggy *sand*—so I can instantly make my body *rock hard*—hard enough even to hurt—the *Thing*!" Importantly, while Mr. Fantastic always maintains at least vaguely human features during his many transformations (he always has, for instance, eyes and a mouth), and an identifiable, solid outline, the Sandman's body frequently lacks both human features and borders of any kind. While Mr. Fantastic always *makes* shapes, the Sandman routinely *loses* shape. The Sandman's lack of borders also threatens the borders of others. This happens metaphorically, as the Sandman's ability to render his body formless robs the Thing of his strength. But it also happens literally, as the Sandman's dispersed, porous, leaky, body consumes and engulfs the bodies of the Fantastic Four. In *Fantastic Four* #61, the Sandman actually *drowns* the Fantastic Four in his body, filling, or at the very least blocking, their eyes and mouths (and potentially other orifices) not in a single, penetrating gesture but in a

continuous, heavy, overwhelming flow. In this, the Sandman embodies a kind of weaponized passivity, a gender disruption that is similar to, but considerably more extreme than, that of the villainous Medusa. Even though the Sandman can adapt, grow, and expand as much (or more) than Mr. Fantastic, when he expands too much he ceases to be a body at all, ceases, in fact, to be not only male but human, mirroring the association of Soviet fluidity with a loss of individuality (and specifically, connotatively masculine, heterosexual, American individuality). The Sandman's fluidity also, of course, threatens the sanctity of the American nuclear family, as represented in this case by the Fantastic Four. Ultimately, the defining feature of the Sandman's villainy is located in the fact that, although he can be (with difficulty) contained, he is not, and cannot be, an active vehicle of containment; his greatest weapon, and the primary characteristic of his body, is instead his ability to dissolve the containment of others.

In the end, while the similarities between the Sandman and contemporary perceptions of Soviet, female, and homosexual bodies may have been unconscious and coincidental, they are not incidental. Although the fears evoked by the Sandman's body are far older than the Atomic Age or the Cold War, they are nonetheless articulated in these comics in ways that are specifically relevant to that era. In moments of both conformity and resistance, Marvel Age comics are always in conversation with the Atomic Age and the Cold War. On the one hand, the Marvel Age's monstrous superheroes provide tools to experiment with what is normal—to expose and interrogate traditional social, visual, and corporeal expressions of identity, traditions that the Atomic Age forever altered, and that containment culture tried very hard to preserve. On the other hand, however, the Marvel Age's monstrous superheroes also foreground and exploit the instability, flexibility, and multiplicity of bodies in ways that reassert the status quo, reaffirming cultural rules about how much and what kinds of difference are ultimately

acceptable. During the Marvel Age, monstrousness is ultimately acceptable only to the extent that it can be mobilized to help preserve, on its own or through intercorporeal relations, traditional value hierarchies, wherein comparative stability is still preferable to comparative instability, comparative impenetrability is still preferable to comparative porousness, comparative control is still preferable to comparative excess, and male bodies are always preferable to female bodies.

And yet, the Marvel Age's introduction of relativity still represents a radical departure from the previous generation of comics. In the wake of the Marvel Age, superheroes and supervillains would no longer be "good" and "bad" so much as "better" and "worse." Thus, even though this era of superhero comics continued to encourage readers to view some types and forms of embodiment as more desirable than others, it also compelled readers to think in deeper and more complex ways about the relationship between different types of bodies and, subsequently, different types of power. The following chapters will chart the evolution of this relativity as it informs and intersects with the development of minority superheroes, changing art styles, and increasingly self-conscious, critical storytelling techniques.

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CHAPTER TWO: THE MINORITY SUPERHERO (1966-1986)

"It is *they* who are the *monsters*—they with their mindless

prejudices!"

      -Nightcrawler, *Giant-Size X-Men* #1 (1975)

In the mid-to-late 1960s, superhero comics began a concerted effort to achieve greater relevance.

As Ramzi Fawaz describes, this turn toward relevance coincided with a general shift in the

public perception of comics, spurred by both the Underground movement and the dawn of the

Marvel Age; both the Undergrounds and the new Marvel superheroes attracted more teenagers

and adults to the world of comics, and garnered positive mainstream media attention that would

have been unimaginable during the 1950s. According to Fawaz:

> Where little more than a decade earlier comics had signaled the moral and
>
> aesthetic degradation of American culture, by 1971 they had come of age as
>
> America's "native art": taught on Ivy League campuses, studied by
>
> European scholars, artists, and filmmakers, and translated and sold around
>
> the world, they were now taken up as a new generation's critique of
>
> American society… [I]n the early 1970s *relevance* became a popular
>
> buzzword denoting a shift in comic book content from oblique narrative
>
> metaphors for social problems toward direct representations of racism and
>
> sexism, political corruption, and urban blight. (126)

As Fawaz's summary relates, the first wave of Marvel superheroes tended to respond somewhat

indirectly to a changed and changing cultural landscape; the threats of communism and nuclear annihilation were present in these comics, but generally in the fantastical form of radioactive mutations, shapeshifters, and planet-eating aliens. By the 1970s, however, superhero comics were commonly addressing contemporary politics more directly. Case in point, in 1971, *Amazing Spider-Man* #76 featured a story in which Peter Parker's best friend Harry Osborn overdoses on pills; this comic was the first mainstream superhero comic in 17 years to be published without the Comic Book Code Seal of Approval.[35] Also in 1971, DC Comics began publishing the critically acclaimed series *Green Lantern Co-Starring Green Arrow*, in which the title characters eschew traditional superheroics in favour of embarking on a quest to "find the real America." Driving across the nation in a beat-up pickup truck, this superheroic odd couple encounters such hot button issues as corruption, pollution, cults, and overpopulation. And in 1974, in the wake of the Watergate scandal, Captain America abandoned the stars and stripes for a new moniker, one that reflected a heretofore unimaginable loss of faith in American nationalism: "Nomad, the Man Without a Country." Prompted by the social, political, and cultural upheavals of, in particular, Civil Rights and second-wave feminism, superhero comics from this era also began to engage race and gender conflicts more seriously and more comprehensively than ever before. This state of affairs was reflected at both Marvel and DC in the creation of several new black and female superheroes that were intended to resonate with the newly urgent demands for black and female empowerment.

This chapter will explore this era of relevance by examining Marvel's attempts to use several newly created characters to incorporate racial, gender, and multicultural politics into its superhero universe. First, this chapter will consider comics featuring the first black superhero,

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[35] Positive reception of this comic's anti-drug message would help inspire the first revision of the Code.

Marvel's Black Panther, who was created in 1966 and starred in his first solo series beginning in 1973. This will be followed by an examination of a group of female superheroes created by Marvel during the 1970s, including the Cat, Ms. Marvel, She-Hulk, and Spider-Woman. Lastly, this chapter will consider the deployment of multiculturalism in the X-Men franchise, which was reimagined in 1975 as a more explicit metaphor for the persecution of racial and other minorities. Letter pages and in-comic editorials suggest that all of the Black Panther, these new female superheroes, and the reimagined X-Men were intended, in part, to expand the superhero comics market by reaching out to a new, more diverse readership. Yet these new characters, almost all of whom were created by straight white men, also reflect mainstream sensibilities concerning race, gender, and multicultural politics. They also remain steeped in the conventions of the superhero genre, which has traditionally privileged a fairly narrow range of straight white male subjects. As discussed in Chapter One, Marvel's white male superheroes most convincingly prove their (super)heroic masculinity and/or maleness by demonstrating their ability to revise it: to develop new (or at least seemingly new) ways and types of embodying still-mostly-traditional notions of (among other thing) gender and sex(uality); consequently, Marvel's white male superheroes can be described as reaffirming traditional masculinity amid, and in response to, a new sense of vulnerability and visibility. Conversely, the new minority superheroes under examination in this chapter must assert control over a pre-existing vulnerability rooted in a pre-existing visibility. As Moira Gatens describes, Western culture has historically viewed non-male, non-white, non-straight, disabled, or otherwise "abnormal" bodies as possessing a "corporeal specificity marks them as inappropriate analogues to the political body" (23). Because such bodies "are not capable of the appropriate political forfeit," they are "excluded from political and ethical relations," and are instead "defined by mere nature, mere corporeality and they have no place in

the semi-divine political body" (Gatens 24). This chapter will use the example of this era's new

minority superheroes to consider what it does or might mean to have minoritized bodies enact

racialized and gendered spectacles without *becoming* spectacles—or, to put it another way, what

it might mean to be and represent through and upon a minoritized body without becoming *just* a

minoritized body.

While gender conflicts have always been either implicitly or explicitly visible within the

superhero genre, for the first several decades of the genre's existence, racial politics were either

exaggeratedly obvious or disguised in metaphor. Before and during WWII and for nearly two

decades afterwards, any non-white characters who appeared in mainstream superhero comics

were generally bumbling, caricatured sidekicks (such as the Timely Comics' character

"Whitewash") or grotesque villains. Marvel continued to feature racially caricatured villains well

into the 1960s. For instance, in Iron Man's origin story in *Tales of Suspense* #39 (1963), he is

pitted against "Wong-Chu, the red guerilla tyrant" (Image 1). Although Wong-Chu is rendered in

a less grotesque fashion than many of the Japanese villains that filled the pages of superhero

comics during World War II, this evil Vietnamese commander is nonetheless highly caricatured,

from his cunning-but-cowardly personality to his buck teeth, exaggeratedly slanted eyes, and

obviously yellow skin tone.[36] Before 1966, black characters, in particular, were almost totally

absent from the Marvel Universe.[37] That year, both the Black Panther,[38] the world's first black

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[36] It is worth noting that this story also features a heroic Asian character, in the form of Professor Yinsen, a fellow
prisoner of the communists who helps Tony Stark build his Iron Man armor. However, Yinsen is also highly
stereotypical: he is the racialized "helper figure" who gladly sacrifices his life so that the more important white
hero may live.

[37] Between 1961 and 1966, the Marvel Universe featured only one recurring black character: Gabriel Jones, in the
title *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos* (1963-1981). Importantly, though, this title eschewed
contemporary politics by being set comfortably in the past, during WWII. Jones, the only black member of an
eight-person team, also played a minor role; when the title's lead character, Nick Fury, was translated into the
contemporary continuity to head up the *Man from U.N.C.L.E.*-inspired Supreme Headquarters, International
Espionage, Law-Enforcement Division (a.k.a. S.H.I.E.L.D.) in *Strange Tales* #135 (1965), Jones did not follow.

[38] There has been some debate about the connection between Marvel's Black Panther and the Black Panther Party.

superhero, and Dr. Bill Foster, who would later become the superhero Black Goliath, were introduced. In the next decade, several more black superheroes would emerge at both Marvel and DC. In 1969, Marvel introduced the Falcon, the first African-American superhero, who would become the long-time partner (or, depending on your level of cynicism, long-time sidekick) of Captain America; in 1972, Marvel also introduced Power Man/Luke Cage in the company's first solo series starring a black superhero; and in 1973, Marvel introduced the supernatural heroes Blade and Brother Voodoo. DC comics, for their part, introduced their first prominent black superhero, the Green Lantern John Stewart, in 1971; in 1977, Black Lightning became DC's first black superhero to star in his own series.

Although all of these characters are worthy of analysis, Black Panther is an especially influential and unique character. The first black superhero and, to this day, one of the most prominent black superheroes,[39] Black Panther is the only mainstream black superhero from the 1960s or 70s who is not centrally inspired by what Adilifu Nama calls the "ghettocentric clichés" (44) of Blaxploitation cinema. While these clichés, and their incorporation into the superhero genre, are certainly interesting in their own right, this chapter is primarily concerned with Black Panther's embodiment of a separatist, utopian black futurism that is missing—or at least comparatively muted—in stories featuring many of the Blaxploitation-inspired superheroes, few

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Anna Beatrice Scott argues that although many amateur and professional comics historians have claimed that the Black Panther Party was inspired by the Marvel hero, such claims have little basis in fact. While Scott ultimately surmises that the naming was likely a coincidence, Sean Howe's recent investigation of the issue argues that Marvel's Black Panther may have been inspired by the Black Panther Party; Howe's proof is that Lee and Kirby's original design for the character called him the Coal Tiger, but this name changed following an article in the *New York Times* about the Lowndes County Freedom Organization, which was already using the Black Panther as its logo.

[39] Black Panther has the most solo series and the most total solo issues of any black superhero. Black Panther's prominence and uniqueness is furthermore evinced by the fact that, since the 1970s, he has often been paired with influential black voices. Reginald Hudlin, former President of Entertainment for BET, wrote Black Panther's solo series from 2005 to 2008; in 2016, journalistic and cultural critic Ta-Neshi Coates was the writer of a new solo series starring the Panther; and in 2018, Black Panther will star in a blockbuster feature film helmed by critically acclaimed director Ryan Coogler.

of which managed to become prominent past the 1970s (at least without significant reinvention).

The long absence of black superheroes from the pages of American superhero comics is conspicuous inasmuch as the superhero genre's defining themes of alienation and difference inherently evoke racialized experiences of passing and double consciousness. Similar to classic science fiction which, as Isiah Lavender III observes, "often talks about race by not talking about race," the first several decades of superhero comics set their outlandish fantasies within a "generic white space" (Lavender 7). In superhero comics, the exclusion of racial diversity is rendered additionally conspicuous via the fact that so many of the superhero genre's most influential creators—including Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, Bill Finger (co-creator of Batman), Jack Kirby, and Stan Lee—were first-generation Jewish immigrants who began writing and drawing comics amid the intense anti-Semitism that culminated in the holocaust. Despite the superhero genre's copious images of Aryan power (see the aforementioned WWII-era images of white supermen towering over grotesque caricatures of Japanese soldiers), several recent books (see Brod, Kaplan, Fingeroth) argue that reading this Jewish context into the founding conventions of the superhero genre can offer heretofore neglected interpretations of those conventions. The convention of the dual or secret identity is a frequent focus of these analyses. Harry Brod, for instance, argues that "Clark's Jewish-seeming nerdiness and Superman's non-Jewish-seeming hypermasculinity are two sides of the same coin, the accentuated Jewish male stereotype and its exaggerated stereotypical counterpart" (11). Although Superman is, in a sense, celebrated for his difference, wearing his heritage proudly on his chest and declaring his alien-ness through the spectacular display of his superpowers, Danny Fingeroth argues that Superman can also be read as representing a fantasy of ideal assimilation. Superman, Fingeroth argues, embodies "[t]he fantasy of the totally accepted immigrant, the curly, dark immigrant being taken

in by the WASP heartland itself—by the wholesome and nurturing world of the farm, which

provided sustenance to the country and the world beyond—this was truly the welcome that the

immigrant and the immigrant's introverted, traumatized, fiction-dwelling son—Mitchell Siegel's

son—could only imagine and hope for" (48). Taking a similar line, Greg M. Smith offers a

sympathetic reading of Superman's whiteness when he argues that, "The secret identity…

embodies the American immigrant experience of assimilation, in which the alien Other must put

on a mainstream costume in order to 'pass' within society" (126-7). Anna Beatrice Scott offers a

less sympathetic reading when she argues that the "whiteness" of "'aliens' like Superman is

predicated on their difference of the same—they are visibly marked as white, such that their

difference is subsumed, perhaps augmented by this whiteness. In this frame… the superhero…

allows white men to explore Otherness publicly" (296). Though many superhero stories make

both Smith and Scott's readings available, it is nonetheless inescapably true that although

Superman—as well as the Golden Age's other prominent superheroes, such as Batman, Wonder

Woman, and Captain America—evoke double consciousness, they all exploit their duality (or,

more accurately, their multiplicity) more than they are truly afflicted by it, due, in large part, to

the ideal/"normal" white bodies behind their glasses and within their skin-tight leotards.

As discussed in Chapter One, the initial wave of Marvel heroes did experience

superheroism as an affliction as well as an advantage (a trend that Brod calls the "re-

Jewification" of superheroes [86]). And yet, for the first five years of the Marvel Universe,

beneath or behind even the most monstrous transformations there was always an ideal or at the

very least "normal" white face. Supervillains, in contrast, are often implicitly or explicitly

racialized.[40] In addition, when and where the Marvel Age superheroes face persecution as

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[40] In addition to explicitly and exaggeratedly racialized supervillains such as Wong-Chu, supervillains such as the
Sub-Mariner are often implicitly racialized. As Fawaz observes, in the postwar era in particular, the Sub-

minorities, these superheroes' white faces can, as Scott argues above, render such stories appropriative. This appropriation is especially evident in the example of the original *X-Men*, in which the persecution of the all-white, all-American superteam as a fantastical racial minority (the "mutant race") takes its cue from the Civil Rights movement. As Fingeroth observes, in the early *X-Men* comics, the conflict between the pacifist and integrationist mutant leader Charles Xavier and the aggressive and separatist mutant leader Magneto functions as an obvious (and thoroughly imperfect) analogue of the ideological conflicts between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcom X (121).[41] The fact that it was considered acceptable to use fictional white characters to represent the experiences of real minorities speaks to the white privilege of universality—that is, the assumption that whiteness is a norm or default state that exceeds and/or encompasses all racial categories. As Richard Dyer explains, "At the level of racial representation… whites are not of a certain race, they're just the human race" (3). The early *X-Men*'s appropriation also speaks to the tendency of America's white majority to be interested in the political struggles of minorities only if and when those struggles are thought to directly affect them. David S. Marriott identifies this tendency in several postwar racial "problem" films. While films such as *Home of the Brave* (1949) were "purportedly about blacks, these films were also, as Ralph Ellison's 1949 review in *The Reporter* put it, 'not about Negroes at all; they are about what whites think and feel about negroes'" (74). The original *X-Men* may be read as an extreme example of this phenomenon, in that it explicitly replaces (or displaces) black experiences and subjectivities with white faces that cannot help but evoke white desires and white perspectives.

Mariner can be read as a Japanese stand-in (84).

[41] Of course, many of the X-Men franchise's iconic storylines also explicitly reference the persecution of Jews. The "Days of Future Past" storyline, for instance, in *Uncanny X-Men* #141–142 (1981), makes mutants the victims of a holocaust, and Magneto is eventually revealed as a concentration camp survivor. However, these explicit references to Jewish experience were not present in the original stories.

The introduction of Black Panther, a.k.a. T'Challa, king of the fictional African kingdom of Wakanda, in *Fantastic Four* #52 (1966) (Image 2) makes some efforts to address—and redress—the superhero genre's long history of racial appropriation and exclusion. In *Fantastic Four* #52, the Panther sends a guide in a futuristic flying machine to invite the Fantastic Four to his secretive African homeland for a "hunt." In the standard Marvel tradition of superhero team-ups, the Panther is a brief antagonist before uniting with the Four against a greater threat in the following issue. The Panther "hunts" the Fantastic Four only as a test of his prowess that prepares him to defeat his true arch-enemy, a pit helmet-wearing colonial invader by the name of Klaw (Image 3), a man who is also responsible for killing the Panther's father.

The choice to debut the first black superhero in a jungle setting risks confirming Africa as exotic or savage, locating black men and women as foreign others rather than neighbors at home. Yet Lee and Kirby are clearly aware of their participation in certain stereotypes of black representation, and of the need to subvert these stereotypes—morally, but also in the interests of ensuring the viability of their new black superhero. As a case in point, in *Fantastic Four* #52 the customarily uncouth Thing repeatedly points out the similarities between Black Panther's origin story and other generic jungle tales. When the Panther begins to relate the story of how his father, a "great chieftain," was killed during Klaw's invasion, the Thing yawns loudly and declares, "I *saw* this in a million *jungle movies*!" *Fantastic Four* #52 more prominently asserts its difference from the racist conventions of the jungle genre during a scene in which the team first flies over the verdant landscape of Wakanda (Image 4). During this scene, Mr. Fantastic declares, "The jungle looks so *primitive*—so undeveloped! Are you *sure* we have reached *Wakanda* territory?" To which the Wakandan guide replies, "We are virtually at our destination, Mr. Richards! And you would do well to remember—in this land, things are not always—as they

seem!" A moment later, there is "a *break* in the dense foliage" revealing a "*man-made* jungle."
The guide then reveals that, "The entire topography and flora are electronically-controlled
mechanical apparatus!" "Even the boulders," he says, "can be heard to hum with the steady
pulse of *computer dynamos*!" In the world of Wakanda, tribal drums signal an attack force armed
with "polarity guns," and a seemingly "primitive" Panther totem is the gateway to a
technological wonderland (Image 5). Black Panther's first appearance, Nama argues, "meld[s]
science fiction iconography with African imagery" in a way that "stands in stark contrast to the
historical and symbolic constructions of Africans as simple tribal people and Africa as primitive"
(42). Nama additionally argues that "the Black Panther's origin tale—fending off invasion of an
African nation by white mercenaries—clearly signals a strident critique of African colonial and
postcolonial politics" (43).

The forthcoming analysis will contest Nama's assertion that Black Panther offers a "stark
contrast" to historical (i.e. racist, colonialist) depictions of Africa. Yet the Panther is significantly
different from most of the other black superheroes of the same era. Nearly all of Marvel and
DC's other black superheroes from the 1960s and 70s are, as Jeffrey A. Brown describes,
"closely identified with the limited stereotypes commonly found in Blaxploitation films of the
era" (4). Even the scientific accomplishments of the aforementioned Bill Foster—who becomes
Black Goliath in a 5-issue solo series in 1976—were presented within a ghetto-centric context;
the origin blurb from *Black Goliath* #1 describes Foster as "a child of the *ghetto* who has pulled
himself up out of the Los Angeles slums to become director of one of the nation's most
prestigious research labs." Phillip Lamarr Cunningham argues that, "Like the anti-heroes of the
Blaxploitation genre, these superheroes' ties to traditional heroics were always in question:
Captain America's partner The Falcon began life as a pimp/gangster named 'Snap' Wilson; Luke

Cage gains his powers after being experimented on while in prison (albeit for a crime he did not commit); and Black Lightning is as wanted by the police as the villains he fights" (54). In contrast, Black Panther and the hidden, hybrid nation of Wakanda provide a distinct and unique space for black activity. Gerald Early argues that, "What Lee and Kirby do in combining western technology and the jungle is to idealize Africa as a site where modernity and the primitive meet and co-exist"; this "polemical, romantic formula" would, as Early describes, be taken up by several black creators of Afrocentric comics, such as the underground comic *Ebon* (1970), as well as the alternative comics *Zwanna, Son of Zulu* and *Heru, Son of Ausar* (both of which were published by the black-run publishing company ANIA in 1993) (69).

However, the ability of the Panther's story to function as a "strident critique" is tempered in some significant ways. It is worth noting, for instance, that Wakanda's futuristic technology and fabulous wealth are somewhat accidental, being dependent on a substance called vibranium, a metal with the ability to absorb vibrations that crash-landed in Wakanda centuries ago inside a spaceship of unknown origin. In addition, the Panther only learns to exploit vibranium through his Western education. In *Fantastic Four* #53 (1966), the Panther says that he "attended the fine *universities* of both hemispheres!" In a later appearance in *Avengers* #77 (1970), he more specifically indicates that he attended "the best schools in *Europe*… and *America*." In *Avengers* #87 (1971), this fact is repeated, in a scene in which T'Challa's lead advisor, N'Baza, explicitly links the acquisition of Western education to the acquisition of manhood. Says N'Baza to an eager young T'Challa: "So, you would be a *man*, would you? Then you must go to *school* in the outside world—that you may be a *good* one." An origin story flashback in *Fantastic Four* #53 makes it especially clear that without T'Challa's Western education, Wakanda would have remained stereotypically primitive. In this flashback, T'Challa is a child watching Klaw attack

the Wakandans, who try in vain to defend themselves against the white villain's machine guns using only wooden shields and spears. In his narration of the flashback, T'Challa specifically indicates that the Wakandans of the past "are *helpless* before the withering fire of the invaders!"

Furthermore, Black Panther only truly becomes a superhero at the recommendation of the Fantastic Four, whose powers and intelligence are also crucial to the Wakandans' ability to defeat Klaw.[42] In *Fantastic Four* #52 and #53, the Panther is initially depicted as honorable but also selfish and vainglorious. In *Fantastic Four* #53, for instance, he revels in his luxury while enjoying a cigarette, saying, "I can *afford* to pamper myself—to indulge my every whim—enjoy every luxury! I'm one of the *richest men* in the world!" Later in the same issue, the Panther reveals that he amassed a fortune and created a technological wonderland not, primarily, for the benefit of his people or as a protection against invaders like Klaw; instead, he says, he built his "mechanized jungle" as "a lark." "It was a simple *exercise*," says T'Challa, "to test my skill." Once Klaw is defeated, T'Challa is left purposeless, and even considers retiring his Black Panther identity. It is only after Mr. Fantastic claps him on the shoulder and tells him that the world needs him that he is promoted to pledge: "I shall *do* it! I pledge my *fortune*, my *powers*— my very *life*—to the service of all mankind!" The Fantastic Four's involvement in preserving Wakanda's sovereignty and shaping T'Challa's heroism strongly suggests that the Panther's origin story does not fully subvert the racist and colonialist jungle genre convention of white saviours "protecting childish natives from evil whites or from savage, aggressive tribes who were usually in the thrall of some evil white" (Early 66). Instead, the Panther's origin story may be

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[42] Importantly, Johnny Storm's non-superpowered college friend, Wyatt Wingfoot, who is Native American (born on the fictional Keewazi Indian reservation in Oklahoma), also plays a significant role in defeating Klaw. The inclusion of Wingfoot suggests that the victory over Klaw is meant to be read, in part, as a triumph of diversity and teamwork. However, the Fantastic Four remain the central figures in both the story and the victory; Wyatt actually spends much of the Wakanda episode asleep before finally springing into action.

read almost like a form of self-congratulatory anthropology: paralleling the comic's creators, the Fantastic Four journey into a fantastic jungle untouched by historical colonialism to discover, but also create, a black superhero; this makes the Panther a product and symbol of white guilt as much as black liberation.

The Panther's promise to serve "all mankind," which manifests in him joining the Avengers in America, also situates his heroic journey within a context of assimilation and servitude to the West. Admittedly, Black Panther is similar to other Marvel heroes inasmuch as he is shown as needing to pay a penance for his hubris, which takes the form of his leaving behind his kingship in Wakanda to experience living as an ordinary citizen in America (and specifically, in Harlem). However, there is a great deal of cultural imperialism and, arguably, implicit racism at work in the proposition that the best way for a powerful black leader to prove his heroism is to give up his African throne and become the sole black member of otherwise all-white, American superteam. Furthermore, the Panther's stint with the Avengers repeatedly emphasizes that it is somehow inadequate or small-minded for the world's first black superhero to align himself with a specific black nation or community. For instance, in *Avengers* #52 (1968), the issue in which Black Panther first joins the team, the Panther re-states the declaration of heroism that he made in *Fantastic Four* #53, but in terms that make it even clearer that the leadership of Wakanda is a lesser cause than membership in the Avengers. At the conclusion of *Avengers* #52, the Panther states that he has renounced his throne so that he may "better serve a *greater* kingdom… the whole of *mankind* itself!" On the surface, statements such as this might seem to reflect an ethos of equality, "a dream," famously articulated by Martin Luther King Jr. just five years before, of "a nation where [people] will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." Yet it is, at best, convenient that this "greater kingdom" is

represented as predominately—and sometimes exclusively—white and American. The fact that

the Panther cannot become a superhero without being Western-educated, without being helped

and encouraged by established white, American superheroes, and without leaving Africa to join

an otherwise all-white American superteam, demonstrates that it is impossible to separate the

Panther's need to humble himself from an overarching or contingent need to assimilate into a

white, Western culture, and to prioritize white, Western values and interests.

Ultimately, although the hybridity of Wakanda as a seemingly primitive but actually

technologically advanced space does have the potential to productively subvert racist tropes, the

Panther, by virtue of his assimilation, is less subversive. Through his Western assimilation, the

Panther confirms certain conventions of the jungle genre, albeit with the caveat that a black man

is now able to participate in them. Through his combination of animalistic superpowers and

Western education, the Panther, similar to Edgar Rice Burroughs' Tarzan, in effect combines "a

powerful dose of primitive masculinity" with the preferred characteristics of "civilized white

manliness" (Bederman 222). It is additionally significant that, as in the "rugged geography" of

Tarzan's world, in the Panther's world, all men are not created equal. As Gail Bederman

describes, Tarzan's inherent, seemingly biological aristocracy is crucial to his ability to

incorporate and contain the advantages of the primitive: "As a self-made man, [Tarzan] could

appeal to many readers. Yet Burroughs, in line with the predominant thought of influential whites

of his time, believed that Tarzan carries his most valuable hereditary privilege, his innate

superiority, in his very blood" (212). Black Panther is similarly innately superior. Although he

must earn his kingship, and with it, his superpowered abilities—which include enhanced speed,

strength, agility, and senses—through long years of training culminating in a series of tests, the

Panther is also, by virtue of heredity, the only Wakandan who has the privilege of undertaking

this training. In short, Black Panther is culturally but also biologically the lone Wakandan who is able to be both primitive and civilized, to incorporate, contain, and exploit the best of both worlds. Despite the important difference that the Panther's hereditary aristocracy is of African rather than Anglo Saxon descent, his privileged ability to combine African primitivism with Western culture still echoes and mirrors the fantasies that informed Tarzan. In this respect, the Panther's example does not necessarily revise jungle genre tropes associating Africa with primitiveness, and primitiveness with a dangerous but necessary rejuvenation of masculinity; instead, the Panther demonstrates that, in rare instances, an exceptional black man might be able to harness his own primitiveness for the good of a (supposedly) global (but really white, Western, and American) society.

Although all superheroes are obviously exceptional, the terms of Black Panther's exceptionalism bear further investigation inasmuch as they serve to differentiate him both from other superheroes and from other black men. Compared to his white male superhero contemporaries, the Panther is granted exceptionally exaggerated trappings of masculinity. In addition to his fantastic wealth, scientific knowledge, and physical prowess, Black Panther is also a literal king within an explicitly patriarchal society. In his very first on-panel appearance in *Fantastic Four* #52, the Panther is depicted atop a throne, with a cluster of loyal subjects gathered below him, pampering him with shade umbrellas and trays of food and bowing their heads in reverence as they approach his dais. Later images also specifically foreground the Panther's patriarchal authority, showing subservient women bowing over trays of food and/or draping themselves adoringly at his feet (Image 6). On the one hand, this exaggerated masculinity—as located within a monarchial structure that 1960s American culture would consider itself to have "progressed" beyond—confirms racist conceptions of black men as

somehow more in touch with a primitive wellspring of essential male power, a belief frequently represented in 20th century American culture by what Donald Bogle calls the stereotype of the "brutal black buck." On the other hand, however, the Panther's exaggerated masculinity also plays into contemporary black fantasies. Brown argues that the Black Power Movement and Black Panther Party's embrace of "the hypermasculine stereotype" is "a logical cultural development" inasmuch as black men have been "systematically denied full access to the socially constructed ideas of masculinity," such as self-determination, financial stability, and access to women ("Black Superheroes" 170). Stephane Dunn argues that in a majority of black power-identified cultural production—everything from the politicized poetry of Amiri Baraka to Blaxploitation cinema—black men are configured, or configure themselves, in ways that are strikingly similar to the way Marvel comics from the 1960s and 70s characterize Black Panther: as "African kings" who reaffirm "the traditional association of manhood with the ability to protect as well as rule," especially, Dunn argues, over women (40). Rob Lendrum goes further when he argues that, "In an attempt to raise the status of black males, black power assumed a hard line that promoted sexism, homophobia, and phallocentricity" (363).

Lendrum furthermore claims that "[m]any of the black [super]heroes of the 1970s possess 'super-savage' abilities, or hyperbolized physical powers of the uncontrollable body of the Buck" (366). Lendrum argues that this description typifies the Black Panther by virtue of his animal-like and thus suggestively savage powers. Importantly, though, even as the Panther's powerset and the context of his origin are implicitly and sometimes explicitly phallocentric, his personality is far more similar to the screen persona of Sidney Poitier than to Blaxploitation characters such as Sweet Sweetback. Case in point, the Panther's short-lived alter ego as a school teacher in Harlem was likely inspired by Poitier's turn as a school teacher in the popular film *To Sir, With*

Love (1967), which was released just two years before the beginning of this plotline in *Avengers* #60 (1969). More generally, the Panther resembles Poiter's common screen persona inasmuch as he is never overtly aggressive or sexual; during the Panther's stint with the Avengers, while his teammates frequently fight amongst themselves and are preoccupied with affairs of the heart, the Panther participates in few interpersonal conflicts and does not express any romantic desires.[43]

In addition, the assertion that Black Panther's body is "hyperbolized" or "uncontrollable" is troubled by that fact that his design is far less excessive than many of his white male contemporaries. Although Black Panther's name and body are obviously animalistic, his incorporation of animal traits and imagery is presented as attractive and explicitly, even emphatically, contained. Despite the ways in which the Panther often slinks, stalks, and crouches across the page (Image 7), he is more pleasingly proportioned than Spider-Man (at least when drawn by Ditko), and less obviously monstrous and/or wounded than virtually any other Marvel superhero from the same period. The Panther's costume emphasizes the serious, unfunny, un-flamboyant nature of his body; Batman, a character who also wears a mostly-black costume and who is similarly identified, as Kendall R. Phillips observes, with "an extreme level of control" (128), has a costume that is a veritable Fourth of July parade compared to the Panther's all-black, logo-less, seam-less, costume, whose only stylistic excess is a tiny pair of cat ears. The seamless and self-contained design of Black Panther's body and costume emphasizes that, unlike the Thing, the Hulk, Mr. Fantastic, or Spider-Man, he is not self-hating, monstrously excessive, or femininely fluid. When comparing different forms and connotations of masculinity, it is

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[43] The Panther's first romantic connection is with soul singer turned social activist Monica Lynne. Though Lynne is introduced in *Avengers* #73 (1970), she does not become officially involved with the Panther until his first solo series, *Jungle Action Featuring: The Black* Panther. Lynne shares the Panther's first on-panel kiss and implied sex scene in *Jungle Action* #16 (1975).

important to keep in mind that "maleness" and "masculinity" are not necessarily the same thing, particularly when it comes to black men. Where black men are concerned, America's white supremacist patriarchy tends to differentiate between maleness and masculinity. As Cassandra Jackson describes, "Portrayed as virile, over-sexed, and menacing, and at the same time as lacking the political, economic, and intellectual power associated with white men, black men have often been represented as 'excessively male [and] insufficiently masculine'" (4). Black Panther's exaggerated trappings of masculinity combined with his serious, self-contained, and ideal male body resists, or at least addresses, this expectation. Black Panther's masculinity is extreme, but also supreme; this supreme masculinity allows him to be ideally rather than excessively male, while his ideal maleness, in turn, confirms his supreme masculinity.

Certainly, the decision to depict the Panther's black male body as an ideal is a significant and important gesture. Black Panther's ideal attractiveness is clearly meant to resonate with the "black is beautiful" movement that was in turn a response to (among other things) Kenneth and Mamie Clark's famous doll tests of the 1930s and 40s, which argued that African American children—especially those in segregated schools—predominately associated black dolls with evil and ugliness, and white dolls with beauty and goodness. And yet, Black Panther's idealness also harkens back to the Invisible Girl, whose complexity and subsequent access to power suffered in part due to her lack of graphic excesses and its related privileges of confronting and revising identity categories and expectations. Unlike the Invisible Girl, however, Black Panther does confront and incarnate bodily conflicts; this is virtually guaranteed by the physical nature of his powers, which are in turn a privilege of his maleness. Yet the terms and modes of the Panther's bodily conflicts are nonetheless indelibly intertwined with race. In the 1960s and 70s, nearly all Marvel superheroes, including the Black Panther, have their masculinity and/or maleness tested,

and are routinely and continually required to prove their masculinity and/or maleness upon and through the spectacle of their graphically and/or functionally monstrous bodies. However, as discussed earlier, minority superheroes such as Black Panther must prove their ability to assert control over a pre-existing vulnerability rooted in a pre-existing visibility. Where Black Panther is concerned, this fact is true, first and foremost, because black bodies, first introduced to the New World as property, occupy an extremely vexed place in American culture. bell hooks argues that "every movement for black liberation in [American] society… has had to formulate a counter-hegemonic discourse of the body to effectively resist white supremacy" (128). As hooks describes, before, during, and after the Civil Rights movement, "reformist agendas" of black liberation have tended to counter conceptions of black men as "beasts, as rapists, as bodies out of control… by revering the refined, restrained, desexualized black male body," while "[r]adical militant resistance… typified by the sixties and seventies black power movements, called out of the shadow of repression the black male body, claiming it as a site of hypermasculine power, agency, and sexual potency" (128). Throughout the first two decades of his existence, Black Panther is forced to negotiate a space between and/or within these poles, facing the specific— and specifically risky—challenge of performing black embodiment without becoming reduced to that embodiment.

The Black Panther's early appearances in *The Avengers* attempt to strike this balance by showing the Panther's ability to confront, overcome, and contain the threat of racist images and ideas, as embodied, in particular, by racialized villains. The Panther's initial conflicts with his second arch nemesis, M'Baku, a.k.a. the Man-Ape, introduced in *Avengers* #62 (1969), emblematize this strategy. On the cover of *Avengers* #62 (Image 8), there are certain obvious ways in which Man-Ape's body is distinguished as villainous. As-discussed in Chapter One, the

way a superbeing incorporates their augmentation always matters. On the *Avengers* #62 cover, while Black Panther seamlessly integrates and controls his animism, Man-Ape is unbalanced, weighted down, and swallowed up by his animism. To put it simply: whereas Black Panther is seamless, Man-Ape quite literally has a monkey on his back. Man-Ape's particular brand of excess also has racial connotations and implications. Monstrously huge and muscular with exaggeratedly thick pink lips and a flat nose, Man-Ape is a racist caricature, a black man wearing, but also *resembling* an ape. Furthermore, the use of colour ensures the racial connotations of Man-Ape's unbalanced body. Man-Ape is both half-man and half-ape as well as half-white and half-black; Man-Ape is thus both a racist caricature and a spectacle of fearful hybridity, a black man hiding—threateningly but also unconvincingly—inside a white skin. The Panther is also, of course, hybrid and excessive. He is, after all, a man dressed as an animal who conceals (or contains) his blackness in an even blacker animal skin; in this, the Panther is both un-raced and super-raced, both racially indeterminate and racially overdetermined. Compared to Man-Ape, however, Black Panther appears extremely contained and, significantly, extremely pure; whereas Man-Ape is a fearful spectre of degeneration and/or miscegenation, Black Panther is (or, more appropriately, *appears* to be) an icon of seamless purity. This opposition between Black Panther and Man-Ape depends on, and thus exploits and implicitly confirms, racist stereotypes and fears. It also, however, illustrates the harsh demands that structure the Panther's heroism. The juxtaposition between the Panther's extremely contained, streamlined, all-black body and Man-Ape's excessive half-white/half-black body suggests that any acceptable, ideal, heroic black male body is easily identifiable, extremely contained, and emphatically pure, both because these qualities are hegemonically desirable in and of themselves, but also because to be anything else (or anything less) is to risk being dangerous, villainous, and even degenerate. The

importance of this juxtaposition is emphasized by its repetition; Marvel would feature images of

Black Panther facing off against a half-white, man-like gorilla on four very similar covers over

the course of the next decade (Image 9).

Early stories featuring Man-Ape similarly test the Panther by threatening him with

spectres of racialized degeneracy. The plot of *Avengers* #62, for instance, involves Man-Ape,

a.k.a. ruling Wakandan regent M'Baku, attempting to usurp T'Challa's throne. To aid him in this

quest, M'Baku gains fantastic strength by consuming "the flesh and blood of the fabled white

gorilla"—a distinctly savage contrast to T'Challa's method of empowerment, which involves

study, tests, and the application of "sacred herbs." M'Baku's association with degeneracy is

confirmed by his ultimate goal to "return" Wakanda's "primeval jungle" to an original state of

"darkness," because "only in a *primitive* world is *power* its own reward!" M'Baku is furthermore

a force of racial conflict, gaining traction with the people of Wakanda by accusing T'Challa of

being "decadent," of having "*sold* yourself to our white-skinned *enemies*." Man-Ape is a

remarkably unsympathetic villain, inasmuch as sympathizing with his goals means openly

embracing the notion that animalistic, ape-like savagery is black Africa's real or proper past and

destiny. Although M'Baku's complaint that T'Challa has turned his back on his people carries

some political weight, Man-Ape's thoroughly unsympathetic villainy delegitimizes this

potentially valid critique. Ultimately, this comic situates the Panther's Western assimilation as

heroic and desirable in contrast to the clearly evil M'Baku, who represents separatism and

rebellion against the West.

As much as the Panther's opposition to Man Ape would seem to denounce associations of

black Africans with savagery and primitiveness, the enactment of the Panther's opposition also

partly confirms these ideas. During the initial face-off between the Panther and Man Ape in

Avengers #62, the Panther refers to Man-Ape as an "anachronism" and asks him, "Would you *wipe out* all progress—turn the Wakandans back down the road to *savagery*?" These statements confirm ape-like savagery as a real stage of Wakandan society. A fevered dream leading up to this battle furthermore presents this savagery as a barely supressed memory. Directly preceding Man-Ape's first on-panel appearance and subsequent attack, the Panther is drugged and has his "tortured brain" haunted by the "bestial, grotesque, *mocking*" image of an anthropomorphic gorilla who once again possesses the thick red lips, heavy brow, and wide nose of racial caricature. Although the Panther could be seeing a distorted image of Man-Ape in this scene, the capacity of such an image to "torture" his brain strongly suggests the existence of a traumatic memory.[44] Thus, although Black Panther seems to defeat Man-Ape's racist image and ideology in this story, he does so at the cost of upholding some of its truth.

Black Panther's first solo series, beginning in issue #5 of the anthology *Jungle Action* (1973-76), continues and intensifies his efforts to prove himself against racist images and ideas while repeatedly falling into the same trap of reaffirming them. The title of this series, which, in issue #5, becomes *Jungle Action Featuring: The Black Panther*, tellingly locates the Panther as once again mired in and forced to battle racist anachronisms. Before the Black Panther's arrival, *Jungle Action* was a vehicle for reprinting jungle stories from the 1950s; the second appearance of Black Panther in the title is actually accompanied by a reprint of a story starring the titillating white saviour "Lorna, the Jungle Girl." Despite this inauspicious beginning, the series takes some immediate and significant steps to readdress the veneration of Western assimilation that was present in most of Black Panther's previous portrayals. The first 13 out of the 19 total issues

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[44] That gorillas are an integral part of Wakanda's past is emphasized and confirmed in the *Jungle Action* series, which, in issue #13, features an extended scene in which the Panther must prove himself against man-gorilla-monsters that are described as incarnations of gods once widely worshipped in Wakanda.

of *Jungle Action Featuring: The Black Panther* take place in Wakanda, giving the most in-depth view of that place and its people that had yet been seen. Written throughout by Don McGregor with more than half of the issues penciled by Billy Graham (one of the few black creators working in mainstream comics during that era), *Jungle Action Featuring: The Black Panther* created the most diverse collection of black characters that had ever been seen in mainstream American comics. The series significantly lessens Black Panther's burden of representation by featuring numerous black heroes and black villains, black warriors and black pacifists. The series also questions the rightness of the Panther's decision to leave his homeland for America; the first 13 issues deal with the Panther's efforts to quell a state of civil unrest that apparently began after his departure. In addition, the series makes an effort to explore intersectional conflicts between race, gender, and culture. For instance, the series shows Wakanda's citizens struggling to adapt to what is presented as a rapid technological revolution under T'Challa's reign. Black women appear throughout the series in diverse roles as superbeings, mothers, servants, and popular entertainers; notable among these conflicts are recurring clashes between the Panther's sometimes-lover, Monica Lynne, an independent, sexually liberated African-American woman, and African women who are steeped in the traditions of the Wakandan court and/or attached to the traditions of an agrarian existence that is quickly becoming extinct.[45] Undoubtedly, *Jungle Action Featuring: The Black Panther* had lofty goals. In 1985, Will Jacobs and Gerard Jones called the series "the most difficult and ambitious style yet employed in comics," describing it as filled with "large doses of popular psychology and philosophy" and "detailed discussions of

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[45] Nonetheless, the *Jungle Action* series reflects, at best, a vexed and sometimes contradictory embrace of feminism. Though Monica Lynne is granted some moments of subjectivity—especially in the final issues of the series, in which Black Panther accompanies her to her home in the American south—she primarily functions as an idea and object of exchange. Frequently shown draped across the Panther's legs as he sits on his throne, Lynne, through her sexual allure, can be read as symbolizing the lure of America.

values and self-perceptions" (163).

As in any superhero comic, however, bodies are at the centre of the story. Reading this series as a body narrative—for what is typical in terms of the deployment and depiction of, in particular, Black Panther's body—one finds the world's first black superhero particularly defined by spectacles of suffering. Admittedly, this is true of all superheroes. As discussed in Chapter One, Ditko's Spider-Man, in particular, is frequently depicted in cowering, vulnerable postures. However, Black Panther's spectacles of suffering have different tendencies, contexts, and meanings. This is true, firstly, because of who Black Panther tends to fight in this series, and how. In the issues of *Jungle Action* set in Wakanda, Black Panther's most extended and dramatic physical encounters pit him against animals rather than people. In the 13 issues set in Wakanda, there are nine lengthy (i.e. two or more pages) scenes in which the Panther fights leopards (twice), a crocodile, a rhinoceros, snakes (twice), a dinosaur, gorillas, and wolves. This is, once again, not entirely unusual. Other superheroes occasionally fight animals, and jungle heroes have built a career on it. Tarzan, for instance, fought a lion on the cover of his first appearance in the pulp *All-Story Magazine* in 1912; the following decades saw him fight countless animals on countless magazine covers and dust jackets, and in numerous comics. Before the arrival of Black Panther, the *Jungle Action* anthology also featured many scenes and covers showing the white hero Tharn battling animals (Image 10). However, whereas white superheroes and white jungle heroes tend to fight animals in ways that demonstrate their superiority to those animals, Black Panther's animal battles tend to suggest a degree of affinity that is, for a black, African superhero, especially dangerous.

This difference between white heroes battling animals and black heroes doing the same comes across via the specific context and articulation of Black Panther's animal battles. Where

Black Panther is concerned, it is significant that animal imagery is used at all, given the initial

presentation of the character and his homeland as a technological wonderland, and, of course, the

presentation of his superhero contemporaries as products of science, fighting predominately

science-based opponents. While technology is, as mentioned, sometimes present as a cultural

conflict in the *Jungle Action* series, the fact that technology *is* presented as a conflict—that is, as

a foreign element at odds with nature and Wakandan society—represents a significant departure

from the initial depictions of Wakanda in *Fantastic Four* #52 and #53. In contrast to the

mechanical jungle depicted by Kirby, *Jungle Action* depicts a more primal world, in which only a

small, central area of Wakanda—in and around T'Challa's palace—has access to electricity let

alone futuristic technological wonders.[46] This altered depiction of Wakanda risks perpetuating

the stereotype that Africa is "a world of nature, not… a cultural or human-made world" (Pieterse

113). Furthermore, in *Jungle Action*, fantastical happenings are far more likely to be explained

by supernatural forces rather than scientific ones. While the Panther begins the series fighting

realistic animals and mostly normal-looking human villains, by the series' midpoint, he finds

himself fighting zombies, demon-animals, and increasingly grotesque villains mutated by a

mysterious space ray, the source and workings of which are never fully explained (even in the

pseudo-scientific language that is typical of superhero comics). This shift from science to the

supernatural reflects a stereotype that Scott argues also permeates comics starring Marvel's

Brother Voodoo. Scott argues that Brother Voodoo's racially marked magical powers—which are

a hereditary and acquired during Voodoo's forced return to his hometown in Haiti—risk

confirming the racist premise "that a black body is always already supernatural" (296). Although

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[46] While Black Panther also fought animals in his first appearance in *Fantastic Four* #52-3, on that occasion, the animals were scientific, rather than natural. In that story, the animals were hard light projections produced by Klaw's sound ray.

there is no doubting *Jungle Action*'s ambitiousness, there is also little doubt that its emphasis on nature and the supernatural moves Black Panther's world more in line with the racist traditions of the jungle genre, in which black Africans tend to be superstitious magic believers constantly threatened by savage animals that can only be repelled through low-tech means, i.e., through strength and skill at hand-to-hand combat.

It is additionally significant that in most of the Panther's animal battles, the animals replace or stand-in for human opponents. While the Panther sometimes fights animals that are unconnected with human villains—the crocodile that attacks him in *Jungle Action* #10 (1974), for instance, is motivated only by hunger—in general, the animals he fights are proxies or servants of human antagonists. For instance, the Panther's arch-nemesis in this series, Erik Killmonger, forces the Panther to battle leopards, wolves, gorillas, and a dinosaur (*Jungle Action* #5-6 [1973] #12 [1974], #13, and #14 [1975]; the villain Venomm employs snakes (*Jungle Action* #7 [1973] and #16 [1975]; and the villain Madame Slay commands a horde of leopards (*Jungle Action* #18 [1975]). The Panther is only able to finally defeat his human antagonists in this series—a cadre of villains led by Killmonger—after he has fought and overcome this legion of animals. In line with Theodore Roosevelt's doctrine of the "strenuous life," these animal battles can be read as masculine tests, ways of affirming masculinity by imposing one's will over animals and the natural world. This is emphasized by narrations that feminize the Panther's animal foes, repeatedly characterizing their mouths as vagina dentata-like damp, devouring caverns. In the Panther's battle against Killmonger's leopard, for instance, in *Jungle Action* #5 (1973) (Image 11), the narration describes the Panther's "fingers questing through fur for a vulnerable opening," looking for a firm grip to break the cat's wide, hungry jaw. In his battle against the crocodile in *Jungle Action* #10 (1974) (Image 12), the Panther once again breaks his

opponent's jaw, but not before nearly being consumed by the soft, wet, "mush interior" of the crocodile's mouth. During this battle, the narration describes: "his boots purposely *gouge* into the yielding, salivating mouth, and its tongue *bulges* beneath and around his heels!" During the Panther's battle with the dinosaur in *Jungle Action* #14 (Image 13), he must escape another enormous mouth, described as "a wet cavern" that "smells of swamp murk" with "saliva, the consistency of *membranous tissue*." And in *Jungle Action* #16, the particularly fluid, "swaying, undulating" bodies of Venomm's snakes "caress" the Panther's body before their embrace turns deadly, forcing the Panther to remind himself, "Don't let that head get at you!" (Image 14).

Importantly, a black man asserting his masculinity against animals takes place within a different historical and cultural context than a white man doing the same. As Jan Nederveen Pieterse observes, in both Europe and America, images of black men or women with or alongside animals must always be read within a history of representation that has tended to "suggest the assimilation of Africans and blacks to nature and a low place on the ladder of evolution." "For instance," Pieterse observes, "Africans and crocodiles together within a single frame appear to be the European counterpart to the morbid American myth that crocodiles are particularly fond of black flesh" (44). Furthermore, when white men battle animals, and especially African animals, their victory is bound up in the glory of colonial exploration and conquest, evoking the (supposedly) heroic act of venturing into "deepest, darkest Africa" to recapture or reaffirm an essential masculinity thought damaged by the feminizing forces of civilization. As Pieterse observes, the story of Tarzan, the quintessential white jungle hero, is "above all… a white-settler myth, a white power fantasy" (110). Similar to the myth of "regeneration through violence" that Richard Slotkin argues defines the American heroic archetype, white heroes battle animals to foreground their right of conquest; by asserting their superiority over the native animals of a new

and unfamiliar territory, white heroes also symbolically assert their superiority over that territory's native peoples. America's white frontier heroes, Slotkin argues, learn about animals and the natural world only to gain mastery over them; they interact with the natural world and native peoples only for the purpose of destroying them, because it is only by destroying them that they can solidify their own superiority (555-7). Although the Panther emerges victorious from each animal battle, his superiority is, arguably, less assured. Taken together, the different history and context of the Panther's black body combined with the choice to make animals the primary antagonists for a hero who was once centrally defined by technology suggests a dangerous equivalency between human and animal, which is also evident in the graphic depiction of these battles.

In each animal battle, the Panther is dramatically intertwined with his animal opponents. Over the course of many pages, these animals wrap and weave their paws, salivating jaws, and undulating bodies through and around the Panther's body, which is wrenched into extreme postures of exertion and passion. In the Panther's battle with Venomm's snakes in *Jungle Action* #16 (Image 14), for instance, the thick, heavy lines and dark shadows on the Panther's unnaturally distorted and exaggerated muscles cause his body to mimic the texture and undulating fluidity of the snakes; close-up views of the Panther's arms and hands wrapped around the snake's neck and body, which reduce both the Panther and the snake to thickly textured sinews, particularly emphasize the sameness of human and snake. Again and again, the Panther is bound up with animals in a kind of intercorporeal exchange across species lines, facilitated by the exaggeration and fragmentation of both man and animal, but also by the Panther's design. Whereas white jungle heroes prove and display their humanity—and their whiteness—by wearing as little clothing as possible, the Panther, as discussed earlier, covers his

blackness with an even blacker animal skin. In some instances, such as during the battle against Man-Ape in *Avengers* #62, the Panther's costume evokes containment and purity. Yet in his battles with animals, the Panther's costume cannot help but suggest an equivalency between human and animal that is quite different than the obvious separation between human and animal commonly emphasized in images of mostly-naked white jungle heroes battling African animals. The sexualisation of these battles contributes to this sense of equivalency, and the sense of exchange mentioned above. The Panther's animal battles are sexualized by the feminine imagery already discussed, but also by the Panther's tendency to throw back his head and thrust forward his pelvis while in the grip of the beast. During the fight with Killmonger's leopard, for instance, the Panther (a man dressed up as a cat) is pinned, straddled, and embraced by the paws and body of the leopard (a cat in the thrall of a man) amid a raging waterfall; as the leopard's head lines up with the Panther's, as though threatening (or titillating) him with an interspecies kiss, the Panther reclines in pain that, given the expressionless-ness of his mask, could as easily be passion. And specifically, a highly feminized form of passion; in this and other images, the Panther's body language evokes a helpless (but perhaps willing) surrender to a passionate and connotatively masculine attack/embrace.

The ways in which the Panther triumphs in these animal battles emphasizes an additional equivalency between human and animal. The Panther does not, like the similarly animal-inspired Spider-Man, triumph through technology or through recourse to scientifically-derived superpowers. Although he must employ human rationality to master his own animal instincts of panic and fear, the Panther still largely fights these animals on their own terms, relying on his animal-inspired strength, speed, and endurance. In the end, as much as these fights can and should be read as examples of man asserting his dominance over animals, their particular nature

and context also emphasize the ways in which Black Panther is *like* an animal. While at other times, the self-contained idealness of Black Panther's costume and body clearly separates him from the animal world, within the context of *Jungle Action*'s animal battles, his body is, if not quite fully animalistic or degenerate, at least fleshier, and thus, more and differently vulnerable than the bodies of his white counterparts, whose battles are (usually) more technologically driven and/or are against more human-like opponents.

Throughout the *Jungle Action* series, Black Panther is made additionally vulnerable by the fact that, both in the paws or jaws of animals and elsewhere, he is especially prone to being depicted in spectacles of bondage. Although superheroes are often chained and tied up, the type and frequency of Black Panther's bondage is especially frequent and excessive. In almost every major story featuring the Black Panther leading up to *Jungle Action*, he can be seen in chains (Image 15). Even in stories that do not directly feature such an image, chains are nonetheless invoked. For instance, in *Fantastic Four* #119 (1972), while the imprisoned Panther is not shown in actual chains on either the cover or in the story the follows, the Human Torch nonetheless describes him this way on the cover: "*T'challa's chained up in there...* And we're gonna get him *out*!" In addition, in *Avengers* #74, #78, and #79 (1970), and *Astonishing Tales* #7 (1971), Black Panther is the only superhero singled out to be chained, despite the fact that all of the *Avengers* stories (3 out of 4 examples) take place in a team context. These scenes showing Black Panther bound in chains become spectacles rather than mere images in part based on how extended and intense they are. In *Avengers* #74, for instance, the Panther is shown in bondage on several pages, and in seven total panels; in addition, the Panther's body is not merely bound, but also exaggeratedly humbled and bent, dramatically straining under the weight and pressure of very extensive chains, which are attached to all of his neck, arms, and legs. In *Avengers* #78, the

Panther's chains are similarly extensive; in this issue, he is bound at both his legs and his neck, and dragged on all fours by a metal collar like an animal. While *Jungle Action* only features one example of Black Panther bound in chains (Image 16-18), it does feature many memorable spectacles of bondage, including some of the animal battles already discussed, as well several other scenes in which the Panther is bound and made to suffer for several pages (see Image 16-22 for representative examples). These scenes are all drawn-out and exaggerated by the sheer number of pages and panels they occupy and by their copious narration, experimental layouts, and what might be called the intensive subjectivity of, in particular, Graham's artwork, which has a tendency to dramatically manipulate the body during scenes of suffering and bondage.

This imagery has some empowering possibilities. Although these copious images of the world's first black superhero in chains and bondage obviously evoke slavery, lynching, and the more general, metaphorical bondage of racial inequality, evoking this context allows Black Panther to be shown defying it; in *Jungle Action* #24 (1976), for instance, the multiple pages depicting the Panther suffering in chains conclude with a dynamic splash page showing him breaking his chains (Image 18). It is furthermore probable that these comics exploit the image of an attractive, heroic black man suffering in bondage because such imagery had, in the past, proved extremely useful in generating sympathy for black subjects among white audiences. Linda Williams observes that American melodrama—of which superhero comics are certainly a part—has a long history of employing spectacles of suffering to generate sympathy across racial lines. "American racial melodrama," says Williams, "deploys the paradoxical location of strength in weakness—the process by which suffering subjects take what Nietzsche calls *ressentiment*, a moralizing revenge upon the powerful achieved through a triumph of the weak in their very weakness (43). Referencing the work of Lauren Berlant, Williams argues that this veneration of

"strength in weakness" is particularly applicable to efforts to generate sympathy for oppressed

groups, including both women and blacks:

> Ever since the abolitionist and suffrage movements, Berlant argues,
>
> individual citizens have been most compellingly identified with the national
>
> collectivity not through a universalist rhetoric of abstract citizenship but
>
> through a 'capacity for suffering and trauma' viewed as the core of
>
> citizenship (Berlant 1998, 636). 'It would not be exaggerating to say that
>
> sentimentality has long been the more popular rhetorical means by which
>
> pain is advanced, in the United States, as the true core of personhood and
>
> political collectivity. It operates when relatively privileged national subjects
>
> are exposed to the suffering of their intimate Others, so that to be virtuous
>
> requires feeling the pain of flawed or denied citizenship as their own pain'
>
> (Berlant 2000). (43)

Abolitionist imagery, Williams and Berlant assert, was a primary, original reference point for the

American articulation of what might be called "citizenship through suffering." Pieterse

furthermore observes that abolitionist imagery that depicts suffering, supplicating black men,

women, and children had a tremendous cultural impact, to the extent that it has become a

primary reference point for the visualization of American slavery and blacks in general. "If

images of slavery from the pro-slavery point of view were scarce," says Pieterse, "the image

production of abolitionism was abundant. Almost all the images of slavery with which we are

familiar are in fact abolitionist images. The typical iconography of abolitionism displays the

movement's Christian pathos: the recurring image is that of blacks kneeling with hands folded

and eyes cast upward" (59).

This conception of citizenship or subjecthood as something that must be established or proved through the ability to suffer can have significant consequences for black subjects. Pieterse, for instance, argues that "[t]he period of abolitionism coincided with the rise of racism," to the extent that "[t]he humanization of the image of blacks in abolitionist propaganda went hand in hand with the hardening of that image through the application of the category 'race,'" (57); in addition, abolitionist imagery "humanized the image of blacks but also popularized the image of blacks as victims" (Pieterse 60).[47] Jackson argues that generating sympathy for black subjects only or primarily through suffering is problematic not only because it presents blacks as perpetual victims, but also because, on a certain level, it demands and implicitly sanctions the abuse of black bodies. To emphasize this point, Jackson uses the example of a famous photograph commonly called "The Scourged Back." Widely circulated within the American abolitionist movement, this photograph shows a black slave whose back is a mass of whip lash scars (Image 23). Although this image was used to generate sympathy, "The man's subjectivity…" Jackson argues, "depends on his mutilated body, his status as victim" (22). According to Jackson, this image is particularly dangerous and problematic due to the ways in which it feigns realism while actually being deliberately posed. This image positions the scarred body for aesthetic effect, displaying and opening up its wounds for curious onlookers; at the same time, the specificity of the subject's face is de-emphasized, being bent to the side, creating an almost silhouette-like, iconic profile. This combined aestheticization and de-personalization

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[47] Pieterse argues that abolitionist imagery set the stage for the images of suffering and starving black men, women, and children that are now commonly employed by charities and non-profits such as Oxfam: "fund raising for famine relief in Africa over and over again shows people starving, down to the flies in their eyes. The macabre reverse effect of this imagery is that while it shows 'the Third World' in a state of utter destitution, thus instilling the false sense of a gulf yawning between North and South, it nourishes the complacency and narcissism of the West. Rather than producing human solidarity this kind of imagery tend to foster estrangement" (209).

of the wounded black body commodifies and even potentially eroticizes it; in Jackson's reading of the "The Scourged Back," black subjecthood and subjectivity ultimately compete with, and even takes a back seat to, creating a response in the white viewer, who desires but also *expects* black bodies to be primarily and essentially wounded. Thus, although "The Scourged Back" does generate sympathy, it also creates barriers to true empathy.

As Jackson describes, white-produced or targeted images of suffering, wounded black bodies, which includes everything from abolitionist imagery to scenes of carnage during Civil Rights marches and images of starving black Africans disseminated by contemporary charities and non-profits, frequently suggest a sense of ownership over the black body. Writes Jackson:

> The wound frees the viewer to examine bodies, including bodies previously
> off limits. The wounded body's interior, that which we are not supposed to
> see, is open to observation. In the case of the black male body, a body
> already considered dangerous, volatile, and forbidden, the wound makes the
> body available to observation and desire. In her discussion of the wounded
> body of the title character of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*
> (1852), Marianna Noble sums up the effect of the wound thus: 'Feminizing
> and emasculating these [black] men frees her [Stowe] to desire them, for as
> tortured objects of pity, they invite the full force of love, tenderness and
> longing for intimacy that Stowe could never bestow upon a black man
> represented as a subject.' The wound is a means through which black male
> bodies become desirable objects and, at the same time, controllable objects.
> The power to look is also the power to police and govern that body, imbuing
> it with an erotics of control. (Jackson 4-5)

Unlike Uncle Tom, Black Panther is not wholly passive in his suffering; in most of his spectacles of bondage, the narration and the contortions of his body emphasize his active resistance. However, the spectacular nature of the Panther's suffering heightens the threat of objectification, and thus arguably pacifies him to a different and greater extent than is usual for his white male contemporaries. The Panther's suffering also, as discussed above, takes place in a different context, and evokes a different history. Case in point: the Panther's battle against Venomm's snakes in *Jungle Action* #16 can be read as referencing both previous images of Tarzan, including an image of the Tarzan-knockoff Tharn on the cover of *Jungle Action* #3 (1973), as well as turn-of-the-century anti-colonial propaganda. Pieterse's study of white-produced images of black subjects includes a 1906 political cartoon from the magazine *Punch* satirizing King Leopold's colonialism that almost precisely mirrors both the Tharn cover and Graham's image of Black Panther fighting Venomm's snakes (Image 24). In all of these snake images, a male body is wrenched backwards in struggling pain, recoiling from the head of a snake that one free arm tries desperately to ward off. And yet, the images depicting black bodies have different implied and actual political meanings. The image of Tharn depicts the struggle of man against nature, reinvigorating but also confirming white male superiority. In the *Punch* cartoon, however, the snake's head is that of the Belgian King Leopold; this fact renders the black man's struggle institutional as well as practical, which in turn makes his victory far less certain. In the image of Black Panther, the snake is once again more than just a snake; instead, it is a snake in the service of the skull-faced albino villain known as Venomm. Thus, Black Panther's snake battle is once again colour-coded, depicting a black man's struggle against nature as well as a literally white man who is capable of changing the very rules of nature. Ultimately, in these images, the cards seem to be stacked against the black man to a different and

greater degree than the white man.

Of course, it is not only black men who are objectified and glorified through spectacles of bondage and suffering in popular American culture; there is also Jesus, the preeminent white male sufferer. Significantly, at least three of the bondage scenes in *Jungle Action* directly evoke crucifixion: in *Jungle Action* #15 (1975) (Image 19), the Panther's arms and legs are tied to a cactus in a crucifixion-like pose; in *Jungle Action* #24 (Image 16-18), he is spayed across a waterwheel; and in *Jungle Action* #20 and #21 (1976) (Image 20-22), he is tied to an actual cross by the Ku Klux Klan, his main antagonist in the final issues of the series. However, depicting a black man suffering on a cross is, once again, fundamentally different than depicting a white man on a cross. Richard Dyer defines the hegemonic Western interpretation of Jesus's crucifixion thusly:

> The divided nature of white masculinity, which is expressed in relation not only to sexuality but also to anything that can be characterised as low, dark and irremediably corporeal, reproduces the structure of feeling of the Christ story. His agony is that he was fully flesh and fully spirit, able to be tempted though able to resist. In the torment of crucifixion, he experiences the fullness of the pain of sin, but in the resurrection showed that he could transcend it. The spectacle of the white male body suffering typically conveys a sense of the dignity and transcendence of such pain. (28)

Because one cannot truly defy the "darkness" of the body without confirming the association of darkness (or blackness) with evil, Black Panther cannot truly mimic Jesus except as an expression of self-hatred. The relative power of Jesus and Black Panther leading up to their

spectacles of suffering emphasizes this discrepancy. Jesus is, within the hegemonic Western depiction described by Dyer, lily white and inherently divine before enduring his physical trials—that is, before being tempted and tested by that which is corporeal and "dark"; in other words, Jesus' subjecthood—indeed, his divinity—is established prior to his suffering. Black Panther's subjecthood, however, is established and acquired *through* physical conflict, and especially through suffering. Furthermore, although the images of Black Panther crucified do not precisely mimic what Pieterse calls "[t]he central icon of abolitionism," namely, "the figure of the black kneeling, hands folded and eyes cast upward," they nonetheless carry a similar "Christian tenor" (60) that threatens the Panther's subjecthood. As Pieterse argues, abolitionist imagery of black men and women supplicating themselves to the Christian god "made emancipation conditional—on condition of conversion and on condition of docility and meekness, on condition of being on one's knees. This imagery was more an affirmation of Christianity than of the emancipation of blacks" (60). At the very least, the fact that Black Panther, a character who is shown, repeatedly, to practice a non-Christian religion, is routinely depicted within Christian imagery suggests that such scenes are less for the benefit of him as a character and more as a shorthand cue to garner sympathy from an audience familiar with locating black subjecthood in a capacity to suffer with docile, Christian piety.

The substance and style of *Jungle Action*'s crucifixion scenes furthermore evoke the controlling and possessive power of a white and implicitly Christian gaze. In each of the *Jungle Action* bondage scenes mentioned above, *Black Panther* suffers in silence. During the Panther's crucifixion by the Klan in *Jungle Action* #21, the narration says, "the flames which consume the cross and his body prove his humanity," directly stating that the Panther's subjecthood emerges through his capacity to suffer. Problematic as this notion already is, the bulk of the narration

actually contradicts it by de-emphasizing the Panther's humanity in favour of highlighting his animalistic bodily responses. "He is the *great black cat*," the narration in the *Jungle Action* #21 crucifixion scene states, "and the great black cat *fears* flame. He fears it instinctively. He does not need to thrust his paw into the flame to know it will cause pain." Significantly, in each crucifixion scene, the Panther's heroism, and, ultimately, his survival, depends on his ability to keep his mouth shut. In the cactus crucifixion scene from *Jungle Action* #15, the Panther's heroic endurance is symbolized by his ability to bite his lip to keep from vomiting or crying out. Similarly, in the Klan crucifixion scene, the Panther intimidates the Klan with his stoic silence. Finally, in the waterwheel crucifixion scene from *Jungle Action* #24, the Panther must keep his mouth closed to keep from drowning.

In each crucifixion scene, the Panther's own thoughts emerge only obliquely, filtered through the narration. His psychology is thus replaced, or at least overwritten, by the voice of the narrator (i.e. the white writer) who describes, labels, and investigates his bound, suffering body. In the Klan scene in particular, a white news reporter, Kevin Trublood—who, Sean Howe observes, is "an obvious stand-in for McGregor himself" (180)—is the primary vehicle of identification. While Black Panther's faceless, voiceless body endures its trials, Trublood is given copious dialogue, his face visible in close-ups down the left side of the page (literally framing the Panther's suffering). Although black characters—notably Monica Lynne—also get to speak in this scene, it is only Trublood who is permitted to voice active resistance, or state an intention to rebel—which, tellingly, takes the form of Trublood writing about his responses to the suffering of the Panther and Monica, whose sister was killed by the Klan. In comparison, the ability of the Panther's body to truly act or speak resistance in this scene is limited. While Trublood voices political resistance, the Panther's resistance to the Klan is exclusively physical

in a way that also reduces the physical to the instinctual. His body defies the Klan not by

confronting their ideology or politics, but by proving its ability to endure and survive their

punishment. Although Black Panther's physical resilience does surprise and intimidate the Klan,

it also, inevitably, affirms the racist assumption that there is something exceptional about the

black body, something supernatural and dangerous that can and must be tamed through physical

and scopophilic testing and interrogation.

Ultimately, Black Panther's spectacles of suffering suggest that his body is more steeped

in abolitionist imagery than black power imagery, while his animal battles suggest a particularly

risky context of proving his masculinity and heroism (and perhaps, his humanity). These

problematic aspects of the character's portrayal do not, of course, completely negate his ability to

be either subversive or inspirational. Prior to its crucifixion scene, the Klan storyline, for

instance, makes a heavy-handed, though still emotionally resonant, case for the potential

importance of a black hero through a long sequence in which Monica Lynne imaginatively

inserts the Panther into a story about an ancestor who was lynched by the Klan; in this sequence,

Lynne imagines the Panther fighting the Klan to save her long-dead ancestor, restoring and

preserving justice in the reconstruction-era South as well as hope in the present, in which

Lynne's family is once again menaced by the Klan. Lynne's assertion at the end of this sequence

about the importance of "*conjuring* [one's] own *mythology*," resonates with the calls of many

prominent black artists throughout the 20th century for Black Art and a black aesthetic. In the

end, the Panther, similar to his white male contemporaries, embodies multiple interpretative

possibilities. And yet, as the above analysis illustrates, the construction and deployment of these

multiplicities very often aggravates the racist assumptions and exclusions the character was

supposedly designed to combat—sometimes by feeding into racist logic, other times by not

resisting it enough to not be subsumed by the white supremacist logic that has shaped the black body for centuries.

Female superheroes are similar to black superheroes inasmuch as both women and blacks have historically been disenfranchised by their visibility, and by their related association with the body as opposed to, or in excess of, the mind. Within the context of the superhero genre, black superheroes and female superheroes are also, of course, minorities; they are atypical protagonists, whose bodies are overdetermined with cultural meanings and signs before they ever appear on the page. However, whereas Black Panther's masculine aspirations enjoy a degree of acceptability and sympathy for the simple reason that his body is male, the white, female superheroes who emerged in the 1970s are set apart, first and foremost, due to the ways in which white female bodies have been inscribed in Western society and visual culture as not only objects, but specifically as *erotic* objects. Though Marvel's newly created female superheroes of the 1970s possess the privilege of whiteness—a privilege that is often highlighted through battles with comparatively alien or otherwise "foreign" supervillains—their emphasized eroticism also defines the terms of their struggle to *be* embodied while not being *reduced* to a body.

As discussed in Chapter One, the powers—and, subsequently, the power—of female superheroes is generally circumscribed by their sexual objectification. As the example of the Invisible Girl demonstrated, the tendency to grant female superheroes comparatively passive "strike a pose and point" powers ensures that their empowerment does not infringe upon or damage their ideal (or idealized) feminine beauty, which in turn denies them the privileges of monstrousness and intercorporeal exchange. As Brown describes, although the female action hero "represents a potentially transgressive figure capable of expanding the popular perception of women's roles and abilities," her persistent sexualization also "runs the risk of reinscribing strict

gender binaries and of being nothing more than sexist window-dressing for the predominantly male audience" ("Dangerous Curves" 43). In general, female superheroes are routinely compelled to negotiate competing demands that they be both heroic subjects as well as erotic objects. However, the terms and forms of these negotiations vary across different characters, as well as different eras. As Dawn Heinecken observes, these multi-faceted, ongoing negotiations make female superheroes a great place to investigate the evolving and competing meanings of female power circulating in our society (21).

Since the 1960s, female power has been inseparable from the discourses of second-wave feminism. As Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra observe, post-1960s popular culture has been produced, at least in part, in response to feminism; consequently, performing a feminist analysis of this era's texts requires interrogating their politics of both marginalization and incorporation (Tasker and Negra 5). Just as Civil Rights and decolonization provided a viable and relevant context for the creation of the first black superhero, so too did feminism—or, as it was commonly referred to during the 1960s and 70s, "women's lib"—provide a viable and relevant context for creating a new type of female superhero, one who could be more than eye candy or moral support, who could have real power and revel in it while operating beyond the immediate influence of a husband, boyfriend, or male-dominated team. Between 1972 and 1980, Marvel created four new solo series starring female superheroes, all of which were either explicitly or implicitly meant to reflect and capitalize on the context of second-wave feminism: *The Cat*, created by the extremely rare all-female team of Marie Severin and Linda Fite, ran for four issues in 1972; *Ms. Marvel* ran for 23 issues from 1977-1979; *Spider-Woman* ran for 50 issues from 1978-83; and *The Savage She-Hulk* ran for 25 issues from 1980-82. Because these titles feature very similar themes and tendencies, this chapter will use examples from all of them to

examine the depiction of female superheroes created within, and in response to, second-wave feminism.

Notably, as mentioned, all of these new titles star white women,[48] and typically fall short of even *Jungle Action's* tentative attempts at intersectionality; as mentioned, where these new female superheroes do interact with literal or metaphorical women of colour, those women are most often villains. The relationship between these new female superheroes and their typical villainous counterparts will be discussed in more detail below; before that dynamic can be properly analyzed, however, it is necessary to investigate the ways in which these new female superheroes do represent significant departures from Marvel's female superheroes of the 1960s. The Cat, for instance, Marvel's first serious attempt to incorporate or address feminism,[49] revises several key tropes related to the depiction of female action heroes in all types of media. In *The Claws of the Cat* #1 (1972), the Cat, a.k.a. Green Nelson, begins her heroic journey after her policeman husband Bill, in a clear reference to the origin story of Batman, is shot and killed by a mugger while the couple is leaving a movie theatre. The feminist twist on this familiar tale is that Bill's death does not motivate Nelson to vengeance so much as liberate her from a man who actively limited her independence; in a series of flashbacks, Bill is shown refusing to allow Nelson to finish her college degree or drive a car. Furthermore, the journey to independence and

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[48] In *Amazing Spider-Man Annual* #16 (1982), Marvel did create one black female superhero: Monica Rambeau, who took over the name of Captain Marvel. Though Rambeau never starred in her own solo series, she did join Marvel's flagship title *The Avengers* and would remain a sporadic member of that team for nearly 20 years. She also starred in a solo "one-shot" in 1989. As of this writing, Rambeau remains an active character in the Marvel Universe. She is, however, compared to all of Ms. Marvel, Spider-Woman, and She-Hulk, a minor character, and has abandoned the Captain Marvel name to Carol Danvers, a.k.a. the original Ms. Marvel.

[49] *The Cat* was not the first time that Marvel Comics addressed feminism. However, it would be difficult to argue that the publisher's earlier invocations constituted serious treatments of the issue. Case in point, one of Marvel's earliest references to feminism is the "Lady Liberators" storyline in *Avengers* #83 (1970). In this story, the Enchantress, disguising herself as a superheroine called Valkyrie, brainwashes the Scarlet Witch, Medusa, Wasp, and Black Widow into fighting the male Avengers. The brainwashing element of this story effectively prevents it from reflecting legitimate feminist criticisms.

heroism that begins with the death of Nelson's husband comes to fruition via the help of a female

mentor. After being turned down for all of the jobs she applies for after Bill's death—a state of

affairs that, according to the narration, causes "women's lib... to have new meaning"—Nelson is

finally hired as a lab assistant by Dr. Tumolo, a kindly, grey-haired female scientist who nurtures

Nelson's intellectual talents and whose experiments are the source of Nelson's superheroic

transformation. This depiction of a female mentor is unusual. As Jennifer Stuller observes,

female action heroes tend to mirror the motherless Athena in having male mentors; in these

stories, the presence of a male mentor regularly sends the message that women "can only be as

independent as they are because they lack a mother's womanly—almost always implied as

passive—influence" (107).[50] Most of Marvel's female superheroes of the 1960s fit the male

mentor pattern, including the Invisible Girl, the Wasp, and Marvel Girl; all of these women are

empowered by the experiments of a male love interest and/or become and remain superheroes

primarily out of their love and support for a man who is usually more powerful, both physically

and institutionally. Nelson's heroism, in contrast, is inspired by a surrogate mother figure. Thinks

Nelson, in *The Cat* #1: "Dr. Tumolo really makes me *proud* to be a woman. I can't let her—or

myself—down."[51]

    To various extents, the original comics starring Ms. Marvel, Spider-Woman, and She-

Hulk similarly situate female empowerment within a context of female community while also

emphasizing the importance of independence. For instance, the emotional recovery of Spider-

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[50] An important exception to this rule is Wonder Woman, who, in her 1942 origin story, is built out of clay by her mother and imbued with life by Aphrodite. Wonder Woman's early comics (i.e. those written by William Marston) also emphasize female friendship and community, with Wonder Woman recruiting a university sorority known as the Holliday Girls to assist her in her missions. Though his emphasis on female community declined significantly following Marston's death, it has sometimes been resurrected since (for detailed histories of Wonder Woman's evolution as a character, see Lepore, Robbins).

51 The Cat spends issue #2 and the beginning of issue #3 fighting to save Dr. Tumolo's life. Although the doctor ends the series in a catatonic state, it is unclear whether she would have recovered had the series continued.

Woman's alter ego, Jessica Drew, from the trauma of being brainwashed by the evil organization

Hydra, who raised her following the (apparent) death of her parents, begins when she gets her

first paying job and continues when she makes her first female friend, Lindsay Grant; Drew

shares an apartment with Grant for the final 14 issues of her series. Jennifer Walters and Carol

Danvers, the alter egos of She-Hulk and Ms. Marvel, respectively, both begin their series in high-

powered careers, as a criminal lawyer and a NASA security chief turned magazine editor.[52] Both

of these characters also have female friends and support networks; in the first issues of her series,

She-Hulk's rage and vengeance is motivated by the death of her best friend Jill at the hands of

gangsters; similarly, Ms. Marvel goes a mission to avenge the death of her best Salia Petrie, a

female astronaut who dies amid a conflict with a group of supernatural villains known as the

Elementals.

It is the *Ms. Marvel* series, though, that most clearly situates female community at the

centre of its story of empowerment. In *Ms. Marvel* #1 (1977), Danvers is hired by Daily Bugle

publisher J. Jonah Jameson to become the editor of the aforementioned *Woman* magazine, a new

publication aimed at a lapsed female readership (potentially mirroring the comic book itself).[53] In

describing the content of his previous publications aimed at women, Jameson, a stereotypical

male chauvinist pig, vehemently rejects feminism: "Articles on *women's lib*, interviews with

Kate Millet, stories about *careers for women—yecch*." Jameson wants *Woman* to be a more

"traditional" women's magazine, offering "*new diets*, and *fashions*, and *recipes*," and, of course,

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[52] Carol Danvers was first introduced as a supporting character in *Marvel Super-Heroes* #13 (1968). At that point, she was a NASA security chief and potential love interest for Captain Marvel. The *Ms. Marvel* series opens with Danvers reinventing herself as a successful author after being fired from NASA following the accident involving Captain Marvel that also granted her her superpowers.

[53] There is no hard data about how many girls and women read superhero comics during the era in question. Although Suzanne Scott argues that the female audience for superhero comics has likely been consistently underestimated (7), the near exclusivity of male creators and the dominance of male characters and patriarchal and otherwise male-directed fantasies during the era in question suggests that boys and men comprised the genre's dominant fanbase.

a scathing condemnation of Ms. Marvel. Danvers' heroic commitment to feminism is in turn foregrounded by her refusal to write about diets, fashions, or recipes, and in the production of a pro-Ms. Marvel piece. This conflict between Danvers and Jameson is a crucial site of negotiation, allowing for criticism of a patriarchal publishing industry while privileging Marvel above such criticism because it publishes the (purportedly) feminist *Ms. Marvel*. The first splash page of *Ms. Marvel* #6 (1977), which features a close-up of *Woman* #1 with an image of Ms. Marvel on the cover (Image 25), explicates Marvel's effort to connect Ms. Marvel/Carol Danvers to feminist icon Gloria Steinem, co-founder of *Ms.* magazine, which featured the world's most famous female superhero, Wonder Woman, on the cover of its 1972 debut.[54] Danvers is furthermore portrayed in this comic as an idol to other women, including Spider-Man's long-time paramour Mary Jane Watson, who, in *Ms. Marvel* #1, treats Danvers like a lifestyle guru, fawning over her beauty and success and asking her, over lunch, how she "found herself." Danvers is also shown using her institutional power to help other women; for instance, in *Ms. Marvel* #8 (1977), she reaches out to Tracy Burke, a famed journalist disgraced by alcoholism, to be the associate editor of *Woman*. Ms. Marvel is also presented as an aspirational ideal for girls and women. In the opening scene of issue #1 (Image 26), a little girl, wide-eyed by Ms. Marvel's physical display, points to her and says, "Mommy, I've never seen a woman like *that*—have *you*?" The little girl's mother replies, "No, Suzy—*never*!" The girl then exclaims, "Wow! When *I* grow up—I wanna be just like *her*!" This scene emphasizes the intention—or, perhaps, the conceit—that Ms. Marvel could become a hero for a new generation of women, serving as both a

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[54] Steinem was a leading voice in the re-cooperation of Wonder Woman as a feminist icon. In the same year that *Ms* launched, Steinam wrote an introduction for a reprint collection of Wonder Woman stories from the 1940s, in which she claimed, "If we had all read more about Wonder Woman and less about Dick and Jane, the new wave of the feminist revolution might have happened less painfully and sooner" (3). Steinem was also instrumental securing the restoration of Wonder Woman's original patriotic costume and powerset after she was re-imagined as a de-powered boutique owner beginning in 1968 (Greenberger 175).

model and a metaphor for women's liberation.

This new group of female superheroes also possess explicitly physical powers and abilities. The Cat uses her razor-sharp claws and advanced acrobatic skills to scale buildings and engage in hand-to-hand combat; Spider-Woman projects venom blasts from her fingertips but also climbs walls, has enhanced senses and flexibility, and the ability to fly; Ms. Marvel has superhuman strength, speed, agility, and the ability to fly; and She-Hulk's name makes her powers relatively self-explanatory. The aforementioned opening scenes of *Ms. Marvel* #1 particularly foreground the physical might of its self-consciously feminist star. *Ms. Marvel* #1 opens in media res, with the titular hero flying, delivering roundhouse punches, and throwing a car full of escaping bank robbers. While the Cat's introduction included a comparison to Batman, Ms. Marvel's introduction establishes her similarity to history's first and most famous superhero, Superman, who also made a memorable first impression by throwing a car. A far cry from the Invisible Girl or Marvel Girl posing at the edge of the battle and projecting invisible energy into the fray, the Cat, Spider-Woman, Ms. Marvel, and She-Hulk are willing and able to get their hands dirty, to show and demonstrate physical pain and joy and become viscerally, corporeally visible.

Notably, however, the ways in which these women come by their powers tend to be problematic at best. The Cat is empowered via a scientific experiment whose reputed goal, as Dr. Tumolo states in *The Cat* #1, is to "someday make it possible for any woman to totally fulfil her physical and mental potential—despite the handicaps that society places on her." Stuller argues that, "While the message resonates with consciousness-raising politics of Women's Liberation in the 1970s... [u]sing a machine to amplify women's abilities excuses them from the responsibilities of empowering themselves" (40). It is worth noting, too, that aspects of the Cat's

powerset essentialize her femininity. In *The Cat* #1, the narration states that "[Nelson's] intensified perceptions were like an *embodiment* of that mythical quality known as *woman's intuition.*" Nelson's superpowered intuition allows her to both instinctively solve mechanical problems as well as feel the pain in the paw of an injured squirrel (Image 27); as such, the Cat's powerset heightens stereotypically feminine qualities of empathy and emotionality alongside, or perhaps in compensation for, more stereotypically masculine capabilities. For her part, Spider-Woman is empowered by her father, who injects her with spider DNA to save her from radiation sickness. Finally, She-Hulk and Ms. Marvel take their powers directly from their male counterparts: like Eve created from Adam's rib, She-Hulk and Ms. Marvel gain their superpowers when their bodies are, respectively, augmented by a blood transfusion from the Hulk, and fused with the DNA of the male Captain Marvel.

The names of these new female superheroes substantiate their subordination to their male counterparts. While the names of Spider-Man, the Hulk, and Captain Marvel are either implicitly or explicitly universal, the names of Spider-Woman, She-Hulk, and Ms. Marvel are explicitly gendered. Although Ms. Marvel's name was meant to resonate with feminism,[55] it also directly subordinates her to the male superhero, Captain Marvel, whose name connotes institutional power in a way that Ms. Marvel's name does not. Feminizing the names of already existing male superheroes in this way suggests that women are a variation on the norm, which in turn situates femaleness as a strain or aspect of maleness. This meaning is especially clear in the case of She-Hulk, whose hyphenated name explicitly adds to or qualifies the genderless (re: universal) moniker of her pre-existing male counterpart. A similar argument can, of course, apply to the

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[55] In an introductory letter at the end of *Ms. Marvel* #1, writer/creator Jerry Conway asserts the importance of the "Ms" prefix as a statement of female independence. Writes Conway: "her name, if nothing else, is influenced, to a great extent, by the move toward women's liberation. She is *not* a Marvel Girl; she's a woman, *not* a Miss or a Mrs.—a *Ms*. Her own person. Herself."

naming of Black Panther. As Lendrum observes, "They didn't call him Super-*White* Man, or Captain *White* America, but for some reason, comic book publishers often felt the need to emphasize the ethnicity of African American superheroes" (360). The names of Black Panther, Black Goliath, and Black Lighting are quite obviously racially marked, making the characters overwritten or overdetermined by race in a way that white superheroes are not. Nevertheless, Black Panther's name is arguably less directly subordinating than the names of this group of female superheroes, inasmuch as he is not actually a black variation on a pre-existing white character.

Visually, too, the strength of this new group of female superheroes is often highly circumscribed. This is especially evident in scenes featuring She-Hulk, who is ostensibly one of the strongest superheroes in the Marvel Universe. The actions scenes in *Savage She-Hulk* #7 and 8 (1980) (Image 28), penciled by Mike Vosburg, are a case in point. In these scenes, She-Hulk's smooth, lanky arms are not practically or dramatically appropriate to the context of the scene, in which She-Hulk furiously wrestles an alligator and the antihero known as the Man-Thing. She-Hulk appears moderately athletic in these scenes, but her supposedly super-strong punches have little or no weight; her arms do not ripple with power, but rather appear very lean and unlined. This unwillingness to depict She-Hulk's muscles turns what should be large, impressive actions into mere gestures; She-Hulk goes through the motions of fighting for her life, but her graphic lack of strength or exertion does little to make the reader practically or emotionally believe in it. In other words, this scene *tells* us that She-Hulk is strong, but does very little to *show* it. In *Ms. Marvel*, the artwork similarly tends to downplay the strength of the title's star. Four pages from *Ms. Marvel* #1 (Image 29 and 30) are emblematic of this tendency. In this scene, penciled by veteran artist John Buscema (co-author of the instructional book, *How to Draw Comics the*

Marvel Way), Ms. Marvel is largely viewed from a distance; only the final panel on the third page of the excerpt (Image 30) is a true close-up of Ms. Marvel, focusing on her determined face as she delivers a solid punch. This tendency to view Ms. Marvel from a distance deemphasizes her size and physical might and creates a somewhat lifeless, and thus unheroic, action sequence. Importantly, too, this layout goes against the teachings of *How to Draw Comics the Marvel Way*, which opines that compositions should feature a diversity of angles and focal lengths. "It gets dull," the text states of that book states, "for a reader to see characters who are pretty much the same size throughout the pages." Ultimately, these pages' frame and pose Ms. Marvel's body in ways that do less to showcase her superheroic speed and strength, and more to emphasize her erotic appeal. In at least half of the panels on these pages, Ms. Marvel is depicted from behind, usually using angles or poses that showcase as much as possible of her bare back and/or legs. Furthermore, in most of the athletic poses on these pages, the curves of Ms. Marvel's buttocks and breasts are visible at the same time; when Ms. Marvel punches or falls, at least one perky breast always points out or upwards, essentializing her body's femininity and foregrounding her erotic appeal.

The costumes of these new female superheroes enhance their sexualisation. While not quite as revealing or otherwise sexualized as the costumes many female superheroes would sport in the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, the costumes of these new female superheroes nonetheless push the limits of what could be shown under the auspices of the Comics Code, which was written to allow clothing to reflect changing social norms. Through its light colour and seamlessness, the Cat's costume provides a strong illusion of nakedness. This illusion of nakedness was not lost on artist Wally Wood, who was hired to ink Severin's cover for *The Cat* #1; Howe claims that Wood initially inked the cover as though the title character were naked,

forcing Severin to white-out nipples and pubic hair (130). *The Cat*'s interior art further evokes this illusion of nakedness; in one memorable panel from issue #1, the Cat is knocked unconscious into a pose that is highly reminiscent of a typical Playboy pinup from a similar era (Image 31). Spider-Woman's costume, while basically similar to the all-over-spandex of a traditional male superhero costume, is also designed to highlight her feminine curves; the yellow hourglass design running down the centre of her body cups her breasts and creates a bold yellow arrow pointing at her crotch. Though She-Hulk wears about as much fabric as the Hulk, it is differently distributed upon her differently excessive body; the fabric of She-Hulk's "costume" tears wide across her breasts, cups her buttocks, and draws another arrow to her crotch. For her part, Ms. Marvel went through several different costumes during the 1970s. The first is a cut-out design featuring bare legs and an exposed back and midriff. While the midriff and back holes are closed in *Ms. Marvel* #9 (1977), issue #20 (1978) features a highly sexualized redesign, swapping out the bright primary colours for a shiny black ensemble consisting of a backless bathing suit, thigh-high heeled boots, and long gloves, accompanied by a much longer, fuller mane of blonde hair (Image 32).

Importantly, Ms. Marvel's black costume is justified as a personally empowering choice. The first pages of *Ms. Marvel* #20 show Ms. Marvel posing in front of a mirror in her apartment, displaying her breasts and buttocks to their full advantage and at multiple angles, declaring, "I look *grrrrreat*!" In part, this scene reflects a common tendency to sexualize the transformation of female characters into their superheroic personas. As Richard Reynolds describes, "whilst for the superhero the transformation into costume can best be achieved with something as instantaneous as Billy Batson's 'Shazam', which calls forth the invincible Captain Marvel, for the superheroine the process can (at least potentially) be viewed as the performance of an uncompleted striptease"

(37). This tendency is emblematized by many extended scenes from the 1940s showing Wonder Woman stripping off her dowdy civilian clothing to reveal her pornography-inspired crime-fighting gear, consisting of a strapless bustier, tap shorts, and high heels. However, within the context of the later-1970s, Ms. Marvel's final costume change is notable for making explicit something that other comics from this period only imply: that sexualisation is not incompatible with superheroism, but can, instead, be an aspect of it when used as a statement of liberation. In other words, this moment capitalizes on the real linkages between feminism and the sexual revolution to assert that self-sexualisation *is* a form of feminism. To be fair, this proposition is not in itself false. What is suspicious, however, about Ms. Marvel's new costume and the scene in which she reveals it, is how precisely this new supposed liberation aligns with stereotypical male sexual fantasies.

The thick admixture of progressive and regressive tropes and images that characterizes this new era of female superheroes suggests that the biggest difference between this new generation of female superheroes and the generation that came before may be the fact that the new generation is more intensely conflicted; both more explicitly feminist and more explicitly sexualized, these new female superheroes embody heightened gender conflicts. Furthermore, these heightened conflicts are not incidental, but are in fact intentional, being emphasized and sometimes directly stated by and within the imagery and stories of the comics themselves. The cover of *The Cat* #1 (Image 33) is a prime example. On this cover, beneath the jagged letters of the title ("Beware... The claws of *The Cat!*"), a shapely female form in a canary yellow unitard and navy blue, cat-eared mask lunges forward, her raised hands ending in long, sharp claws. All around her, bold fonts declare the introduction of "*Marvel's newest action bombshell*!" and ask, "How did a *beautiful girl* gain the uncanny powers of a *killer beast*??" This cover situates the

female superhero as a particular type of gender monster. The Cat blurs the boundaries between masculine activity and feminine passivity; she is both an "action" hero and a "bombshell," both a "killer beast" and a "beautiful girl." Inside her skin-tight costume, the Cat also embodies these supposed conflicts, her razor-sharp claws contrasting, both visually and ideologically, the soft curves of her hourglass figure. *The Cat* even invokes this contradiction herself in the last panel of issue #1, after the accidental death of the story's villain and the near-death of Dr. Tumolo: "All our plans for the *betterment* of womankind—! I did what I set out to do, and I did it *well*—but have I *misused* my powers? Did I become a stronger *woman*—only to become a *poorer* human being?"

On the one hand, the fact that a female superhero is being allowed to pose such as question can be viewed as a positive development. The Cat's ability to question the nature and terms of her embodied identity confirms that, unlike the Invisible Girl, she is allowed to exercise agency in the creation and representation of her superheroic self; it also confirms that she is allowed to be monstrous, in the sense that she is allowed to be wary of her boundary-breaking body, and question the terms and nature of her transformation. However, similar to Black Panther's opposition to the "anachronism" of Man-Ape, placing the Cat in this conflict risks legitimizing it *as* a conflict. Essentially, the Cat's defining conflict is between sex and gender, her example debating whether it is possible for a woman to embody masculine characteristics of assertiveness, strength, and even heroism without becoming the *wrong* kind of superbeing—that is, one that is uncontrolled and irredeemable rather than contained/containing and redeemable. To ask whether a female body can be assertive very obviously essentializes gender, locating and fixing certain traits in certain bodies. In effect, the Cat's defining conflict legitimates the question: is female empowerment—female strength—desirable, or dangerous? Is it good for

society, or bad? Sherrie A. Inness argues that this conflict is typical of post-1960s female action heroes, who are often "split between traditionally feminine and masculine traits and are sometimes strongly ambivalent about this division, suggesting that being tough is not 'normal' for women" (149-50).

All of Marvel's new female superheroes of the 1970s are presented as gender rebels (or deviants); they are also often presented as sexual rebels (or, once again, deviants). For instance, Spider-Woman's defining conflict involves her struggle to control the pheromones that she emits against her will as a result of her spider DNA. These pheromones repel women and attract men; essentially, one of Spider-Woman's defining conflicts revolves around the fact that her body is literally over-sexed. In addition, the cover of *Spider-Woman* #1 is similar to the first issue of *The Cat* in its focus on its star as both a gender rebel and a gender deviant. Although this image clearly references the opening splash page of *Amazing Spider-Man* #1 (Image 34), there are several important differences between the two images. The foremost difference is the sexualisation of Spider-Woman. But Spider-Woman is also persecuted differently; whereas Spider-Man is primarily attacked by pointing fingers and cameras, Spider-Woman is attacked by exaggeratedly large guns, two of which are aimed at the spot between her spread thighs that is also emphasized, as discussed earlier, by the design and placement of her costume's yellow hourglass symbol. It is additionally notable that in the image from *Spider-Man* #1, it is clearly the public making the charges of "freak" and "menace," whereas on the cover of *Spider-Woman* #1, it is the comic itself making such claims, through the tag-line, "To Know Her is to Fear Her!" While the Spider-Man image generates fear but also sympathy and/or empathy for the persecuted protagonist, *Spider-Woman*'s tagline suggests that the audience will—or should—participate in fearing and/or persecuting the protagonist.

Similarly, although She-Hulk's monstrousness is in principle similar to that of the Hulk, in practice it is very differently gendered. The comparison of the covers of the first issues of *Incredible Hulk* #1 and *Savage She-Hulk* #1 (Image 35) illustrates this difference. In both images, a smaller, human form is overshadowed by a larger, monstrous form, as spectators in the background flee in shock and horror. Once again, the most obvious difference between these two cover images is the very different nature of the male and female bodies. When Jennifer Walters transforms into She-Hulk, her increased strength and height is accompanied by exaggeratedly fetishized hair, nails, and breasts. She-Hulk's exaggerated femininity both compensates for her exaggerated strength and naturalizes gender by suggesting that it is impossible for even a monstrous woman to be un-feminine. This exaggerated femininity also, however, suggests that She-Hulk is an icon of monstrous femininity: as a 6'7" green-skinned Amazon with a short temper, She-Hulk might be read as femininity magnified, amplified, and weaponized. Yet another reading is that She-Hulk is monstrous through her combination of exaggerated strength and exaggerated femininity. Whereas the Hulk is presented on the cover of his first issue as a psychological and physical threat, She-Hulk is more directly depicted as a social threat; her sexualized monstrousness is a threat to traditional gender norms and roles, and thus, a threat to public morality and decency. This reading is emphasized by the setting of each cover; whereas the Hulk is depicted in the private space of an army base, She-Hulk is depicted in a public space, on a busy street in a major urban centre where she is watched and feared by a swath of everyday Americans. The different adjectives used to describe each character also connote their differently gendered monstrousness. While the Hulk is "Incredible," She-Hulk is "Savage." These adjectives do not accurately describe the behaviour of these characters, She-Hulk being commonly depicted as a more rational and intelligent character. And yet, these adjectives do accurately describe the

gendered monstrousness of the characters. Inasmuch as his masculinity is exaggerated, the Hulk is monstrous in a gender normative way; although he is a monster, he is an "incredible" monster, a miracle as well as a menace. She-Hulk, however, is a gender hybrid, a woman who transforms into a creature with exaggerated characteristics of both masculinity and femininity; she is "savage" because she is more deviant and unnatural, specifically in terms of her gender representation and, potentially, her sexuality.

Unsurprisingly, Ms. Marvel, Marvel's most overtly feminist superhero, also embodies the most intense gender conflicts of these four female superheroes. For the first dozen issues of her series, Danvers suffers from an especially severe multiple personality disorder. For the first several issues of her series, Danvers is not even aware that she and Ms. Marvel are the same person, her transformations into her superheroic alter ego being triggered, as Alex Boney describes, by "fainting spells and blackouts, which had been used to signal female hysteria and instability for centuries" (24). Although several of Marvel's male superheroes could, as discussed in Chapter One, be said to suffer from hysteria, none—with the possible exception of the Hulk—are centrally defined by hysteria the way Ms. Marvel is. There are, in addition, specific meanings and consequences to depicting a female superhero as hysterical. As Mary Poovey observes, the 19th century discourse of hysteria situated the female body as "always lacking and needing control"; because hysteria was viewed as both a normal state of womanhood and a pathology, it defined women as essentially pathological—as somehow inherently "abnormal" or "disturbed" (cited in Balsamo 27). Consequently, using the signs of hysteria to signal Danvers' transformations into Ms. Marvel suggests either that women are inherently pathological, abnormal, and disturbed, or that they become this way when they become superheroes (re: become empowered). Both readings are supported by an initial storyline in

which Danvers' male psychiatrist, Michael Barret—who is also a potential love interest—learns her dual identity before she does, thus placing him in a position of superior knowledge and control. During the scene in which Danvers exposes her dual identity to Barnett under hypnosis, her vulnerability and dependence on men is strongly emphasized; in this scene, which is partly a series of flashbacks, Danvers is shown fainting three times in four pages, twice into the hands of a more capable man (first Captain Marvel, followed by Barnett). Ultimately, this foundational storyline presents Marvel's most overtly feminist superhero as not only sick, but actually torn apart emotionally and physically. This storyline also suggests that this sickness can only be managed or controlled by a male authority figure/doctor/lover.[56]

In addition, for as long as the split personality plot continues in *Ms. Marvel*, the comic foregrounds Danvers' psychological problems as the result of combining connotatively feminine emotions with connotatively masculine strength, juxtaposing the aggressive, alien personality of Ms. Marvel with the more traditionally feminine personality of Danvers. The narration in *Ms. Marvel* #7 (1977) describes this opposition: "*Friends*—Ms. Marvel had none, Carol, *many*. Ms. Marvel's memories are those of *violence* and hatred, Carol's of love and *beauty*. Both sides of her soul *battle* for supremacy…" While the split between Ms. Marvel/Danvers is functionally similar to the split between the Hulk/Banner, the choice of adjectives in this piece of narration emphasizes the differently gendered nature of the Hulk and Ms. Marvel's conflicts; whereas the conflict between the Hulk and Banner is primarily between violent physicality and intelligence, the conflict between Ms. Marvel and Danvers is between violence and beauty. This opposition

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[56] *Spider-Woman* features a very similar story arc in which Spider-Woman's alter ego Jessica Drew seeks the help of a clinic called "The Hatros Institute for Emotional Research" in an effort to control her pheromone powers (*Spider-Woman* #13 [1979]). The clinic is originally run by a male doctor; several issues later, however, it is revealed that the clinic is actually run by a woman, the supervillain Nekra, and that the pheromone-controlling medicines that Jessica has been given are meant to neutralize her powers to Nekra's advantage.

not only suggests that Danvers' greatest value is located in her physical appearance, but also that her central tragedy is the possibility of her beauty being damaged by her transformation into a superhero. Thus, whereas the Hulk is liberated from beauty, Ms. Marvel is inescapably beholden to it.

Admittedly, these gendered conflicts could function as metaphors for the changing place of women in American society. Gerry Conway, the creator and original writer of *Ms. Marvel*, states this intent directly in a letter appearing at the end issue #1, in which he claims that readers are meant to see "a parallel between *her* [i.e. Ms. Marvel/Carol Danver's] quest for identity, and the modern woman's quest for raised consciousness, for self-liberation, for identity." Certainly, within the narratives of their respective stories, these new female superheroes are routinely subjected to forms of gender discrimination that seem designed to generate sympathy—for the characters, and for the cause of feminism. In *The Cat* #1, for instance, it is difficult not to root for Nelson's independence after seeing the severe ways in which her chauvinist husband tries to limit it. The Cat's first villainous opponent, Mal Donalbain, is also an exaggerated patriarch, a health club owner whose evil scheme involves creating an army of superwomen that he plans to control using a "will-nullifier" that "renders the wearer *helpless* against the superior wishes of [his] *superior mind*" (*The Cat* #1). In the final pages of *The Cat* #1, the Cat provokes Donalbain's death in a scene redolent of rape. Knowing that the maniacal Donalbain has an intense phobia of being touched, the Cat corners him in a dark room and slowly advances on him while uttering suggestive threats. This scene can be read as both a revenge fantasy and an implied critique of patriarchal masculinity; because Donalbain prefers death to being touched by the active (or phallic) woman, his masculine need for dominance and control is shown to be literally self-destructive. Spider-Woman must similarly fight for her independence against a

series of men who try to manipulate her life, including a controlling boyfriend and another would-be boyfriend who partners with her in a bounty hunting business. She-Hulk, too, is confronted with numerous unsupportive male relatives, coworkers, and friends; this includes her father—an aggressive DA who disowns her after she defends a man he believes is guilty—as well as a chauvinist male lawyer at her office and a male best friend (and aspiring lover) who eventually hands her over to a team of evil scientists intent on using her genes to create a clone army. Ms. Marvel is similarly saddled with a chauvinist father who tells her, in a flashback sequence in *Ms. Marvel* #19 (1978), that he will only assist with her brother's college tuition because "you don't need college to find a good *husband*." All of these new female superheroes also face numerous male villains who use sexist language (i.e. "broad," "chick," etc.) to taunt and disparage them.

While these acknowledgements of sexism represent a significant change from the previous era, these new female superheroes still have limited tools for meaningfully resisting sexism and becoming truly empowered. It is, after all, not merely fictional male chauvinists who deny the right and ability of these women to be strong, independent, and heroic; the comics themselves also evince significant doubts about the viability of female superheroism. This doubt is evident in the fundamental design of these female superheroes as gender monsters. It is also evident in the ways these new female superheroes are subjected to sexualised violence. As discussed within the analysis of Black Panther, even though all superheroes are routinely subjected to spectacles of suffering, the quality and frequency of those spectacles always matters. An examination of covers is useful to this end, inasmuch as covers are advertisements that attempt to graphically encapsulate a character's appeal, and because each of these female superheroes has a male counterpart with roughly the same powerset and costume who also

starred in a solo series during the same era. Between 1970-1980, the covers of *Amazing Spider-Man* feature the title character in bondage or incapacitated (i.e. obviously defeated or rendered unconscious) 23 times out of 119, or approximately 19% percent of the time. During the same period, *Captain Marvel* features its title character in bondage and/or incapacitated on 8 out of 41 covers, averaging the same 19%. Unsurprisingly, given the virtually indestructible nature of its protagonist, *The Incredible Hulk* features considerably fewer bondage or incapacitation covers during this period: just 8 out of 119, or 6%. Comparatively, Ms. Marvel is in bondage or incapacitated on 7 out of 23 covers, for a total of 30%; for Spider-Woman, the numbers are 9 out of 50, or 18%; and for She-Hulk, the numbers are 6 out of 25, or 24%.

Based solely on these numbers, the female superheroes are tied up and knocked unconscious only slightly more often than their male counterparts. Yet the quality of the images is significantly different. When the male superheroes are bound or incapacitated, they are almost always shown within a context of active resistance; faces grimacing in a combination of anger and pain, the male superheroes twist and flex their muscles against the chains or ropes or tentacles that bind them, or raise a clenched fist in bitter, intentioned defiance (see Image 36-38). Female superheroes are far less likely to be shown in postures of active resistance. Typical examples from *Ms. Marvel* and *Spider-Woman* (Image 39-42) show the protagonists looking shocked and terrified, evoking helplessness rather than anger or determination. On these covers, the female superheroes do not protest so much as withdraw; rather than attacking or defending themselves, they seem to be thinking only of escape. In addition, the female superheroes are more likely to adopt explicitly sexualized poses while suffering. The cover of *Spider-Woman* #33 (1980) (Image 42), for instance, uses the excuse of Spider-Woman being struck with an energy beam to create a rigid pose in which her buttocks and breasts jut out, and her head is thrown

back, open-mouthed, in a suggestively orgiastic expression; *Spider-Woman* #48 (1983) (Image 42) features a similarly orgiastic expression, while adding the shape of a hard, pointed nipple to Spider-Woman's once again jutting breast, emphasizing her near-nakedness and strongly suggesting a sexual response. Similarly, when She-Hulk is hurled through a window on the cover of *Savage She-Hulk* #3 (1980) (Image 43), her body is posed to show off her legs and offer a tantalizing hint of the space between them, which is covered by a very thin strip of torn white fabric. These sexualized poses sharply contrast the typical depiction of Spider-Man in bondage; on the covers of *Amazing Spider-Man* #85 (1970), #107 (1972), and #191 (1979) (Image 36), Spider-Man's body is either concealed by his bonds or else folded or bent in a protective, shielding posture.

Many of the covers featuring female superheroes in scenes of bondage or incapacitation also titillate through the suggestion of sexual assault. For instance, on the cover of *Ms. Marvel* #17 (1978) (Image 40), Ms. Marvel is shown skittering backwards across the ground, her legs spread open while her wide eyes and gaping mouth convey helplessness, terror, and perhaps a plea for mercy from the unseen figure pointing a huge, gold weapon down at her; her costume has also been torn to expose the top and side of her breast. *Ms. Marvel* #19 (1978) (Image 40) features the same helpless expression and the same torn costume, but places the protagonist on her stomach, with the curve of her buttocks pushed upwards toward the aggressive figure of Captain Marvel, who is thrusting his muscular body forward; even though most readers would know that Captain Marvel is an ally of Ms. Marvel, his aggression nonetheless highlights her helplessness. The cover of *Spider-Woman* #4 (1978) (Image 41) is similar, depicting the dramatically terrified Spider-Woman modelling her curves inside a rope, helplessly sexy under the control of the aggressive, muscular male supervillain towering over her. The cover of *Spider-*

Woman #6 (1978) (Image 41), in which Spider-Woman is gagged and tied to a chair with ropes that carefully avoid obstructing her always-perky breasts, directly states its intent to titillate through Spider-Woman's helplessness: "Spider-Woman is *helpless*… before the mindless rampage of *Werewolf by Night*!" These covers are similar to Richard Dyer's characterization of the typical ways in which woman are sexually victimized in mainstream American films. As Dyer describes, whereas male heroes almost always fight back against those trying to hurt or oppress them, female protagonists are rarely permitted to demonstrate physical resistance. Furthermore, many typical sequences, Dyer argues, are put together in such a way that "we are encouraged to take up a traditional male role in relation to the woman, one that asserts our superiority and at the same time encourages us to feel the desire to rape and conquer… We are encouraged into the position of a rapist in relation to her" (96). An emblematic example of this tendency would be the infamous shower scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), in which the camera shares the same space as the killer as he stabs (and metaphorically rapes) the female protagonist. The cover of *Ms. Marvel* #17, in which the viewer is spatially aligned with the large male figure pointing a gun down at the title's cowering protagonist, is explicitly similar to the *Psycho* example. Yet each example in which the female superhero is sexualized in her suffering and fear also implicitly solicits the viewer to participate in her victimization.

There are, of course, some potential exceptions to these general tendencies. She-Hulk, for instance, does appear muscularly aggressive on several of the covers where she is subjected to bondage. Similarly, the cover for *Captain Marvel* #52 (Image 37) displays Captain Marvel's body in a way that is at least somewhat akin to the ways in which female superheroes are commonly displayed, with the notable difference that he has the defiant expression the female superheroes almost always lack. Additionally, all of Spider-Man, Captain Marvel, and the Hulk

are featured on at least one cover image from the period wherein they are fully unconscious (Image 44) and thus, by default, wholly passive. It is worth noting, however, that passivity in unconsciousness has a different connotation than passivity in consciousness; while the first instance is unavoidable and thus forgivable, the second instance—at least for superheroes, who are invulnerable, can shoot energy bolts out of their fingertips, and/or possess super-strength and speed—suggests a failure to live up to expectations, or a failure to embrace the responsibilities of power. In addition, in each of the aforementioned cover images showing an unconscious male superhero, the emphasis is not on the body, but rather on the face, which, in all three cases, is enlarged in the foreground as the central focus of the composition. Focusing on the face rather than the body of the unconscious superhero protects him from an objectifying gaze; it also emphasizes his subjectivity, soliciting empathy. Conversely, when female superheroes are unconscious on the covers from this period, their whole bodies are not merely shown, but also displayed—laid out or posed for inspection or appreciation. The covers of *Spider-Woman* #43 (1982) (Image 42), *Ms. Marvel* #6 (Image 39), and *Savage She-Hulk* #11 (1980) (Image 43) are especially good examples of this trend. Ultimately, for male superheroes, images of bondage or incapacitation primarily evoke a feeling of heroic drama; these images can be sexy, but their design and composition suggests that titillation is not their primary goal. In contrast, the covers from this period featuring female superheroes bound or incapacitated do not evoke empathy so much as they allow and promote identification with an objectifying and even sexually violent gaze. If these covers solicit sympathy for the female superhero, this sympathy would seem to have less to do with her heroism—that is, her capacity to save others—than because she looks like someone who needs saving.

These covers do not, of course, tell the whole story of the link between sexuality and

violence that exists in these comics. Sexualized violence is also very much present in the stories

themselves, which typically feature extended sequences surrounding the cover images of the

female superheroes bound or incapacitated. *Spider-Woman* #4 and #5, for instance, fulfill the

titillating promise of issue #4's sexually violent cover by featuring no less than five full pages in

which Spider-Woman is tied-up, dragged, and carried about by the villainous Grim Reaper.

Female superheroes are also often featured in plots featuring sexual violence. Typically, such

plots involve the female superhero being brainwashed and/or nearly or actually compelled to

marry a supervillain. During the 1970s and 80s, nearly all of Marvel's major female superhero

were involved in such a plot.[57] To be fair, a femme fatale supervillain such as the Enchantress,

who possesses the power to hypnotize men into loving and serving her, also subjects male

superheroes to what would, in the context of real life, constitute sexual assault and/or rape. For

female superheroes, however, the presence of sexual violence is at once more common and more

explicit. The history of Ms. Marvel is a case in point. In a now infamous storyline that follows

the conclusion of her solo series, Mr. Marvel is kidnapped and brought to another dimension by a

being known as Marcus, who brainwashes her into believing that she loves him before

impregnating her with his own essence as a way to enter Ms. Marvel's reality. Returning to her

own dimension, Ms. Marvel experiences a rapid pregnancy and then gives birth to Marcus in

Avengers #200 (1980). Marcus quickly ages to adulthood, and explains that his actions were

motivated by love; Ms. Marvel accepts this explanation, declares that she loves Marcus in return,

and agrees to spend her life by his side in his home dimension. This storyline's writer, David

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[57] Some examples: the Scarlet Witch was kidnapped and nearly compelled to marry Arkon in *Avengers* #75 (1970); the X-Man Storm is seduced and imprisoned by an infatuated Doctor Doom in *Uncanny X-Men* #145 (1981); She-Hulk is kidnapped and nearly compelled to marry both Xemnu, in *Sensational She-Hulk* #7 (1989), and the Mole Man in *Sensational She-Hulk* #33 (1991); Ms. Marvel is kidnapped and brainwashed into believing she loves M.O.D.O.K. in *Ms. Marvel* #7 (1977).

Michelinie, claims that it was never intended to evoke rape or incest, and that its convoluted-ness was simply the result a trying a meet a tight deadline (Boney 39). Chris Claremont, however, writer of *Ms. Marvel* #3-23, felt differently. In *Avengers Annual* #10 (1981), Claremont wrote a story in which an emotionally distraught Danvers confronted the other Avengers' complicity in a pregnancy and love affair that Danvers does not, in retrospect, view as consensual (Image 45). Despite this effort to repair the damage from *Avengers* #200, the storyline that Carol Strickland, in a 1980 essay in the fanzine *LoC* called, "The Rape of Ms. Marvel," set somewhat of a precedent. Two of the most critically acclaimed superhero stories of the 1980s, Frank Miller's limited series *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) and Alan Moore and Brian Bolland's graphic novel *Batman: The Killing Joke* (1988), feature the sexual assault of a female superhero.[58]

Importantly, rape is a specific type of violence, with a specific set of meanings. Sharon Marcus, for instance, argues that rape specifically attacks subjecthood. "For definitional purposes…" says Marcus, "rape is clearly neither sex nor simple assault. Rape could best be defined as a sexualized and gendered attack which imposes sexual difference along the lines of violence. Rape engenders a sexualized female body defined as a wound, a body excluded from subject-subject violence, from the ability to engage in a fair fight. Rapists do not beat women at the game of violence, but aim to exclude us from playing it altogether" (178). Consequently, the common presentation of female superheroes in images and storylines in which they are implied or actual victims of rape and/or other forms of sexual assault challenges and questions not only their status as superheroes, but also their status as persons. Certainly, there have been some

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[58] In *The Killing Joke*, Batgirl/Barbara Gordon is shot and paralyzed by the Joker, who then takes photos of her naked, bleeding body; and in *The Dark Knight Returns*, it is strongly implied that the Joker rapes former Catwoman Selina Kyle.

stories involving the sexual assault of a female superhero that have treated the reality of rape with gravity and respect, enhancing rather than challenging the heroism and subjecthood of the female protagonist (for an example, see the limited series *Alias* [2004], discussed in Chapter Four). As Kathryn Gravdal observes, "Depicting, narrating, or representing rape certainly does not constitute an unambiguous gesture of endorsement." "But it is crucial," Gravdal argues, "to ask of a historical period… why then is rape a stock device in so many genres and what is the relation genre bears to gender?" (1). In the case of the comics starring these new female superheroes, the titillation value of the violent imagery already discussed, combined with these comics' evident anxieties about female strength and power more generally, strongly suggests that their use of sexually violent imagery and storylines can be read, as least in part, as an effort to punish or control a new generation of strong or liberated women. The amount and type of sexualized violence to which these new female superheroes are subjected undercuts messages of liberation with warnings about the risks of being liberated. Superpowers, these comics suggests, cannot protect women from the same old threats, and the same old violently imposed and regulated gender roles and hierarchies; ultimately, it seems, no amount of strength can give a woman muscles, and no amount of invulnerability can make a woman impenetrable.

The foregrounded penetrability, vulnerability, and tenuous subjecthood of these new female superheroes makes them, compared to their male counterparts, less contained, and less capable of containment. Significantly, these new female superheroes' most convincing performances of containment are in the context of their battles with other women. Although these new female superheroes are pitted most often against male criminals and supervillains, as well as the requisite inhuman robots and monsters, their arch nemeses—i.e., the villains who are featured recurrently and/or are given the most fleshed-out motives, and/or are featured in the

most spectacular battles—tend to be female.[59] Spider-Woman and Ms. Marvel face several

female supervillains who are situated as actual or potential arch-nemeses.[60] In her original solo

series, Spider-Woman is menaced by: Morgan Le Fay, who appears four times; Gypsy Moth, a

villain created specifically for her series, who appears twice; Nekra, who only appears once, but

who manipulates Spider-Woman's life behind the scenes for several issues; and finally, Viper, the

leader of the terrorist organization Hydra who is revealed, in the series' final issues, to be Spider-

Woman's mother (Image 46). For her part, Ms. Marvel is menaced by: Death-Bird, who appears

twice; Hecate, who appears in a story spanning two issues; and Mystique, who only appears

once, but is presented as a mastermind uniting seemingly unrelated conflicts (Image 47).

It is likely that these new female superheroes battle other women as often as they do in

part because of the titillation potential of two scantily clad women in close, passionate contact.

These battles are also, however, like all superhero battles, fruitful sites of negotiation,

highlighting, in this case, the difference between acceptable and useful forms of female

empowerment and unacceptable and dangerous forms of female empowerment. Although many

of the female arch nemeses of these new female superheroes fit the typical pattern of being more

excessive and unbalanced than the superhero, their general type and degree of excess and

unbalance represents a significant departure from the female supervillains of the previous era.

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[59] She-Hulk is a potential exception to this trend, inasmuch as she only faces one female supervillain in her first solo series—the superstrong Ultima in *Savage She-Hulk* #9 (1980). In future appearances, however, she does acquire a female arch-nemesis named Titania; each of She-Hulk's solo series' since *Savage She-Hulk*, including *The Sensational She-Hulk* (1989-1994), and *She-Hulk* Volume 1 (2004-2005), Volume 2 (2005-2009), and Volume 3 (2014-2015), feature at least one grudge match with Titania. She-Hulk's conflict with Titania fits the mold of "good female empowerment" versus "bad female empowerment" inasmuch as Titania is commonly depicted as excessively sexualized, insecure, and debilitatingly obsessed with demonstrating her power and acquiring more power. She-Hulk's efforts to contain Titania may be read as efforts to contain Titania's gender monstrousness and/or feminine excess.

[60] "Potential" because several plotlines are left unresolved following the abrupt cancellation of both series. Ms. Marvel's conflict with Mystique, for instance, does not come to fruition until nearly a decade following the cancellation of her first solo series, in the pages of *Marvel Super-Heroes Magazine* #11 (1992). And even then, Ms. Marvel does not fight Mystique herself, but rather her proxy, in the form of the then-villainous Rogue.

Interestingly, as the female superheroes of the 1970s become both more feminist and more sexualized, the female supervillains from the same era become more monstrous. Nekra, for instance, is an albino with strange body markings and fangs, while Death-Bird is a spiky, bird-animal hybrid, and Gypsy Moth is a woman with actual gossamer wings sprouting from her back who has the decidedly unsettling power to unravel and reshape different types of organic matter. Mystique is more unsettling still: an endlessly mutable shapeshifter, Mystique's natural, human-like form consists of a boney, skull-like face, blue skin, and straight, coarse, straw-like orange hair. For all their monstrousness, these female supervillains are nonetheless highly sexualized. They all possess extremely curvaceous bodies and are typically clothed in dresses and jumpsuits with dramatically plunging necklines; Nekra and Mystique may not even be clothed at all. Importantly, however, none of these female supervillains is depicted, at least within the context of the stories under discussion here, as a seductress. These female supervillains are instead defined primarily through their extreme violence and aggression; Nekra, in particular, is actually empowered by her outsized ability to hate. While nearly all of the female supervillains of the 1960s were seductresses, and were thus empowered by an excess of femininity, the female supervillains of the 1970s more clearly appropriate masculinity. This appropriation is part of their excess and unbalance, demonstrating their surrender to the types of gendered excess and unbalance that the female superheroes fight to negotiate and contain. When these female supervillains are contrasted with their always ideally beautiful and steadfastly heterosexual female superhero counterparts, it is clear that their evilness is signalled, in part, by the fact they are more invested in power than romance or traditional (re: modest) feminine beauty; although all of the female superheroes under discussion in this chapter may be read as sexually rebellious or deviant, their costumes and appearances are nonetheless more chaste than the costumes and

appearances of their female supervillain counterparts, suggesting a passivity and subservience that the female supervillains (at least tentatively) resist.

Interestingly, these new female supervillains are also depicted as betraying feminist principles. Nekra, whose backstory involves being abused and manipulated by her half-brother, the Mandrill—an ape-like supervillain with the power to make women love him—looks to gain revenge upon the world specifically by exploiting other women. Disguising herself in an alternate identity, Nekra founds an institute for emotional research and uses it to manipulate Spider-Woman, the one person besides the Mandrill who, due her unusual pheromones, renders Nekra vulnerable by inspiring feelings of love rather than hate. Similarly, in her first appearance in *Spider-Woman* #10, Gypsy Moth brutally scorns the lonely Spider-Woman's efforts to understand her and become her friend. In the scene where Gypsy Moth is first introduced, Spider-Woman, fascinated with the potential connection between herself and the mysterious flying woman, abruptly breaks off a kiss with her male lover to chase after her. Later in the same issue, after Gypsy Woman attacks the guests at a party that Spider-Woman is attending as Jessica Drew, Spider-Woman once again chases after the supervillain, eager less to punish her than to establish an emotional connection. Says Spider-Woman to Gypsy Moth: "I am *not* your enemy. I don't even *care* what quarrel you have with those silly people down there. We have much in *common*, you and I. We ought to be friends." In response, Gypsy Moth states through sneering lips that she has "no *use* for friends." Death-Bird similarly rejects Ms. Marvel's repeated attempts at friendship, prioritizing instead her own, independent power and her loyalty to the supervillain M.O.D.O.K., a character who sexually assaults Ms. Marvel by brainwashing her into loving him. In *Ms. Marvel* #10, Ms. Marvel's interior monologue reveals that she identifies and empathizes with Death-Bird because she knows what it feels like to have conflicting feelings

"*tearing her apart.*" Ms. Marvel tells Death-Bird, "There's no *need* for us to fight. I mean you *no harm.*" To which the single-minded Death-Bird can only reply: "I don't want your *sympathy*, woman—or your *help*! I don't *need it*! I am what *I am! I am **Death-Bird***! *And I live only to **kill***!""

The juxtapositions between these new female superheroes and their female arch nemeses suggest that good female power aligns with restrained power and traditional feminine beauty whereas bad female power is linked to an excess of individuality and an imperfect or deviant appearance. Importantly, these new female supervillains also highlight the lack of intersectionality in these comics. Racial diversity is nearly totally absent in all of *The Cat*, *Spider-Woman*, *Ms. Marvel*, and *Savage She-Hulk*, the female superheroes in these titles possessing no racially diverse female friends or allies. The one exception to this rule is an especially problematic story in *Savage She-Hulk* #15 (1981). In this issue, Jennifer Walters is engaged to protect a doctor who is being sued by a black nightclub singer known only as Dahlia, who claims the doctor has misdiagnosed her as diabetic. Throughout, Dahlia is shown furiously accusing people who will not hire or work with her of racial discrimination; in reality, though, Dahlia is a very poor singer who suffers terrible mood swings because she refuses to take her diabetes medication. Although Walters ultimately sympathizes with Dahlia and, as She-Hulk, saves her life at the conclusion of this issue, this sympathy comes at a great cost for the only black woman to show up in a major role in this or any of Marvel's other titles from this era starring female superheroes. In this story, Dahlia is shown to be her own worst enemy, and needs a white female superhero to show her that her belief in her own racial oppression is ultimately delusional—the result of a physical sickness and a mental disorder.[61]

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[61] *Spider-Woman* #47 (1982) features a functionally similar story, in which a young black man's selfish quest for fame results in his transformation into the supervillain Daddy Longlegs. As in the She-Hulk story featuring Dahlia, this issue features an oppressed black character whose oppression is ultimately his own fault.

Where racial diversity does show up in these new titles starring female superheroes, it is generally confined to the villains. Most of the female arch nemeses of these newly created female superheroes have racially coded features or backstories. Morgan Le Fay, for instance, is typically drawn with the narrow, slanted eyes and long, straight eyebrows of Asian caricature, while Deathbird is an actual alien, and both Nekra and Mystique are physically monstrous first and foremost as a result of their unusual skin tones. Nekra's narrative is further racialized in particularly convoluted way. Nekra's origin story in *Daredevil* #110 (1974) depicts her as the daughter of an African American cleaning lady at Los Alamos National Laboratory, who is bombarded with radiation while pregnant with Nekra. The mutated, albino-skinned Nekra is loathed by her parents and the black community, which causes her to run away and team up with the villainous Mandrill. Through this origin story, Nekra's chalk white body adopts a meaning that is at least somewhat similar to that of Man Ape in the Black Panther stories already discussed. Similar to Man Ape, Nekra is deviant, monstrous, and villains, in part because she represents the threat of miscegenation, being a black woman hidden or disguised by a white skin.

The fact that these racialized female supervillains spurn any and all attempts at friendship from the white female superheroes exonerates these white female superheroes from the obligation of intersectionality. In addition, the fact that these new female superheroes often fight racially coded female supervillains suggests that they are empowered, in part, through assertions of white, American superiority over foreign, racialized others; in this, the liberation of these new female superheroes not only privileges, but also depends on white supremacy. This reliance on narratives of white supremacy is perhaps the best and final proof that these comics too often appropriate the signs and language of feminism as a tool of marginalization. Although this era's new female superheroes are no longer explicitly beholden to male teammates and lovers, they are

nonetheless obligated to police and contain other, more deviant women in the service of patriarchal as well as white supremacist gender roles and hierarchies. Female strength is only desirable, these comics suggest, to the extent that it is also beautiful, and thus commodifiable, and to the extent that it can be mobilized to preserve an overall hierarchy in which men are always stronger and more fully clothed, and white Americans are always morally righteous and justified in repelling deviant others who are invariably bent on destroying American liberty, which now includes American feminism.

Both Black Panther and these new female superheroes were not initially successful. Black Panther's first solo series ended on a cliff-hanger, his conflict with the Klan never reaching a conclusion. A second solo series, simply called *Black Panther*, ran for just 15 issues from 1977-1979. Written and drawn by Jack Kirby, this series took a very different approach from *Jungle Action*. Kirby's series restores the Panther's association with fantastic technology, but at the expense of its political relevance; this series eliminates the supporting cast developed in *Jungle Action*, and sets the majority of its action in fantastical realms with little or no relation to reality. After this series was cancelled, Black Panther would not appear in another ongoing solo series until 1998. Most of the new female superheroes were even more dramatic failures. *The Cat* lasted only 4 issues, after which Greer Nelson was transformed into the human-cat hybrid Tigra, a character who is known (if she is known at all), primarily for the fact that she fights crime in a string bikini.[62] Ms. Marvel's story was apparently meant to end with her marrying Marcus and being shunted off to another dimension. Yet even after being returned to the regular continuity in *Avengers Annual* #10, Danvers' story remains convoluted. Shortly after *Avengers Annual* #10,

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[62] The Cat's costume has a more interesting legacy. In *The Avengers* #144 (1976), the costume is transferred to the character of Patsy Walker. Walker, who starred in hundreds of teen romance and humour comics for the various iterations of Marvel Comics from 1944 until the mid-60s, is then integrated into the Marvel Universe as the superhero Hellcat.

she has her memory wiped, and is reinvented as a character known as Binary; during the 1990s,

she would also go by the name of Warbird. Danvers would not receive another solo series until

2006, by which time she had resumed using the Ms. Marvel name; in 2012, she finally received a

promotion to Captain Marvel in a still-running solo series of the same name. Spider-Woman,

who had the longest running series of any of these new female superheroes, actually had her

existence erased at the end of her series; *Spider-Woman* #50 features the title character saving the

world by allowing herself to be un-born. Although the character of Jessica Drew was resurrected

a year later, she would not don her Spider-Woman costume again until 1996, and would not

receive another solo series until 2014. She-Hulk would end up being the most successful of the

new female superheroes, but would not find this success without being dramatically reinvented

as a self-consciously humorous character. (This iteration of the character will be explored more

fully in the next chapter.)

The far more successful *X-Men*, re-envisioned in 1975 as a multi-racial, multi-ethnic

superteam (Image 48), represents an important and instructive counterpoint to these failures.

Although *X-Men* began publishing in 1964, much of its relevant and enduring mythos is the

direct result of the aforementioned relaunch in 1975's *Giant-Size X-Men* #1. The X-Men had

always been a team of "mutants," individuals gifted by birth with superpowers manifesting at

puberty who are "sworn to protect a world that hates and fears them." However, prior to 1975,

they were a wholly white, American team on the verge of cancellation; from 1970-75, *X-Men*

only featured reprints of old stories. *Giant-Size X-Men* #1, however, presents an "All-New, All-

Different" team that would eventually turn *X-Men* into one of the best-selling comic book

franchises of the post-Code era. *Giant-Size* #1 took *X-Men's* always implicit theme of mutants as

an oppressed minority and made it explicit, first and foremost by introducing a new cast of

characters including: Nightcrawler/Kurt Wagner from Germany, Storm/Ororo Munroe from Kenya, Colossus/Peter Rasputin from the Soviet Union, Wolverine/Logan from Canada, and Banshee/Sean Cassidy from Ireland[63]; Sunfire/Shiro Yoshida from Japan; and Native American Thunderbird/John Proudstar.[64] From the original squad, only field leader Cyclops/Scott Summers, Marvel Girl/Jean Grey and team recruiter, trainer, and financier Professor Charles Xavier remained as regular characters.

The All-New *X-Men* literalized the metaphorical relationship between the different or outsider body of the superhero and the similarly othered bodies of racial and ethnic minorities; in doing so, it made the theme of mutants as an oppressed minority, which had been with the title since its inception, newly prescient, and newly urgent. For many critics (see Easton, Fawaz, Fingeroth, Reynolds), this newly urgent focus makes the All-New *X-Men* the crowning achievement of mainstream superhero comics' exploration of the condition and processes of otherness. According to Fingeroth, "What had been hinted as with Spider-Man and the Hulk, namely, the elegant statement that being different didn't mean being worse—or being better, for that matter—found its ultimate superhero comics expression in the X-Men" (129). Lee Easton similarly argues that, "*X-Men* excelled because it was grappling with the implications of difference. Far from trying to repeat the same old stories about growing up white, middle class and heterosexual, the new X-Men struggled with being various ethnicities, nationalities and classes in a North American Settling" (250). The All-New *X-Men* did not initially represent all of these identity groups; the franchise took a particularly long time to represent any diversity in terms of sexual orientation, remaining officially heterosexual until the mutant superhero

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[63] Banshee has previously appeared as a villain, initially in *X-Men* #23 (1967).

[64] Significantly, Sunfire would decline to join the team, and Thunderbird would be killed just three issues into the relaunch.

Northstar came out of the closet in 1992 (*Alpha Flight* #106). However, many early fan letters speak to the potential for the mutant metaphor to reflect a wide range of experiences and prejudices. For instance, a letter from "Beverly Ramsgate" appearing in *Uncanny X-Men* #151 (1982) asserts that: "The mutants represent the possibility of a broadened, all-encompassing Humanity that… utilizes our multiplicity and benefits from our individual variance. Sex, race, religion and age are not issues to complicate the co-operation of these champions." As Beverly Ramsgate's letter suggest, the All-New *X-Men* did not merely confront spectres of prejudice, fantastical or otherwise; it also proposed solutions for the same. In its representation of a diverse group of young adults whose ability to save the world is rooted in the selfless purity of their friendship, *X-Men* has been read as offering a utopian vision of social inclusiveness. As Fawaz describes: "The X-Men developed the popular fantasy of the mutant superhero not only to resist a variety of repressive social norms—including racial segregation, sexism, and xenophobia—but also to facilitate the ground from which new kinds of choices of political affiliation and personal identification could be pursued" (361 "'Where'"). According to Fawaz, the All-New *X-Men* extols the possibility of a new and better society, one in which equality is available to all regardless of national origin or embodied difference.

In *Giant-Size* #1, the various scenes of Professor Xavier recruiting his new team illustrate the centrality and the terms of this vision of inclusion. In the first scene of *Giant-Size* #1 (Image 49), the blue-furred, fork-tailed Nightcrawler is seen running on all fours from a torch and pitchfork-wielding mob in "Winzeldorf, Germany." Nightcrawler's embodied difference is purely fictional; various storylines wherein the character is "de-mutated" depict him as a handsome, able-bodied Caucasian man. However, in the fantastical X-Men universe and on the comics page, he is very graphically other. Both demonic and animal-like, with a stooped gait and

stance and only three digits on each hand, Nightcrawler is designed to encapsulate a variety of cultural prejudices, and often, beginning with his introduction in *Giant-Size* #1, functions as a mouthpiece or ultimate example of the All-New *X-Men's* mission statement. When the mob labels him a "monster," Nightcrawler's thought bubble responds: "*Monster*, is it? The *fools*! It is *they* who are the *monsters*—they with their mindless *prejudices*!" Just as the mob is about to drive a stake through Nightcrawler's heart, Professor Xavier psychically freezes them, offering Nightcrawler salvation and a place among the X-Men in the following exchange:

> Xavier: I heard you say you'd come here to *learn*, my friend. I am a *teacher*.
> I run a *school* for gifted youngsters such as you. A school for *mutants*!... *I*
> can help you find your true *potential*.
> Nightcrawler: Can you help me be *normal*?
> Xavier: After tonight's misfortune, Kurt—would you truly *want* to be?
> Nightcrawler: Perhaps not. I only want to be a *whole* Kurt Wagner. If you
> can make me *that*, teacher… I will *go* with you.

In this scene, Xavier indicates that it is the X-Men's core purpose to take fractured souls—and by extension, a fractured world—and unify them, make them *whole*.

One of the most problematic aspects of the mutant metaphor lies in its tendency to replace or exceed the forms of real-life difference it either evokes or intersects with. This tendency is evident in the similarity of the various recruitment scenes in *Giant-Size* #1. Despite the vastly different circumstances of each X-Man prior to his or her recruitment, Xavier's sales-pitch is largely consistent. When he recruits Storm, who is being worshipped as a goddess for using her weather-manipulating powers to ease drought in an isolated Kenyan village, Xavier

foregrounds the transnational, transcultural, and transracial scope of the mutant condition. Xavier tells Storm: "You have a *land*, Ororo—and people who *adore* you. I offer you a *world*—and people who may fear you, *hate* you—but people who *need* you nonetheless. The world I offer is not *beautiful*—but it is *real*—far more real than the *fantasy* you're living in *now*." Xavier gives a similar speech to Colossus, who is hesitant to join the X-Men because he believes his ability to transform himself into "organic steel" might rightfully belong to the Soviet state. Declares Xavier: "Power such as yours belongs to the *world*, Peter—to be used for the good of *all*." Discussing Xavier's proposal with his family, Peter comes to the conclusion: "My heart tells me to *stay*, Papa—but my *conscience* tells me otherwise."

These recruitment scenes suggest that Xavier's X-Men are united by a universal morality that exceeds all other affiliations. This message is, of course, similar to the previously discussed expectation that Black Panther must leave his homeland to serve "all mankind." The mutant condition, however, makes this expectation even more urgent and inescapable; within the imaginary context of the Marvel Universe, the mutant condition does actually exceed every other affiliation, since any race, gender, or class of person can be revealed as a mutant at any time. This ability to exceed other real-life affiliations makes the mutant condition capable of many problematic appropriations. As Neil Shyminsky, observes, "while the X-Men metaphor appears socially progressive in its inclusivity," diversifying the X-Men with young people of different races and nationalities, and, later, different sexual orientations, does not necessarily or automatically expose or deconstruct power hierarchies; conversely, this diversification of the mutant condition can in fact enable readers to "misidentify themselves as the 'other'"; that is, it can allow, in particular, the straight white men who are superhero comics' largest readership demographic to appropriate experiences of prejudice and persecution that are inspired by (or

stolen from) various minorities (Shyminsky 388).

The mutant condition's ability to exceed all other affiliations is problematic in and of itself, but also because of the ways in which the X-Men franchise continually emphasizes the importance of this ability. The all-encompassing nature of the mutant metaphor is often directly stated or invoked, usually in scenes that directly reference *Giant-Size* #1. *Uncanny X-Men* #210[65] features a scene that is representative of this tendency, in which Nightcrawler is chased by yet another mob (Image 50). This scene is an obvious reference to the opening of *Giant-Size* #1, the most significant variation being that this time around, Nightcrawler is saved not through superheroics, but through words; even more exactly, he is saved be a restatement of the common terms and function of the mutant metaphor. In this scene, a member of the mob asserts that Nightcrawler has no human rights since his appearance makes it "obvious" he is not human. This prompts Kitty Pryde, the X-Men's youngest member, to deliver a torrential stump speech about the subjective nature of difference. Says Kitty:

> A whole chunk of my family was murdered in gas chambers because the Nazis said it was just as 'obvious' that *Jews* weren't human. Not too long ago, people in this country felt the same about blacks. Some still do…. You want to prove how tough and brave you are, beat up on *me*!... You're bigger'n me, and I'm just a *girl*! Hey—maybe *I'm* a mutie, too?! Ever think of that?!! Maybe we *all* are?!!

On the one hand, Kitty's speech does make a strong case for the productive adaptability of the mutant metaphor. Because it is a fantasy form and category of otherness, the mutant

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[65] *X-Men* was rebranded as *Uncanny X-Men* beginning with issue #142 (1981).

condition can represent all forms of real-world otherness and prejudice. Nightcrawler, of course, emblematizes this capacity: just as mutant is a fantasy category, so too is Nightcrawler a fantasy being, with blue skin that at once eludes and includes every racial category, and exaggeratedly different physical features that may connote a slew of bodily prejudices, including those related to race and gender as well as physical disability. As such, Kitty's speech can be read as using the example of Nightcrawler's graphically embodied, all-encompassing otherness to show that everything is a matter of perspective. Certainly, the X-gene at the centre of the mutant condition, and thus the mutant metaphor, is well suited to expressing the mobility of difference. As Scott Bukatman describes, the X-gene ensures that mutant superheroes are the most radically unstable superheroes in mainstream comics. "The mutant body," writes Bukatman, "is explicitly traumatic, armoured against the world outside yet racked and torn apart by complex forces within. The mutant body is oxymoronic: rigidly protected but dangerously unstable. In its infinite malleability and overdetermined adolescent iconography, the mutant superhero is the locus of bodily ritual" (51). In other words, mutant superheroes are uniquely but also *perpetually* mobile, continually generating, transforming, hybridizing, and multiplying.

The X-Men franchise depicts the X-gene as having radically diverse, unstable, and unpredictable effects on minds and bodies, both naturally and artificially; while the gene is present at birth, it can always be magically or technologically manipulated, suppressed, or even removed. Variously creating, modifying, and un-creating animal-people, plant-people, liquid-people, and metal-people, not to mention shape-shifters and disembodied consciousnesses of various races, ages, ethnicities, and genders, the X-gene constantly moves between and across different states and effects. Fingeroth argues that the Marvel universe's distinction between mutants possessing the X-gene and other types of mutated humans does not make logical sense.

According to Fingeroth, "the idea that the public would be able to tell how any given superhuman acquired his or her superpowers, and that one method of acquisition would be more threatening to the average human than another, required a major suspension of disbelief" (114). However, this reading does not account for the central difference between X-gene mutants and other types of mutated humans. An important aspect of the public's fear and distrust of X-gene mutants is the fact that mutants are not *made* different, but rather *born* different. Although the concept of the mutant was inspired by the unpredictability of atomic energy—the original *X-Men* comics explained the X-gene as a product of radiation—mutants do not gain their powers as a result of a specific accident (a la Spider-Man) or a specific set of life choices (a la the Fantastic Four or the Hulk). Instead, mutants are originally and fundamentally different, unstable, and multiple; mutant bodies are never innocent, but are, instead, always already monstrous. In addition, the X-gene may presage a wholescale evolution of the human race, making it a much more penetrating, encompassing, and thus, threatening form of difference.

Yet it is also the mobility of the X-gene which allows it to overwrite and appropriate different real-life bodily states, effects, and experiences. On the one hand, Kitty's assertion in *Uncanny X-Men* #210 that anyone can emerge or be exposed as a mutant at any time productively exposes the culturally constructed nature of otherness, reminding both the mob and the reader that all it takes is a change in the tide or the stroke of a pen to turn today's accepted citizen into tomorrow's pariah. In effect, Kitty's speech de-essentializes all forms and types of identity and privilege by highlighting the fact that, in one way or another, and whether we know it or not, we are all passing, all subject to the same shifting morass of insider/outsider power relations. This assertion is problematic inasmuch as is does not make distinctions between different experiences of prejudice. By comparing prejudice against mutants with a variety of

other real-world historical and contemporary prejudices related to ethnicity, religion, race, and gender, Kitty unavoidably suggests that these experiences are not only similar, but potentially equivalent. Importantly, too, because potential or actual possession of the X-gene is at the centre of this shared passing and subsequent shared difference and exclusion, everyone is ultimately different in a very similar way—because they do or might possess something that is, despite its infinitely multiple and infinitely multiplying effects, nonetheless a detectable biological factor.

For all its mobility, then, the X-gene also functions as something of a neutral ground, conceptually and functionally similar to idea of the "neutral centre" within the discourse of liberal multiculturalism. As David Theo Goldberg relates, the discourse of liberal or "soft" multiculturalism first emerged in North America in the 1960s amid the social upheavals of that era's various rights movements; these upheavals created the need for a populist model of social inclusion capable of accounting for the newly urgent voices of marginalized groups while also maintaining, on behalf of the hegemony, a sense of national and cultural unity. The model that emerged "left cultural groups (including races) with effective control of their private autonomous cultural determinations and expressions at the sociocultural margins, while maintaining a supposedly separate and, thus, neutral set of common values… to mediate their relations at the center" (Goldberg 6). This "neutral set of common values," or "neutral centre," is, like the X-gene, both part of society, culture, and biology and larger than these things, exceeding all ideologies and affiliations due to its defining neutrality. Liberal multiculturalism asks people to invest in this neutral centre in much the same way that Kitty's speech in *Uncanny X-Men* #210 asks the mob and subsequently, the reader, to invest in the X-gene: as something more expansive and important than every other comparatively petty ideology or affiliation, relevant to all but loyal to none. Within liberal multiculturalism, Sara Ahmed argues, "the right to cultural identity

is both individuated (it is something an individual owns, possesses or has) at the same time it is universalized, such that it does not recognize differences between social groups… but instead establishes what is 'common' to all'" (104). Within liberal multiculturalism, then, difference is allowed, but only to the extent that its manifestations respect the ultimate sanctity of the neutral centre that is required to insure the inclusion of everyone.

Liberal multiculturalism's most obvious flaw resides in the somewhat obvious fact that the neutral centre is never truly neutral. In both the American society of the 1960s and 70s and the pages of the All-New *X-Men*, the neutral centre is defined and controlled by the cultural hegemony. In *X-Men*, this is the Anglo, Western liberal values that are imparted by Xavier, the wealthy white visionary who rescues mutants from savage foreign cultures and relocates them to America to better serve "the world." The X-gene itself further naturalizes the neutral centre by making it biological. It is, after all, a shared mutant condition that precipitates the forming of the X-Men, prompting the collection of a diverse mix of races, bodies, and nationalities into the ancestral mansion of Xavier. In a sense, the mutant condition can be seen as a kind of naturalized melting pot. The possession of the X-gene creates is a shared biology that in turn creates shared experiences (such as the shared experience of persecution), and even, via Xavier's school and the formation of the X-Men, a shared purpose. This naturalized melting pot suggests that the X-Men franchise is underpinned by a homogenizing impulse that is, once again, at the heart of liberal multiculturalism. Within the ideal liberal multicultural society, Goldberg argues, "The *fact* of great heterogeneity… is taken to necessitate the *aspiration* to a set of unifying, homogenizing ideals" (20). Charles Taylor sees this aspiration at work in many commonly voiced theories about the proper trajectory of affirmative action. As Taylor describes, affirmative action legislation is often justified to and by the social and cultural hegemony as "a temporary measure that will

eventually level the playing field and allow the old 'blind' rules to come back into force in a way that doesn't disadvantage anyone" (40).

According to Goldberg, liberal multiculturalism is furthermore invested in the presumed naturalness of homogeneity. Because, Goldberg argues, "homogeneity… is the presumed proper application of reason," it "is considered a natural condition of human social existence" (21). In the All-New *X-Men* comics of the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s, this homogenizing impulse, and this belief in homogeneity as evidence of the proper application of reason, is present in the recruitment scenes already discussed, as well as biological basis of the X-gene and the general function of Xavier's school. Importantly, although mutants are natural superbeings, they are not natural super*heroes*. Within the Marvel Universe, without access to Xavier's school, and the (supposedly) neutral, rational values it imparts, mutants often end up as supervillains. They also often end up as *groups* of supervillains. Supervillain groups are, of course, not uncommon in superheroes comics. They are, however, slightly more common in the X-Men Universe. Whereas Marvel's other superteams such as the Fantastic Four and the Avengers most often fight individual foes, the X-Men's most frequently recurring protagonists are other groups of mutants, such as the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, the Hellfire Club, the Purifiers, the Marauders, Alpha Flight, and the Acolytes. The X-Men franchise's tendency to pit groups of mutants against other groups of mutants proposes an ideological conflict beyond, or in addition to, that which structures most superhero versus supervillain battles. In general, supervillains are driven by a desire for power, which can manifest in things like access to wealth or the ability to exercise control over others. Although the X-Men's villains also typically desire power, pitting one group of mutants against another group of mutants also represents a conflict between different versions of group identity—and specifically, multicultural group identity.

The X-Men's conflicts with groups of mutant supervillains particularly emphasize, then, the terms of the franchise's version of liberal multiculturalism. To this end, the X-Men's first conflict with a group of mutant supervillains knowns as the Morlocks is illustrative. First appearing in *Uncanny X-Men* #169-170 (1983), the Morlocks are a group of hostile, sewer-dwelling mutants who are—or at least perceive themselves to be—outcast from society due to their extreme physical differences (or, more accurately, their extreme physical deformities). Obviously, the deformities and subterranean living conditions of the Morlocks emphasize their connection with the original Morlocks, from H.G. Wells' novel *The Time Machine* (1895). Yet whereas Wells' novel was centrally concerned with class, this initial appearance of the Morlocks in the world of the X-Men significantly downplays class politics. While Wells' novel very clearly situates the Morlocks as descendants of the working class, who have to work underground so that the rich upper class (represented by the beautiful but unintelligent Eloi) can live in luxury, the Morlocks of the X-Men comics do not exist in a symbiotic relationship with the more beautiful X-Men; whereas Wells' Morlocks clothe and fed the Eloi (while also cannibalistically feasting on them), the X-Men Universe Morlocks do nothing similar for the X-Men. Though the X-Men's initial ignorance of the Morlocks' existence links them to the oblivious Eloi, this lack of symbiosis contributes to the comics' unsympathetic portrayal of the Morlocks as self-centered and ultimately delusional.

In their initial appearance, the Morlocks are shown to be fixated on their physical appearances; bittier about what they view as their inability to exist among both "normal" (re: non-mutant) people as well as comparatively normal-looking mutants such as the X-Men, the Morlocks kidnap the ideally beautiful (or, literally angelic) former X-Man Angel with the intent of clipping his wings and making him the consort of their ruler, Callisto. In *Uncanny X-Men*

#170, Callisto, who has a severe, lined face, a punk haircut, and an eyepatch (which, in a later issue, is revealed to contain a mass of seething tentacles), attempts to make a connection between her group and the X-Men's most graphically monstrous member, Nightcrawler. Callisto proposes Nightcrawler join the Morlocks in a protest against the exclusionary surface world because, as she says, "your features brand you as much an outcast as us." Nightcrawler, however, a character who, as discussed, is frequently at the centre of the X-Men franchise's various statements and restatements of its message of inclusion, vehemently rejects Callisto's proposal. While Nightcrawler's rejection is understandable to the extent that Callisto and her followers have recently abducted and threatened to harm his friend, the way he chooses to reject her offer is significant. Says Nightcrawler: "I've spent my whole life… fighting to be accepted as I am—to be judged by my deeds, instead of my looks—and I won't leave that battle before it's done" (Image 88).

Nightcrawler's desire not to have his identity overdetermined by his appearance is, of course, emotionally sympathetic. Yet the terms of his rejection reflect and invoke liberal multiculturalism's problematic assertions of neutrality and rationality. As Shyminsky observes, Nightcrawler's criticism and rejection of the Morlocks puts the onus on the outcasts for their own oppression. "Aligning himself with a conservative ideology of meritocracy," says Shyminsky, "Nightcrawler accuses the Morlocks of being victims of their own prejudices first and foremost, chiding them for their own intolerance of non-mutant humans" (394). This accusation is especially brutal inasmuch as the Morlocks are so obviously and graphically monstrous compared to the X-Men, including Nightcrawler. After his first appearance in *Giant-Size* #1, Nightcrawler evolves into a much more attractive character, with soft fur and blunt hands that afford him an almost cuddly, toy-like quality; indeed, all of Kitty Pryde,

Nightcrawler's girlfriend Amanda Sefton, and Colossus' kid sister Illyana, are shown to possess a stuffed toy version of Nightcrawler. The Morlocks, in contrast, exhibit a range of standard supervillain deformities. The Morlocks typically have unbalanced features such as over-large hands or small heads, and/or have missing eyes, warts, or scars (Image 51). Again similar to typical supervillains, the Morlocks also have the types of superpowers that can only injure or disrupt containment; Plague, for instance, has the power to transmit a fatal disease, while Masque has the ability to deform the faces and bodies of others. The story that introduces the Morlocks denies the unfairness of this distribution of powers. In *Uncanny X-Men* #169-170, the Morlocks' claims of persecution are questioned not only by their kidnapping of Angel, but also by their refusal to join the X-Men after they are invited to do so by Storm. Through their refusal to join the X-Men, and through their villainous actions more generally, the Morlocks are, this storyline suggests, responsible for their own fate, and have only been judged as Nightcrawler wishes to be judged: based on actions, rather than appearance.

Depicting the Morlock's persecution as self-inflicted rejects the existence of differences between different types and forms of difference. And yet, this condemnation if not terribly surprising. In the X-Men Universe, the (supposedly) neutral values of Xavier's school, like the (supposedly) neutral values at the centre of the ideal liberal multicultural society, (supposedly) guarantee that individual choice of allegiance is free and available to everyone. Consequently, the Morlocks cannot be shown as differently persecuted than the X-Men, because this would disprove the choice of allegiance that the X-Men, as representatives and keepers of the neutral centre, are shown to guarantee. Yet in attempting to disguise liberal multiculturalism's ethical and practical flaws, this storyline also exposes them. The example of the Morlocks demonstrates that liberal multiculturalism can be very cruel to those who either reject or contradict the

principle of the neutral centre; such persons or groups are, like the Morlocks, often labelled as villainous, and blamed for their own persecution or unassimilability.

Within the All-New *X-Men's* liberal multicultural utopia, it is, the example of the Morlocks suggests, as immoral to seek power as to cultivate or revel in difference. This support's Ahmed assertion that within the ideal liberal multicultural society, "Those cultural forms that are 'more acceptable' are precisely those that may look different, *but are in fact the same underneath*" (106). Within the X-Men Universe, a character such as Nightcrawler, who looks different while embracing the (supposedly) neutral (but actually hegemonic) centre, confirms the goodness of hegemonic values and the rightness of assimilating to them. Furthermore, the naturalness of Nightcrawler's difference—which is at the biological level of his mutant condition—proves the naturalness of the processes and terms of this assimilation, even as a simultaneous insistence on choice of allegiance paradoxically denies the governing force of biology. As the typical example of the Morlocks story illustrates, X-Men comics often exploit the mobility and multiplicity of the X-gene to defend the rightness of a trajectory toward a universal embrace of hegemonic values that will produce an ideally homogeneous society. The possibility and rightness of this homogeneity can be read into the promise that Xavier makes to Nightcrawler when he recruits him in the first scene of *Giant-Size* #1. In that scene, Xavier promises that his school will help make Nightcrawler "whole." Richard J. F. Day argues that "the supposition that individuals can 'have' or 'achieve' stable ethnocultural identities" is both the founding principle and a central flaw of liberal multiculturalism, first and foremost because it assumes that difference is a *problem* that needs a regulatory *solution* (32). In *Giant-Size* #1, instead of encouraging Nightcrawler to confront the power structures responsible for coding his body as monstrous and thus, ineligible for human rights or citizenship, Xavier instead promises

him access to a place where he can learn a set of not-so-neutral values, values that he must agree not to challenge as a condition of his inclusion—indeed, his literal survival. Ultimately, the All-New *X-Men's* deployment of the mutant metaphor generally offers a vision of an ideal society in which difference is embraced only because it no longer matters.

However, because the mutant metaphor is always multiplying, always taking on new forms and creating new combinations, it still has the potential to forge intersectional connections that might expose the same power structures and hierarchies it frequently upholds and disguises. Conceptually, at least, the endlessly multiple, endlessly multiplying X-gene is comparable to Homi Bhabha's conception of the "Third Space," inasmuch as it is similarly a hybrid, interrogative meeting point between reality and representation, body and mind, self and other. Because both the X-gene and the Third Space are "*neither the one nor the Other*" (11), not a single state but as an ongoing process of iteration, they can illuminate, interrogate, and even challenge the power relations warring within and around them. "It is the Third Space," says Bhabha, "though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew" (21). The aftermath of Kitty's speech in *Uncanny X-Men* #210 (Image 52) at least tentatively suggests the potential of the always mobile mutant metaphor to expose and resist its own appropriative and homogenizing tendencies. During the entirety of Kitty's speech, Nightcrawler's subjectivity is clouded in secrecy; throughout, Nightcrawler withholds his eyes, looking down or away in a gesture of either submission or resistance. It is only when Kitty asks Nightcrawler why he did not simply use his mutant power of teleportation to escape the mob that he finally raises his eyes, and says: "I could not. I seem to have lost my power." This moment

highlights the productive slipperiness of the mutant metaphor. Even as Kitty mobilizes Nightcrawler's mutant condition as a rhetorical tool, it slips through her fingers by fulfilling its name: by mutating, and revealing itself to have become other than Kitty had expected.

Another, more extensive example that uses the mutant metaphor to acknowledge, reveal, and subvert its own appropriative and homogenizing tendencies is the story "Lifedeath: A Love Story," from *Uncanny X-Men* #186 (1984). This double-sized issue documents a preliminary romance between Storm, recently depowered (re: de-mutated) by an experimental weapon, and Forge, a Native American mutant who is mentally superpowered but physically disabled. In this issue, Storm and Forge struggle to negotiate a series of real and fantastic multiplicities while also trying, sometimes successfully, and sometimes unsuccessfully, to navigate depression and suicide toward understanding and love. "Lifedeath" is an obviously hybrid term, with multiple potential connotations. One is to suggest that hybridity can be a terrifying placelessness, even a zombie-like state of being neither living nor dead. This seems to be how the de-mutated Storm perceives herself at the beginning of the issue (Image 53). The opening splash page shows her sprawled naked and despondent in bed, the absence of her superhero costume evoking the loss of her powers (or: her power); a "zoom-out" in the next two panels shows the bed suspended in empty space, emphasizing Storm's emotional and practical isolation as she is imprisoned by and within the open spaces she once easily traversed, and/or the sky she once commanded. Neither mutant nor human, neither one nor the other, Storm inhabits the Third Space, and it is not a happy location. Yet that unhappiness is crucial to this issue's foregrounding of the difficulties of embodying and negotiating shifting multiplicities. Storm is not beyond the categories she no longer fits into; instead, those categories are at war within and without her. In "Lifedeath," Storm struggles to possess herself on emotional, social, and physical levels within the context of both

her budding relationship with Forge and her resistance to the government agency he works for, whose top man wants to bring her in for "testing." The comic's opening line, "Once upon a time, there was a woman who could fly," metaphorizes this struggle as the conflict and the difference between flying and being grounded, between the empty sky and the messiness of earthly conflict; or, perhaps, between the appropriative fantasy of the mutant condition, liberating in its free-floating history-less-ness, and various real-life experiences of otherness, whose inescapable historicity is both painful and ethically necessary.[66]

Over the course of "Lifedeath," the mutant fantasy is explicitly complicated by real-world manifestations of otherness: by ethnicity, represented through Forge's struggle between his traditional upbringing as a "Cheyenne medicine man" and his mutant gift for technological invention; by gender, represented through Storm's new emotional freedom resulting from the loss of her vastly destructive, empathically affected elemental powers; and especially by disability, represented by both Storm's de-mutation and Forge's amputated hand and leg, changes (or losses) in social and physical identity and power that, in both cases, provoke a despondent placelessness that leads to attempted suicide. At one point, Storm bemoans her de-mutated existence by explicitly describing it as a fall from unity into multiplicity: "This is not life, Forge, merely existence—a shadow of what was. To believe otherwise is but the cruelest of deceptions…. You don't understand—how could you?! I could fly! I was *one* with all *creation*!" Forge's bitter reply is: "And now you've got to walk, like everybody else… Tough break." The

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[66] Storm's struggle to physically and emotionally possess and contain herself in this issue evokes the problematic defining conflict of female superheroes—namely, the struggle to be both powerful and feminine, both active and passive. And yet, this story also complicates this narrative in interesting ways. Case in point, Storm's healing is initially signalled, in part, by her willingness to be make herself beautiful and desirable, as she dons an evening gown for her first dinner with Forge. However, Storm quickly realizes that this dress does not fit her mood or personality, and changes into a more masculine-coded outfit of white overalls. Any accusations of gender essentialism are also undercut by the ways in which this story links and intertwines Storm's struggle with that of Forge.

full implication of Forge's words is revealed to both Storm and the reader a few pages later, when Storm bests Forge in a swimming race and starts to playfully (or flirtatiously) taunt him before seeing his detached artificial leg at side of the pool (Image 54). In this scene, a problematic levelling effect is present in the equation of Storm's fictional loss (her mutant powers) with Forge's real one (his amputated leg), and in the decision to ignore Storm's racial identity in favour of her mutant one. However, this scene also questions the nature and value of mutant power, and thus the appropriative fantasy of the mutant condition, at the same time that it questions the nature and value of various forms of real-world power.

The example of "Lifedeath" offers an important counterpoint to Bukatman's argument that, "The bodily torment of the mutant superhero expresses a desire, a need, to transcend the confines of the body, to exist as pure spirit" (71). In "Lifedeath," although neither Storm nor Forge want to be limited by the perceived or actual capabilities of their respectively powerful but unstable and/or incomplete bodies, their emotional healing cannot be separated from their corporeal experiences. As discussed in both the Introduction and in Chapter One, superheroes might desire to transcend the normal limits of the body, yet post-Atomic Age superheroes, in particular, can never truly do so; the post-Atomic Age superheroes eschew transcendence in favour of ongoing battles to use and control their increasingly multiple and, in the case of mutant superheroes, their perpetually multiplying bodies. The superheroes in "Lifedeath" not only eschew transcendence but also confront and interrogate it. Challenging superhero comics' typical privileging of self-control and containment, "Lifedeath" depicts self-possession as a perpetual battle between what is physically available and culturally possible, a negotiation that is ongoing because both bodies and culture are profoundly unstable, both literally and representationally. Ultimately, although "Lifedeath" does not fully escape the mutant metaphor's tendency to level

or appropriate different differences, it does, at the very least, expose and complicate those tendencies. In "Lifedeath," whatever empathy, understanding, and healing Storm and Forge achieve comes not from turning difference into sameness, but by recognizing the existence of different differences; certainly, flying is different from walking, yet walking is also different from walking, depending on the body in question.

Admittedly, though, "Lifedeath" is not necessarily a typical superhero story. In addition to being a double-size issue, "Lifedeath" also employs a guest artist, Barry Windsor-Smith, whose style is considerably more idiosyncratic than the comparably slick, commercial style employed by many of the All-New *X-Men*'s regular pencilers from the era, such as Dave Cockrum, John Byrne, and Paul Smith. Although exceptional stories such as "Lifedeath" often crop up within the X-Men franchise, it is nonetheless possible to generalize about the typical deployment of the mutant metaphor in stories from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s. Similar to the Thing's function as a disability metaphor, Black Panther's function as a metaphor for racial empowerment, and the function of female superheroes as metaphors for female empowerment, the mutant metaphor risks confirming differently abled, raced, or gendered bodies as *actually* different, and/or *actually* special, *actually* supernatural, or *actually* dangerous; it also suggests that difference, whether actual or perceived, can and must be compensated for and overcome. However, similar, especially, to the Thing's function as a disability metaphor, the mutant metaphor also suggests that one's difference and/or multiplicity can never truly be overcome. Just as the Thing will always be a highly visible, unstable outsider, the X-Men will always be persecuted—because some of them are, like the Thing, so obviously, graphically different, but also because an end to the X-Men's persecution would mean an end to their stories, which are centrally concerned with the experience and navigation of otherness.

Chapter One highlighted some of the ways in which the goodness and power of superheroes is established through relativity; this chapter has considered the evolution of that relativity to include more complex relationships between black and white superheroes as well as male and female superheroes. This evolution has further complicated and strained the boundaries between superheroism and supervillainy, while also helping the superhero genre develop newly sophisticated ways of maintaining those boundaries and the cultural hierarchies that inform them. Ultimately, this chapter has illustrated the superhero genre's adaptability and resiliency, as especially highlighted by its ability to exploit the superhero's defining multiplicity and mutability to incorporate and manage new cultural anxieties and threats. The next chapter will explore further mutations, this time at the level of style, examining how the exaggeratedly and excessively large, hard, and curvaceous superhero bodies of the late 1980s and early-to-mid 1990s reveal the superhero genre's increasingly fraught contradictions precisely through their ultra-graphic attempts to contain them.

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CHAPTER THREE: THE EXCESSIVE SUPERHERO (1989-1995)

"But he doesn't 'draw' comics. Oh God, no."

      -Bill Hanstock, "The 40 Worst Rob Liefeld Drawings" (2012)

Todd McFarlane and Jim Lee began doing regular work for Marvel beginning in 1987; Rob Liefeld followed in 1989. Within a few short years, all three creators became popular enough to demand something that no other creator at the "big two" American comic book publishers, Marvel and DC, had ever achieved: full ownership and creative control over their work. Unwilling or unable to concede to such demands, Marvel attempted to appease McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld by launching three new titles that would explicitly showcase their talents and grant them additional creative control. In August of 1990, Marvel launched *Spider-Man*, an offshoot of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, that was both written and penciled by McFarlane; a year later, in August of 1991, they launched *X-Force*, an X-Men franchise title that was penciled and plotted by Liefeld (with scripts by Fabian Nicieza); and in October of 1991, they launched *X-Men*, an offshoot of *The Uncanny X-Men*, that was penciled and "co-plotted" by Lee (with scripts by Chris Claremont). These new titles were tremendously successful. The first issue of *Spider-Man* sold 2.5 million copies across several variant covers. The following year, the first issue of *X-Force* eclipsed *Spider-Man*'s debut, selling 5 million copies. A few months later, *X-Men* sold nearly as many issues as the previous debuts combined, selling an estimated 8 million copies, enough to earn it a spot in the Guinness Book of World Records as the best-selling comic book of all time.[67] These sales numbers remain impressive; according to Diamond Comic Distributors,

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[67] This "world" record may be contested inasmuch as it excludes non-American comics, and because few accurate sales figures exist for comics from the American Golden Age period.

the current sole distributor for the North American comic book store market, since 1997, no single issue of an American comic book has sold more than one million physical copies (Diamond). The record-breaking success of *Spider-Man*, *X-Men*, and *X-Force* is what finally made it possible for McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld to obtain the full ownership and creative control they so desired, although they would have to leave Marvel to get it. In early 1992, McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld, along with Marc Silvestri, Erik Larsen, Jim Valentino, Whilce Portacio, and Chris Claremont, left Marvel to form their own publishing company. With the exception of Claremont, this group of creators was known primarily as pencilers rather than writers, and the name of their new company, Image Comics, reflected that focus. At Image, all of McFarlane, Lee, Liefeld, Silvestri, Larsen, and Valentino had their own imprints or "studios" completely free of any central editorial oversight or control.

The rise to fame of McFarlane, Lee, Liefeld, and other of the Image Comics artists was and remains unprecedented in both its rapidity and its scope, signalling not only the newly important role of the "superstar" creator, but also of the superstar artist. McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld are particularly significant among the Image founders, in part because their work produced the most impressive sales numbers, but also because they were extremely influential; all three creators helped to shape and redefine flagship titles and characters at Marvel, and in their editorship roles at Image, each creator mentored developing artists, many of whom became active and successful at Image, Marvel and/or DC (among other publishers). Lee, in particular, continues to directly influence the creative direction of mainstream superhero comics; in 2010, he became the co-publisher (with Dan Didio) of DC Comics, a position he still holds.

As Barbara Postema observes, unpacking the style of comics is crucial to understanding their meaning. "In comics," says Postema, "style is so pervasive that it encompasses the entire

experience of the comic—the characters, the storyline, the look—often even down to the shapes of the letters. Style in effect ceases to be style, since it is no longer a superficial surface matter. Style becomes the substance of comics, through which each text speaks in a voice that is completely its own. Style signifies in comics" (122). This chapter will examine how the distinctive but also broadly similar styles of McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld reconfigured the superhero in ways that reflect and negotiate the cultural context of the 1980s and early 1990s, an era that witnessed many important changes in the popular representation of the body. It will also examine a text that perhaps represents the pinnacle of this era's privileging of the artist and of the new artistic styles popularized by McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld: the annual *Marvel Swimsuit Special*, a largely non-narrative collection of superhero pin-ups that was published between 1991 and 1995. Both parodic and erotic, the *Marvel Swimsuit Special* provides unique access to the shape and substance of bodily fantasies within an increasingly self-aware superhero genre and an increasingly body- and image-conscious American society. This chapter's analysis will particularly focus on the employment of exaggeration and excess, examining how the increased hyper-muscularity and hyper-sexuality of this era's superhero bodies reflects new efforts to preserve traditional values and hierarchies while also offering new modes and moments of resistance to those values and hierarchies.

The styles of McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld are, in many ways, less radically experimental than the work of other superstar creators from the 1980s and 90s. The work of Bill Sienkiewicz and Frank Miller, for instance, often cultivates dramatic distortions, with bodies stretching and changing from scene to scene, and even panel to panel, in relation to the emotional moods or perceptions of the characters (Image 1). And yet, McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld's superhero bodies are considerably different than those produced by the clean, round, commercial lines of many

other popular artists of the era, such as John Byrne and George Pérez.[68] The styles of McFarlane,

Lee, and Liefeld fall somewhere between the sometimes-wild experimentalism of Sienkiewicz

and Miller and the "house style" of Byrne and Pérez, whose clean-lined aesthetic guarantees a

basic level of consistency in the design of characters and the depiction of action. The styles of

McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld operate within the broad terms of traditional superhero artwork,

inasmuch as their expressionistic exaggerations emphasize male power, female objectification,

and spectacular action. As Neil Cohn describes, American superhero comics employ a common

visual language that Cohn calls "Kirbyian"—in reference, of course, to Jack Kirby's enormous

influence upon multiple generations of superhero comics. Within the Kirbyian language, "all

bodies are physically exaggerated—men more muscular, women more curvy," and characters

"often appear in 'dramatic' and 'dynamic' poses that stretch slightly beyond the full point of

action"; in addition, "figures and poses are highly unrealistic," to the point of being "near

impossible (or at least uncomfortable) for actual human bodies," and are sometimes "not

anatomically correct" (Cohn 141). Certainly, these characteristics are true of the superhero

bodies depicted by McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld; Cohn even singles out Lee's artwork as a direct

inheritor of the Kirbyian tradition. Similar to Charles Hatfield's descriptions of Kirby's artwork,

all of McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld could also be said to treat superheroes bodies as "abstract

design elements" and "vectors of *force*" (45).

However, these creators also modify and amplify this conventional exaggeration in ways

that demonstrate a new—or at least newly insistent—privileging of style above and beyond the

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[68] Byrne both wrote and penciled several high-profile series during the 1980s and 90s for both Marvel and DC, including *Fantastic Four*, *The Sensational She-Hulk*, and the 6-issue limited series *Man of Steel*, which re-envisioned and streamlined Superman's origin story following DC's *Crisis on Infinite Earths* event, which eliminated the DC "multiverse" to create a shared continuity more similar to that used by Marvel. Pérez also penciled several high-profile series for both companies during this era, including *Teen Titans* and *Avengers*; he also both wrote and penciled the re-envisioning of Wonder Woman that followed *Crisis on Infinite Earths*.

exigencies of narrative. According to Hatfield, "The telltale stylization of Kirby's drawings…

has everything to do with their narrative purposes, their containment in and contributions to a

gridded comics narrative." "*Pacing*," Hatfield asserts, "…is the overriding reality that

determined Kirby's style, his characteristic distortions of and departures from the canons of

realistic drawing" (63). Kirby's style, Hatfield argues, stands "in contradistinction to illustrative

drawing, which… relates differently to written text, leans more heavily toward the decorative,

and, by virtue of its separateness from the text, typically elicits 'a more contemplative reading'…

By contrast, the drawing of Kirby is, always, narrative" (65). In other words, where Kirby's

superhero bodies are exaggerated, this exaggeration generally serves a specific narrative purpose,

highlighting a certain action, mood, and/or emotion. Kirby's renditions of Mr. Fantastic,

discussed in Chapter One, are representative of Kirby's approach to exaggeration. Kirby's

rendition of Mr. Fantastic's body at rest and in domestic moments is largely un-exaggerated; in

such moments, Mr. Fantastic is often depicted as thin or narrow-bodied and rarely exhibits his

stretching powers. Under Kirby's pencil, it is only during dramatic action sequences that Mr.

Fantastic's body takes on wildly exaggerated forms. Similarly, although Billy Graham, as

discussed in Chapter Two, often depicts Black Panther's body in very exaggerated terms, the

most extreme exaggerations are typically reserved for moments of intense emotional and/or

physical strain.

 In contrast, McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld's exaggerations tend, to paraphrase Hatfield, to

lean more toward the decorative, eliciting a contemplative reading that routinely slows down or

fragments the narrative. In the case of McFarlane's depictions of Spider-Man, the degree of

detail, in particular, demands special contemplation. Compared to the artists who preceded him,

McFarlane adds additional detail to Spider-Man's webbing, giving it a visibly thicker, lumpier

texture (a style colloquially known as "spaghetti webbing"), and often draws this webbing surrounding Spider-Man's body and/or exceeding panel and page borders (Image 2). McFarlane also adds new lines to the webbing pattern on Spider-Man's costume and enlarges the eye pieces of his mask; these changes emphasize the character's alien, insect-like appearance and expression while also emphasizing McFarlane's individual style, inasmuch as the intricacy of his linework highlights his artistic skill (or at the very least, his artistic effort). McFarlane additionally tends to situate Spider-Man within extremely detailed splash pages and innovative layouts, frequently using overlapping borders, bodies, and objects to weave together panels and action sequences. A two-page sequence from *Spider-Man* #5 (1991) (Image 3) is representative of these common techniques. These pages employ several inset panels and minimum gutters, and even the gutters are decorated with spider webs that stick the sequence together. These webs help to create a more cohesive, full-page design, but in doing so, they also slow down the sequence, bogging down the eye's movement between the panels by drawing attention away from the content of the panels themselves and toward the dense, sticky gutters between them. This is a layout that draws a lot of attention to itself, compelling readers to appreciate and interact with its challenging intricacy at the expense of narrative efficiency and in contradistinction to the fast-paced superhero action it seems to depict.

Lee's style is, in some ways, more traditional than McFarlane's. He is less likely, for instance, to use experimental layouts, tending to employ more conventional panelling within set grids. He does, however, share McFarlane's decorative intricacy, drawing with a thin line that minutely details and shades the always extremely exaggerated contours of muscles and faces. Yet whereas McFarlane's lines and bodies have a liquid, flowing quality, Lee's lines produce bodies that are hard, chiseled, austere, and almost robotic, as evinced by a representative splash page

from *X-Men* #1 (Image 4). Lee's men are always very thickly muscled and tend to be posed

somewhat stiffly whether at rest or in action. His women, meanwhile, are a mix of hard and soft

pieces; these women are very tall and very thin, with large breasts and spines that are almost

perpetually curved into dramatic "s" shapes. The robotic quality of Lee's superheroes is

enhanced by the shiny latex or metallic look of his superhero costumes, which glint and shine at

all times, in every light. These ultra-detailed, robotic-seeming bodies are often displayed within

lush, also ultra-detailed splash pages. Case in point, Lee's splash page from *Uncanny X-Men*

#275 (1991) (Image 5) depicts no less than 17 different super-powered characters, all rendered in

meticulous detail and, as if to draw attention to work's precision, individually labelled,

somewhat like butterflies in a display case. While splash pages, as discussed in Chapter One,

always break up and slow down the action of a comic, the detail and precision of Lee's splash

pages elicits a superior degree of contemplation, and thus, a longer pause.

Liefeld has, without a doubt, the most fraught legacy of the three creators that are the

focus of this chapter; whereas Lee has become the co-publisher of the second largest comic book

company in America, and McFarlane's original artwork continues to sell for hundreds of

thousands of dollars at auction,[69] the top Google result for "Rob Liefeld" is not Wikipedia or the

artist's own Twitter account or webpage, but rather a blog post by Bill Hanstock entitled "The 40

Worst Rob Liefeld Drawings." The popular disparagement of Liefeld's work is both obvious and

complex. In the obvious category, Liefeld's artwork has many highly visible technical

limitations. In the "40 Worst Drawings" blogpost and elsewhere, Liefeld is often criticized for

having a poor understanding of perspective and anatomy; he is particularly known for the

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[69] McFarlane's original artwork for the cover of *Amazing Spider-Man* #328 (1990) was sold at auction in 2012 for $657,250, settling a new record for a piece of original American comic art (the record had previously belonged to three original pages by Miller from *The Dark Knight Returns*) (Heritage Auctions).

inconsistency of his character designs, and for his seeming inability to draw feet and hands. Yet

his work is also highly individual, while also being broadly similar to that of McFarlane and Lee.

Liefeld's superhero bodies fall somewhere between the fluidity of McFarlane's bodies and the

robotic-ness of Lee's bodies, his similarly thin, detailed lines producing shapes that are both

craggy and austere, sometimes in equal measure. The character of Cable (Image 6), a literal man-

machine hybrid co-created by Liefeld with Nicieza, emblematizes this often-uneasy combination.

Under Liefeld's pencil, Cable is intensely hypermasculine, always depicted with enlarged

shoulders and enormous guns. But he also seems somewhat overburdened by that masculinity, in

no small part due to the aforementioned fine, detailed, sometimes-craggy line work. Similar to

both McFarlane and Lee, Liefeld often situates his very exaggerated, very detailed superhero

bodies within bombastic splash pages that tend to slow down or otherwise interfere with the

pacing or progression of the narrative; similar to McFarlane, Liefeld also uses experimental

layouts that demand intense contemplation, in which panels, bodies, and objects overlap or are

layered on top of one another (Image 7).

 To the degree that the styles of all of McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld demand a level of

contemplation that exceeds the exigencies of narrative, these styles can be considered excessive.

This excess has commonly been used to disparage the work of all three creators. As Bart Beaty

and Benjamin Woo's work on symbolic capital in the field of American comics demonstrates,

Kirby has long been held up as the epitome a "good" superhero comics artist in part because his

style strikes a balance between individuality and efficiency; Liefeld, in contrast, has been

particularly singled out as the epitome of a "bad" superhero comics artist because his style is

supposedly too individualistic and inefficient, privileging personal vision above or beyond the

needs of the story. Yet we cannot understand the meaning of McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld's style,

or appreciate how and why it was, and in many cases remains, so appealing and influential, by adhering to simplistic distinctions between "good" and "bad." These creators are not trying to be "good" in the same terms as an artist such as Kirby; instead, they are trying to break with the Kirbyian tradition, in part by exaggerating it beyond anything that had been seen before (and most of what has been seen since). Ultimately, in order to truly understand the meaning and appeal of these creators' work, we must read it on its own terms, which means assessing the forms and functions of its particular excesses.

We can begin to address the meaning of the specific forms of excess in the work of these creators by situating them within the broader social context of the era. In the 1980s and 90s, American society and culture experienced what might be described as a bodily turn. This bodily turn manifested in numerous ways, though one of the most significant and obvious was the increased visibility—and with it, the increased objectification—of the male body. In the 1980s and 90s, sexualized imagery was increasingly used to sell a wider variety of products,[70] and sexualized men were included in that increase, being used to sell everything from designer jeans to perfume and paper towels. Although images of sexualized women did—and do—continue to dominate in advertising,[71] the 1980s and 90s did see a marked increase in ad campaigns starring sexualized men, spurred by the tremendous popularity of (for instance) Calvin Klein's underwear ads and Levis' 1985 "laundrette" ad starring Nick Kamen.

A new genre of film, the "action movie," was born amid this new interest in the sexualized male body. The birth of the action movie is particularly relevant to superhero comics,

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[70] A study by Tom Reichart charting the presence of sex in advertisements appearing in major American magazines between 1983 and 2003 notes significant increases in the use of sexual imagery; between 1983 and 2003, the percentage of ads using sex to sell products rose from 15 to 27 percent.

[71] Richart's study confirms that sexualized women in advertising have consistently greatly outnumbered men. In 1983, 11 percent of all advertisements contained sexualized women, and only 3 percent contained sexualized images of men; as of 2003, those numbers had risen to 22 and 6 percent respectively.

inasmuch as action movies evinced the increased, and increasingly mainstream, interest in the same types of extremely large and hard male bodies that have always been popular in superhero comics. The films in the popular *Rocky*, *Rambo*, and *Terminator* series are distinct from their predecessors in the war, Western, or science fiction genres in no small part due to the ways in which they display and highlight the massive, rock hard, and often well-lubricated male bodies at the centre of their similarly massive spectacles. The action movies of the 1980s and early 90s starring the likes of Sylvester Stallone, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Jean Claude Van Damme among others, evinced, but also influenced, the development of a new type and degree of hypermasculine bodily ideal that nurtured, and was nurtured by, the increased popularity of bodybuilding. As Yvonne Tasker observes, although massive bodies were not necessarily new to the American culture of the 1980s, they were newly popular. Writes Tasker: "It is the sheer scale of the budgets, the box-office success, and of the male bodies on display, that seems to have shifted in the Hollywood cinema of the 1980s. In the same period, the connotations surrounding bodybuilding as a practice and as a competitive sport have similarly shifted from freakish marginality to the mainstream of western health culture" (2).

Before the 1980s, some bodybuilders had, of course, achieved tremendous fame. As discussed in the Introduction, Eugene Sandow was among the most famous and highly paid celebrities of his day. In the 1950s, Mr. Universe winner-turned-actor Steve Reeves also achieved his share of fame, though his massiveness may have also lost him a chance for true Hollywood stardom; in 1948, Reeves turned down the leading role in Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* because the director wanted him to lose 15 pounds, a request that Reeves was unwilling to humour as it would have limited his prospects as a competitive bodybuilder ("The Perfect Vision"). Reeves' example demonstrates that before the 1980s, bodybuilding and bodybuilder-

style physiques were not particularly normal or desirable. Before the mainstream popularity of

Schwarzenegger, in particular, bodybuilding was often associated, in the minds of many

Americans, with the deviance of homosexuality.[72] As Shelly McKenzie observes, "The

association between bodybuilding and homosexuality was concretely linked by the physique

magazines of the 1950s and 1960s, which depicted straight bodybuilders posing, often

knowingly, for gay readers" (160). By the 1990s, however, Schwarzenegger had become not only

a household name, but also one of the most beloved "American" icons of all time. And unlike

Reeves, Schwarzenegger was never asked to slim down for a part, regardless of whether his

muscles were narratively or practically required for any given role. In his day, Sandow was an

ideal, but he was also an exception. During the 1980s, however, due in no small part to the

success of the new type of action movies, the built body became less exceptional than standard,

with male models and growing numbers of male actors adopting elements of the bodybuilder

physique, such as washboard abs and large, developed pecs and shoulders. Sandow may have

started one of the first bodybuilding magazines, but it was not until the 1990s that such a

magazine achieved circulation numbers suggesting mainstream popularity; the bodybuilding

magazine *Men's Health* experienced tremendous growth throughout the 1990s, going from 250

000 subscribers in 1990 to 1.5 million subscribers in 1997 (Miller 57).

Anthony Giddens argues that although modernity in general evinces a kind of "reflexive

mobilization" of the body as it becomes "less and less an extrinsic 'given'," this process

intensified within the 1980s, which saw the development of "an integral connection between

bodily development and lifestyle—manifest, for example, in the pursuit of specific bodily

regimes" (7). McKenzie asserts that the practice of bodybuilding, and the ideal of the built body,

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[72] Fredric Wertham made this claim *in Seduction of the Innocent*, where he charged the muscle ads that commonly
appeared in comic books with promoting homosexual tendencies (209).

spread as rapidly as it did in part due to changes in exercise technology, such as the development

of workout equipment like the Nautilus machine, which "allowed novice gym-goers to strength-

train with little knowledge or experience" (163). Beginning in the 1970s, anabolic steroids,

which Harrison G. Pope Jr. at al describe as "the chemical that could make men bigger than they

had ever been for the last million years" (32), also became widespread in the world of

bodybuilding. By the 1980s, steroids were similarly common in the world of professional

wrestling, which, perhaps not coincidentally, achieved mainstream popularity for the first time

during this era, as evinced by the World Wrestling Federation's ability to set new attendance

records at nationally televised events such as Wrestlemania,[73] and by various cross-promotions

with television, film, and pop music.[74] Steroids also, of course, made their way into the hands of

the general public and into the realm of "legitimate" sports during this period. In 1991, the U.S.

Department of Heath reported than an estimated 250 000 high school-aged boys were taking

steroids, and that steroid use was considered rampant in Olympic-level competition (Miller 20).

The increased popularity of bodybuilding coincided with a general increase, among both

men and women, in participation in a variety of exercise regimes, including jogging as well as

various forms of aerobics and cardiovascular exercise done on tracks, treadmills, stationary

bikes, and other apparatuses. This overall increase in exercise regimes would eventually turn the

gym from a subcultural space primarily associated with the vaguely deviant world of

bodybuilding into something of a cultural norm; circa 2005, approximately 14 percent of the

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[73] Wrestlemania III, held in 1987 at the Pontiac Silverdome in Michigan, set an indoor attendance record of 93,173.
[74] For instance, the "Rock 'n' Wrestling Connection" was a cross-promotion between the WWF and elements of the music industry; as part of this promotion, rock star Cyndi Lauper incorporated WWF wrestlers into music videos that aired on MTV and become involved in several WWF events. The 1980s also witnessed the first of what would become many tie-ins between professional wrestling and popular movies and television shows; for instance, Mr. T, star of the popular NBC television series *The A-Team* (1983-87), was featured as a tag team partner of WWF star Hulk Hogan in the "main event" of the first Wrestlemania in 1985, while Hogan appeared twice on *The A-Team* as a friend of Mr. T's character, B.A. Baracus.

U.S. population belonged to a gym (Sassatelli 7). As Roberta Sassatelli describes, "since the late 1970s, "gyms have been tightly associated with the notion of 'fitness,' and old labels have been replaced in professional texts with neologisms such as 'fitness centres' and 'fitness clubs'" (4). This rebranding signals the transformation of the gym from a "competitive, harsh and often very masculine world" into a more inclusive, less gender-specific space; it also, however, evinces a new view of exercise as yet another commodifiable trapping of a luxurious, successful lifestyle (Sassatelli 4). During the 1980s, this rebranding of the gym combined with a burgeoning fitness industry selling everything from magazines to celebrity-endorsed sneakers to exercise equipment and various legal and illegal enhancements and dietary supplements. This commodification of fitness transformed the gym and actual exercising into just one facet of a growing fitness *culture*; this fitness culture would eventually affect and be accessible to even the majority of Americans who were not members of fitness clubs, or who never adopted exercise regimes.

This commodification of fitness means that fitness culture was and is about the appearance or performance of fitness as much, or more, than the pursuit of actual health or physical strength or skill. The development of fitness culture represented an important shift in popular understandings of the body. Michael Anton Budd argues that in Sandow's late modern, industrial era, "Although the body was a cipher or sign of the self, the essence of the individual remained intertwined with ideas of moral good and rational optimality" (76). In other words, although physical fitness mattered during Sandow's era, it ultimately mattered less than a sense of individual integrity that was still considered somehow separate from the body. In contrast, McKenzie argues that within the postmodern, post-industrial 1980s, "the career-minded workforce had transformed exercise from a leisure hobby grounded in health to a statement of personal and professional competence written on the body" (159). Shari L. Dworkin and Faye

Linda Wachs concur that since the 1980s, "the appearance of the fit body, rather than the reality of fitness, has become a critical determinant of social status and a factor that is self-policed by individuals as they negotiate social positions" (12).

The popularity of bodybuilding and wrestling, both of which were and are inextricably intertwined with the use (or abuse) of anabolic steroids, are two obvious examples of this privileging of the appearance of fitness above the actually healthy body. As the Introduction discussed, bodybuilding prioritizes the display or performance of strength rather than the functional reality of strength. The growth of steroid use in bodybuilding compound this fact, inasmuch as steroids help users achieve larger, harder bodies while often damaging their overall health. During and after the 1980s, the rise of fitness culture was also paralleled by, and often integrated with, the rising popularity of other risky and frequently costly practices of modifying and enhancing the body, including extreme dieting. A study of *Playboy* magazine centerfolds and Miss America contestants between the years 1979 and 1988 observes that during this period, the apparent body weight of both nude models and beauty pageant contestants decreased significantly, from being 13 percent below the average weight of an American woman in the same age group in 1969, to being 19 percent below that average in 1988 (Wiseman et al). This study also records a significant increase in both diet articles and exercise articles in major American magazines during this period. Another study examining cover models appearing on popular women's magazines between 1959 and 1999 found that models not only became much thinner over this timespan, but that this thinness also became more graphically visible: "not only has the proportion of full-body shots increased with time, but so too has the extent to which the bodies of the models are revealed in these depictions" (Sypeck 346). Consequently, "One strong message communicated by the print media over the last 40 years regarding female beauty seems

to have changed from one espousing the importance of a pretty face to one that additionally

emphasized an extremely thin figure, as women have been increasingly exposed to models'

bodies and as these bodies have become progressively thinner" (Sypeck 346).

Cosmetic surgery also grew in popularity during the 1980s and 90s. This popularity

existed among both men and women; by 1994, is was estimated that men received one in four

cosmetic procedures performed annually in the U.S. (Dotson 103). While there were and are

some differences in the types of procedures requested by men and women, there are also many

commonalities; liposuction and face lifts, for instance, are among the most popular procedures

for both sexes (Blum 5). Among women, breast augmentation surgeries experienced a particular

spike in popularity during the 1980s. By 1990, it was estimated that one million American

women had had the procedure (Zuckerman), and these numbers would continue to climb

throughout the 1990s,[75] until breast augmentations became the most popular form of cosmetic

surgery in the U.S. and worldwide (Rice 259). This newly urgent desire for increasingly large

and firm—and thus, increasingly sexualized—breasts can partly be attributed to what Ariel Levy

calls the rise of "raunch culture," and Carla Rice calls "the 'pornification' of popular culture—

the blurring of boundaries between porn and pop culture that has wallpapered media with sexual

imagery" (204). Examples of this "pornification" include the mainstream embrace of "crossover"

icons such as Pamela Anderson, who, during the 1990s, had numerous breast augmentations and

appeared simultaneously in both mainstream television shows and films as well as nude

photoshoots for *Playboy* and other men's magazines. Fitness culture also participated in this

pornification, as attested to by the popularization of stripping and pole dancing as exercise

classes for women (see Levy), and by the increased use of sexual imagery to sell health and

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[75] Breast augmentations increased by 155 percent between 1997 (when the American Society of Aesthetic Plastic
    Surgery started collecting data) and 2010 (Rice 259).

fitness products.[76]

On the one hand, this era's turn toward the body as a meaningful and moldable sign of culture suggests a new breakdown of mind/body dualism and an embrace of the performativity of embodied identity. On the other hand, the types of bodies that are imagined and molded during this era evince familiar biases and hierarchies. Notably, despite the involvement of both men and women in fitness culture, the 1980s witnessed a striking divergence between male and female bodies, with "an ideal of men that are muscular and women that are slim… [becoming] noticeably more pronounced" (Locks 168). During the 1980s, the popularity of bodybuilding and anabolic steroids aided the development of a male physical ideal that was larger than in any previous era; at the same time, the aforementioned pornification of popular culture and an increased emphasis on slimness helped to create a new female physical ideal that was exaggeratedly large in the chest and smaller everywhere else. Partly, this divergence of male and female bodies reflects a desire to physically reassert gender norms that had experienced significant upheaval in and around second-wave feminism. As Dworkin and Wachs observe, beginning in the 1980s, "Extreme gender display seems to codify as a genuine trend just as gender differences in the larger culture were being called into question. As women began entering previously male-dominated professions, increasing numbers of women entered into military service, and Title IX demanded greater opportunities for women and girls in sport… traditional gender ideals were called into question" (6). Pope Jr. et al. similarly argue that in the 1980s, "the body is growing in relative importance as a defining feature of masculinity" because "[o]ne of the few attributes left, one of the few grounds on which women can never match men,

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[76] According to Reichert, between 1983 and 2003, health and hygiene products were more likely than any other class of products to feature sexual imagery, doing so 38 percent of the time. Beauty products, in comparison, featured sexual imagery 36 percent of the time, while drugs and medications, including weight-loss supplements, came in third with 29 percent of ads containing sexual imagery.

is muscularity" (50). There is some questionable gender essentialism at play in the wording of Pope Jr. et al.'s argument; some women do, of course, "match" some men in terms of muscularity, and the shapes and capabilities of male and female bodies are determined by culture as well as, and in concert with, biology. However, muscularity is nonetheless a very important *perceived* threshold between male and female bodies. Muscularity is often perceived as a final proving ground for the display of supposedly natural differences and, of course, supposedly natural hierarchies. As Dworkin and Waschs put it, "Differences in size… provide a way to normalize and naturalize the idea that men and women are inherently different (49).

This assertion of natural gender differences is clearly visible in the artwork of McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld. All three creators exaggerate physical differences between men and women, sometimes by making men more muscular, but always by making women bustier, skinnier, and overall more sexualized. For instance, McFarlane's depiction of Mary Jane is dramatically different from the depiction of her by John Romita Jr., the regular artist McFarlane replaced when he began penciling *Amazing Spider-Man* (Image 8). Whereas Romita Jr.'s version of Mary Jane typically wears clothing that is situationally appropriate—such as jeans, a T-shirt, and a blazer for everyday errands or domestic scenes—McFarlane's version of Mary Jane is almost always dressed for a provocative photoshoot, donning perpetually plunging necklines designed to emphasize breasts that, not coincidentally, grew several sizes larger under McFarlane's pencil. Although Mary Jane is obviously very attractive in Romita Jr.'s pages, and can often be seen "posing" for the viewer (with one leg bent, angling her hips to the side), she is not fetishized in the sense that she is not dressed in a contextually inappropriate manner and is not positioned or exaggerated in such a way that her visual spectacle overwhelms the scene. In contrast, McFarlane's Mary Jane is precisely fetishized. Representative examples from *Spider-Man* #6

and #13 (1991) (Image 9) outfit Mary Jane in outlandish, decadent clothing that belies the private, everyday domestic setting of each scene and explicitly positions her as a spectacle for the male gaze. In both examples, Spider-Man/Peter Parker is clearly a proxy for the male gaze, his much smaller and/or largely off-panel body positioning him as a spectator of Mary Jane's spectacle.

Lee and Liefeld similarly exaggerate differences between male and female bodies, including male and female superheroes. In a splash page by Lee from *X-Men* #11 (1992) (Image 10), the female superheroes are dramatically smaller, in terms of both height and body mass, than the male superheroes. The female superheroes are also explicitly and exaggeratedly objectified relative to their male teammates; in this splash page, three out of four female superheroes strike robotically identical poses in which the chest is thrust forward and the buttocks are thrust back, turning each character's body into an extreme "s" shape that is doubly emphasized by each characters' extremely large, individually articulated breasts and tiny waist. In contrast, three out of the four male superheroes in this splash page are shown crouching in ways that explicitly shield their bodies from view, while the fourth male superhero, Cyclops, who is also the largest character in the scene, strikes a square, hard pose that fundamentally, even exaggeratedly, emphasizes his commanding physical might. The differences between male and female bodies on Liefeld's cover for *X-Force* #1 are even more dramatic (Image 11). On this cover, the bodies of the male superheroes are several times larger than the bodies of the female superheroes, and the composition emphasizes this difference, positioning smaller female characters next to, in front of, beneath, and/or in poses that mirror the larger male characters.

Ultimately, in the artwork of all of McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld, excluding hands and feet, the smallest part of any man's body is typically his head, while the largest part of his body

is typically his shoulders and biceps. In contrast, once again excluding hands and feet, the smallest part of any woman's body is typically her waist, while the largest part of her body is either/both her breasts or buttocks. Although extreme differences between male and female superhero bodies were obviously evident in previous eras, they are newly exaggerated in the artwork of McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld, and in the popular styles of this era more generally, which the work of these creators influenced and typifies. While the breasts of female superheroes have always been large, the late 1980s was the first era in which, as many examples from the *Marvel Swimsuit Special* can attest (see in particular Image 31 and 36), it was not uncommon to see a female superhero's breasts actually drawn larger than her head.

Dworkin and Waschs argue, however, that there are myriad contradictions beyond—or, as the case may be, within—this era's emphasis on exaggerated differences between male and female bodies. According to Dworkin and Waschs, the increased insistence on natural gender differences in the popular, visual culture of the 1980s and 90s is partly a reaction to and against the fact that, both socially and culturally, men's and women's bodies and bodily practices had actually become more similar. In general, say Dworkin and Waschs, "'expanding' definitions of women and men" and "trends of convergence between women, men, consumption, and bodies" almost certainly provided fodder for many of the era's dramatic visual and physical reassertions of gender norms (6). This chapter has already discussed some of the ways in which male and female bodies converged during the 1980s and 90s. For instance, the aforementioned increased objectification of male bodies—as evinced by an increase in sexualized men in advertising, the birth of the action movie, and men's embrace of both bodybuilding and plastic surgery— signalled a new imperative for both men and women to look not only fit, but also *attractive*, and to overtly display their bodies for public inspection and approval. As Pope Jr. et al. observe, the

increased objectification of the male body throughout the 1980s and 90s is evident in studies that report "men's dissatisfaction with body appearance has nearly tripled in less than thirty years—from 15 percent in 1972 to 34 percent in 1985 to 43 percent in 1997" (27). In addition, although the rise of fitness culture almost certainly helped to impose new and harsher restrictions on female bodies, manifesting, in particular, in amplified ideals of slenderness, it also worked in concert with the gains of second-wave feminism to significantly revise traditional images of the female body and thus, traditional conceptions of female roles and capabilities. During the 1980s, in both superhero comics and American culture at large, women's bodies become curvier and sexier, but also harder, tougher, and stronger; this hardening of the female body can be read, in part, as an attempt to deny the female body's traditional connotations of maternal softness and/or sexual penetrability.

Within their seeming reassertion of gender norms, the superhero bodies depicted by McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld's reflect and inform many of this era's central contradictions with regard to the changing roles and shapes of sex and gender. There are several ways in which all three creators' exaggerations of gender differences also depict unconventional, or at the very least new and differently unstable, images of male and female bodies, and thus, newly unstable images of gender. McFarlane's reinterpretation of Spider-Man is a case in point. A splash page occupying the second and third pages of *Spider-Man* #1 (Image 12) is representative of McFarlane's depiction of the character. In this image, the thickly textured webbing that weaves in and around Spider-Man's body references but also enhances the gooey tactile-ness that has always been an essential aspect of the character. In addition, although McFarlane, like every other Spider-Man artist, models the character's poses after Ditko's original images, he pushes Spider-Man's flexibility further than any artist had before. Under McFarlane's pencil, Spider-

Man's limbs almost always point in at least three distinct directions, as two additional pages from *Spider-Man* #1 demonstrate (see Image 2). On the first of these two pages, Spider-Man's head is thrust so far forward between his legs that his raised foot is the highest point of his body. On the second page, Spider-Man's body is bisected by his arms, which cross at a perpendicular angle, while his hips seem to be jointed with ball bearings, allowing his legs to spread wide while extending both forward and back. In these and other images, McFarlane's artwork makes it especially clear that Spider-Man, though he defies gravity, does not fly; even suspended high in the air between skyscrapers, McFarlane's Spider-Man seems to ooze, crawl, and pounce rather than soar, his spaghetti webbing blocking a clear view of the city and bleeding past the frame to invade (or pollute) the gutter.

The special fluidity of McFarlane's Spider-Man lends his body connotations of femininity. Unlike both Ditko's somewhat skeletal depictions of Spider-Man as well as the more squarely muscular depictions by John Romita Sr., who redefined the look of the character following Ditko's departure from Marvel, there is, under the pencil of McFarlane, a particular softness to Spider-Man's hardness. McFarlane's Spider-Man is an especially sensuous, damp, and gooey collection of meaty bumps and lumps woven together by the flowing, detailed line work on his even more web-lined costume as well as the extreme curves of his unnaturally bendable muscles and bones. In a sense, McFarlane's Spider-Man suggests some basic commonalities between the seemingly opposed phenomena of female breast augmentation and steroid use among male bodybuilders. Inasmuch as breast augmentation makes female bodies more obviously sexualized and steroids make male bodies more obviously strong, both phenomena can reflect a desire to reassert gender norms and hierarchies. Yet both breast augmentation and steroid use also distort the body in "unnatural" ways. From a graphic

standpoint, breast augmentation and steroid use can be seen as broadly similar inasmuch as both enhance the silhouette's curves. Because steroids particularly increase a male bodybuilder's upper body mass, including his pectorals, they can be seen as helping to create a body that is both hypermasculine and newly similar to traditional depictions of the curvaceous female form.

In contrast to the curvaceous-ness of McFarlane's Spider-Man, Lee's male superheroes are always emphatically hard and square, adorned with a perpetual shine evoking either/both plastic or metal. The aforementioned splash page from *X-Men* #1 (Image 4) particularly emphasizes these attributes. In this image, the shine on the costumes and even the skin of the superheroes is virtually identical to the shine on the metal and plastic machinery and computer consoles that surround them. In part, Lee's metallic or plastic-seeming bodies continue in a long tradition—discussed in the Introduction—of superhero bodies being compared with, and taking on the properties of, machines and other modern technology. Yet the nature and extent of the machine-like qualities of Lee's superhero bodies is nonetheless notable. Case in point, in Lee's *X-Men* #1 splash page, the dark lines and shading around the individually articulated muscles of, especially, Cyclops' upper body, are very similar to the also-individually-articulated pieces of the machines and consoles, as well as the plastic storage or ammunition compartments on Cyclops' belt. Furthermore, the machine-like nature of Cyclops' body is located both in its hardness and shininess as well as in its incorporation of tiny, specific, individual pieces. Cyclops' body evinces a new type and degree of both control and instability, suggesting the body's ability to be both built and disassembled. Alan Klein argues that in the 1980s, following the newly common use of steroids as well as Nautilus-style exercise equipment, bodybuilders can increasingly be seen to embrace a conception of the body as composed of individually articulate-able and modifiable parts. Post-1980s bodybuilding, says Klein, "feeds… [a] cultural view of the body as 'partible"

as practitioners "view each body part as objectified." This objectification of body parts is considered acceptable inasmuch as it contributes to the bodybuilder's dream of "absolute control of diet and physical regimen"; ultimately, partible-ness is desirable, Klein argues, to the extent that it nurtures a fantasy of the body as a "system" that can, and must, be "mastered" (189). Susan Willis argues that this form of empowerment is an illusion, asserting that Nautilus-style exercise machines are "a capitalist wish-fulfillment" that "gives… access to the machine but denies access to production" (74-5). Tasker similarly argues that although the steroid and Nautilus-era bodybuilder can be read as attempting to assert (or reassert) traditional forms of male power, he is also, in the process, marked "as precisely unnatural, being as he is so clearly… *manufactured*" (78). In addition, the partible-ness of Lee's male superheroes can make them seem especially consumable. Not totally unlike glamour photography, in which women are "made up" in ways that "[promote] the ideal woman as being put together, composed of surfaces and defined by appearance" (Kuhn et al. 14), Lee's male superheroes are shiny, overdetermined assemblages of parts, whose intricacy and detail compels prolonged visual investigation.

In general, the partible-ness of Lee's male superheroes emphasizes traditional male power while also showcasing its delicate and thus potentially fragile construction. Although the generally stiff, rigid poses of Lee's male superheroes might seem to belie this fragility, there are ways in which this rigidity also helps to confirm it. As representative examples from *Uncanny X-Men* #271 (1990) and *X-Men* #8 (1992) (Image 13) can testify, Lee's male superheroes tend to be rigid and fully flexed, and thus stiff, in both action and at rest. This decidedly limited, non-fluid range of motion reflects, in part, the greater importance of displaying, as opposed to using, one's athleticism or physical power. In this, Lee's machine-like, partible, rigid male bodies suggest a form of male power that resides less in a man's dramatic, physical actions than in the punishing

effort required to hold together—or contain—his hundreds of tiny, individual parts. To put it another way: Lee's machine-like, partible, stiff male bodies locate male power less in external actions than internal restraint. While not as obviously threatened with disintegration as many of Liefeld's male superheroes, Lee's male superheroes nonetheless represent maleness and/or masculinity as a collection of parts that one wrong movement—one moment of weakness or softness—might topple, or at the very least rearrange. Ultimately, in Lee's artwork, male power is routinely displayed in reaction to, and in concert with, its tenuousness, which is always written upon and built into the body alongside a denial of the same. Significantly, the plot of *X-Men* #1 both plays up and denies this tenuousness in a long sequence in which the X-Men battle robotic versions of themselves. During this sequence, the reader is fooled into thinking the robotic versions are real, a trick that is effective in part because Lee's artwork renders the difference between man and robot imperceptible. The conclusion of the sequence, however, reasserts the difference between man and machine via a telling reassertion of male sexual prowess, and with it, gender norms and hierarchies: when the real Gambit plies the robotic Jean Grey with a forceful kiss, he fries her circuits.

As discussed, Liefeld's superhero bodies are different from McFarlane and Lee's inasmuch as they are both austere and craggy, both machine-like and, if not quite fluid, then certainly somewhat fleshy. It is partly these contradictions that make Liefeld's male superheroes particularly excessive. Cable is, as noted, Liefeld's emblematic male superhero. A particularly unstable man-machine hybrid, Cable must constantly use his telepathic and telekinetic abilities to hold at bay a "techno organic virus" that has already transformed the flesh of his left arm and half of his face. Although the specific terms of Cable's condition are not fully elucidated until

after Liefeld's departure from Marvel,[77] Liefeld's depiction of the character nonetheless evokes the strenuousness of this affliction. The technological components of Cable's body both are and are not well integrated with his flesh. On the one hand, Cable's techno-organic body allows him to become an especially deadly weapon, as emphasized by recurring imagery of his mechanical arm holding, and seemingly merged with, extremely huge guns (see Image 6). On the other hand, both Cable's weapons and his own exaggerated muscles frequently threaten to overwhelm his humanity. On the cover of *X-Force* #1, for instance (see Image 11), Cable's head, which is his only visible piece of human skin, is virtually swallowed up by his many layers of armour and weapon accessories, as well as by his own bulging arms. In this image, the largest part of Cable's body is actually his engorged thighs, which are scored with dozens of fine lines. Because these lines resemble the wrinkles or scars on Cable's face, they seem to originate in his flesh; consequently, Cable's lined thighs seem to be contracted, or even aged or damaged, by the strain of supporting his enormous, disproportionate upper half. To an even greater degree than the male bodies of McFarlane and Lee, Liefeld's Cable is both bristling with power and dangerously close to disintegrating, with machinic and fleshy parts fighting for supremacy or struggling to support one another. The image of Cable on the *X-Force* #1 cover actually inverts the traditional heroic silhouette; whereas the traditional heroic silhouette is a "V" shape with wide shoulders tapering to a tight, narrow waist, Cable's body forms a reverse "V," his smaller upper half broadening into massive thighs. Ultimately, this disproportionateness and all-around excessiveness constructs a body that does not look self-contained so much as loosely stitched together. It also creates a body that is a supreme image of both possession and lack. As much as Cable's guns integrate with and weaponize his body, they also suggest that his masculinity is incomplete; Cable's enormous

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[77] Many of the details of Cable origin and powers were not confirmed until the ongoing series *Cable* (1993-2002), which began after Liefeld left Marvel.

muscles and literally metallic hardness cannot eliminate his need for even more additional and supplemental phallic signs. In Liefeld's artwork, even superheroes who are not actual man-machine hybrids often evoke this state via their incorporation of metal armour or enormous guns; an image from *X-Force* #11 (1992) (Image 14) depicts another Liefeld co-creation, George Washington or "G.W." Bridge, who is representative of this tendency.

In general, Liefeld's male superheroes contrast those depicted by McFarlane and Lee in that they are rough, awkward, and clumsy, with proportions that would not likely allow them to stand up straight, let alone move quickly. Partly, Liefeld's exaggerations of the male body convey meanings similar to those embodied by the 1960s versions of the Hulk and the Thing. As discussed in Chapter One, radiation transforms the Hulk and the Thing into monstrously excessive embodiments of masculinity that reveal both masculinity's constructed-ness and destructiveness. Yet in the case of Liefeld's artwork, such excess is written into and upon more distinctly human-like bodies. The excessiveness of characters such as Cable and G.W. Bridge is not graphically or practically separate from their humanity; these characters do not have fully encasing rocky hides or green skins to protect or shield their maleness and/or masculinity from their inhumanity. In Liefeld's comics, characters such as Cable and G.W. Bridge—who, importantly, do not have secret identities—are not *humans* who become monstrous but rather *mutants* who are inherently, fundamentally monstrous. This distinction evokes the ways in which real male bodies could and did transform during the 1980s and 90s, particularly, once again, under the influence of steroids. As Pope Jr. et al. describe, the tendency of steroids to especially enlarge men's upper bodies often creates an "oddly disproportionate drug-induced look" (38) that is "'hypermale'" while also "alert[ing] the eye that there's something unnatural about the figure of the man" (36).

Similar to steroid-using bodybuilders, Liefeld's male superheroes wear and display their unnaturalness in newly dramatic ways. Different from the Hulk or the Thing, the monstrousness implicit in the excessive and unstable musculature of Cable and G.W. Bridge never fully erupts or bursts through; whereas the Hulk and the Thing are, in their superheroic forms, graphically inhuman, the monstrousness of Cable and G.W. Bridge bubbles within and upon distinctly human-like skin. More emphatically than Lee's male superheroes, Liefeld's male superheroes are thus visually embroiled in a constant struggle not to fall apart, a struggle that is aggravated by very uncertain boundaries which can change dramatically from scene to scene, or panel to panel. Representative images of Deadpool, alone and battling the supervillain Weapon X attest to this sometimes-wild variation (Image 15). In these images and scenes, unusual uses of perspective combine with a seeming disregard for any rules of anatomy, as Weapon X and Deadpool's heads become dramatically larger or smaller from one panel to the next, and their legs and arms become dramatically shorter or longer; in one panel, Deadpool's neck even emerges from his shoulder rather than the centre of his chest. Liefeld's male superheroes all seem to possess a Hulk-like ability to grow and shrink, but do so more rapidly and without actually changing from one form to another. These capabilities are not, perhaps, surprising, since it is only by constantly shrinking and growing that these superheroes can hope to contain the accumulating pressure of their contradictions. It is also no wonder that Liefeld's male superheroes always seem to grimacing, since being a male superhero in a Liefeld comic seems to be very hard work. Similar to the steroid abusing bodybuilder, the muscles of Liefeld's male superheroes are "an excessive, almost hysterical, performance" (Brown 20). The stitched-together, almost painful-looking nature of their excess also suggests that this is a self-destructive performance, evoking, however indirectly or perhaps unintentionally, the new burdens of 1980s and 90s masculinity, which are,

in turn, powerfully expressed by the health risks of steroids.

Despite the seeming gender essentialism of their exaggerated curves, this era's female superheroes also embody new formulations of familiar contradictions. Although McFarlane does not depict any female superheroes within *Spider-Man* or his run on *Amazing Spider-Man*, Lee and Liefeld depict many in their comics from this era. It is not only the male superheroes who are machine-like and partible in Lee's artwork; the female superheroes, too, appear as assemblages of parts. Yet Lee's female superheroes have different types of parts, which form different types of assemblages. Whereas Lee's male superheroes are composed of countless tiny, individually articulated muscles, his female superheroes, as is evident from representative images of Storm, Jean Grey, and Psylocke (Image 16), are made up of long, sleek pieces; where the abdominals of these characters are indicated, it is by a single line running down the centre of the body from the ribs to the belly button, while their legs and arms are piston or torpedo-like ovals. Liefeld's female superheroes are, as one might expect, generally more excessive. Although the breasts of Liefeld's female superheroes are no larger than those of Lee's, they are often more unruly or irregularly formed; whereas Lee's breasts sit high on the crest of the ribcage, a representative image of Domino (Image 17), another character Liefeld co-created, shows the characters' breasts jutting forward but also pulling downward and to the side. Many of Liefeld's female superheroes also have more muscle tone than Lee's, as is evident in the aforementioned image of Domino, as well as a representative image of yet another Liefeld co-creation, the cat-like antihero Feral (also Image 17). In both the image of Domino and the image of Feral, the curves of each character's breasts combine and merge with the exaggerated, heavily shaded curves of her abdominals and the less heavily shaded but still highly emphasized curves of her upper and lower leg muscles. Both Domino and Feral also evince a man-machine hybridity that

is similar to Liefeld's male superheroes. In the image of Domino, feminine curves merge with ammunition pouches, metallic body armour, and huge, phallic guns, while Feral's body is defined by opposing textures of rock hard muscles and breasts as well as shaggy fur and sleek metal. Importantly, though, neither Domino nor Feral is distorted or augmented in ways that deny her essentially female and essentially erotic character; Domino's accoutrements are not so bulky that they threaten her hourglass shape or obscure her breasts, while Feral's shiny, metallic bodysuit especially highlights her breasts, and might in fact be read as taming the deviance of her hairy, animal-like body.

In both Lee's as well as Liefeld's artwork, female superheroes' large, hard breasts are the most inevitable aspect of their bodies, and the most obvious and essential sign of their fundamental difference from the male superheroes. Whether they sit high on the chest or pull downwards, the breasts of Lee's as well as Liefeld's female superheroes are always rigidly firm and individually defined. Despite the occasional irregularity of Liefeld's breasts relative to Lee's, there is a metallic-ness or plastic-ness, and thus, an artificiality, to the breasts drawn by both creators. In Lee's artwork, the female superheroes' high, hard breasts are rendered artificial by their plastic or metallic coatings and by their identical size and shape; as any of the previously discussed images can attest, all of the female superheroes Lee draws, with the notable exception of teenagers such as Jubilee, have an identical cup size and breast shape. In Liefeld's artwork, breasts are similarly encased in costumes that seem to be made of plastic or metal. The artificiality of the breasts of Liefeld's female superheroes is also suggested by their sometimes-excessive hardness; in the representative image of Domino discussed above, Domino's breasts are so hard that they strain and crease her latex, leather, or metallic costume. In their exaggerated artificiality, the breasts drawn by Lee as well as Liefeld quite directly evoke the idea, if not quite

the reality, of breast augmentation. To this end, Lee's as well as Liefeld's female superheroes perpetuate and even additionally emphasize punishing standards of female beauty while also exploiting the impossible nature of the superhero body to create women who are especially objectified and consumable. Similar to Jeffrey A. Brown's description of a 90s-era character archetype that he calls "the technology-based action heroine," Lee's as well as Liefeld's female superheroes can be viewed as "the model of the perfect machine," that "unites the twin Others of technology and woman into a single commodifiable form… and becomes the perfect fetish object." Brown argues that in the standard depiction of the technology-based action heroine, "Any suggestion of a real woman is displaced by an idealized weapon/body, the ultimate phallic object" (96).

It would, however, be a serious act of neglect to assume that this is the only meaning we might attribute to these bodies. In his first essay on the superhero body, which also happens to be one of the only scholarly works to specifically address this era's style of artwork, Scott Bukatman arguably participates in this neglect. Bukatman describes this era's female superheroes as too obvious to warrant in-depth investigation or critique: "The spectacle of the female body in these titles is so insistent, and the fetishism of breasts, thighs, and hair is so complete, that the comics seem to dare you to say anything about them that isn't redundant. *Of course*, the female form has absurdly exaggerated sexual characteristics; *of course* the costumes are skimpier than one could (or should) imagine; *of course*, there's no visible way that these costumes could stay in place; *of course*, these women represent simple adolescent masturbatory fantasies (with a healthy taste of the dominatrix)" (65). Bukatman is not wrong in any of these observations. However, as I have been emphasizing throughout this project, there are no "simple" fantasies. To that end, there are important complications and contradictions in the

deployment of this era's female superheroes that Bukatman's analysis does not address.

Bukatman's analysis particularly neglects the ways in which the Lee's as well as Liefeld's female superheroes, despite being drawn by men to be consumed by a predominately male audience, intersect with the aftermath of second-wave feminism. For instance, the impossibly tiny waists of Lee's as well as Liefeld's female superheroes both contribute to their consumability, and thus serves a male gaze, while also suggesting female fantasies of control that both conform to patriarchal expectations and modify or subvert those expectations. As previously discussed, during the 1980s and 90s, in images of women sold to men—in the form of pornographic magazines such as *Playboy*—as well as images of women sold to other women—in the form of women's health and beauty magazines—women became increasingly slender. Susan Bordo argues that this era's increasingly prized slenderness ideal particularly evinces "the contradictions of being female in our time":

> On the one hand, the lean body represents a rejection of the fifties
> ideal of cuddly, reproductive womanhood, and an assertion of a post-
> feminist, non-domestic identity. On the other hand, the steadily
> shrinking space permitted the female body seemed expressive of
> discomfort with greater female power and presence. (xxi)

The aforementioned studies by Wiseman and Sypeck concur that the presence of increasingly thin women in all types of media undoubtedly pressures women in general to want to become thinner. Of course, any actual cause-and-effect relationship between images and reality is difficult to trace. Any increase in rates of eating disorders is almost impossible to track, since

increased numbers of diagnosed eating disorders during the 1980s and 90s could simply be the result of increased reporting and documentation of such conditions. In addition, the official guidelines for diagnosing eating disorders discount a vast array of extreme dieting or "problem" eating habits. Case in point, although only an estimated 3% of American women were diagnosed with eating disorders in the 1990s,[78] a study from 1999, cited by Rice, reports that some 50% of North American women admit to "extreme weight control including fasting and vomiting" (242), suggesting that, by the 1990s, some form of "problem" eating was not only common, but normal among women.

According to Bordo, the female anoretic is similar to the male bodybuilder inasmuch as each is motivated by a desire to absolutely control the shape and meaning of the body: "Dictation to nature of one's own chosen design for the body is the central goal for the body-builder, as it is for the anoretic" (152). "Like the bodybuilder," says Bordo, 'the anoretic is engaged in a process of making meaning, of 'labor on the body'…. to create a body that will speak for the self in a meaningful and powerful way" (67). In this pursuit of absolute control, the female anoretic can be read as attempting to use the body to reflect or usurp male privileges: "In the pursuit of slenderness and the denial of appetite the traditional construction of femininity intersects with the new requirement for women to embody the 'masculine' values of the public arena" (Bordo 173). Of course, the feasibility of this goal, and the techniques used to pursue it, are extremely problematic. Although the anoretic's pursuit of slenderness transforms the female body from something soft to something hard, from something perceived as out of control to something rigorously controlled, the slenderness ideal is also always a product of patriarchal pressures and

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[78] Circa the late 1990s, men accounted for approximately 40% of all officially diagnosed eating disorders (Miller 57), suggesting that slenderness ideals significantly affect men as well as women. However, these statistics are not paired with corresponding data regarding whether men (and/or their loved ones) are more likely than women to report or seek treatment for eating disorders.

expectations. In addition, anorexia and other forms of "disordered" or "problem" eating do not, in a practical sense, make women stronger or healthier. It is nonetheless important to acknowledge the multiple meanings of slenderness, since it is the ability of slenderness to function as a sign and tool of both patriarchal control and female liberation that ensures its continued appeal. After all, patriarchal beauty norms only become pervasive and normalized when women can be convinced to adopt them, to accept self-policing and self-objectification. In the aftermath of second-wave feminism, beauty norms must also increasingly try to represent themselves as sources of individual power and identity, and thus, liberation; countless ad campaigns for everything from lipstick to cosmetic surgery reflect this trend, a particularly obvious example being the recent slogan for the American Society of Plastic Surgeons declaring, "Life is What You Make It" (cited in Blum 31). In a sense, where female bodies are concerned, the increased importance of slenderness in the 1980s and 90s can be read as both a form of patriarchal policing as well as a consequence of feminism's collision with reality, as women struggled—and continue to struggle—to discover what female liberation can or should look like within the context of a society that was—and is—still predominantly shaped by patriarchal expectations and logic. According to Rice, the period between the end of the second-wave and the beginning of the third-wave of North American feminism was shaped by the contradiction that women benefitted from feminist efforts while also being increasingly "barraged with hegemonic messages from visual culture" (268).

Importantly, though, whereas the female anoretic often locates male coded privilege and control in the pursuit of an androgynous body that lacks fleshy hips or breasts, the bodies of Lee's as well as Liefeld's female superheroes are anything but androgynous. These female superheroes are, however, extremely unnatural, inasmuch their most essentially feminine

characteristic—their breasts—is also their most artificial. On the one hand, the unnaturalness of

the breasts of Lee's as well as Liefeld's female superheroes can be read as confirming patriarchal

desires. Iris Marion Young argues that male-dominated society does not value the fleshy reality

of breasts, but rather those breasts that are "modelled on male desire and according to a male

norm"; to this end, "The 'best breasts' are those that achieve a 'high, hard, pointy look that

phallic culture posits as the norm'" (quoted in Rice 212). As Rice describes, patriarchal culture

has a vexed relationship with female breasts: "Breasts are closely associated with women's

sexual identity, yet they can be de-sexualized due to their links with mothering and

breastfeeding… Breasts unsettle the nurturing and pleasuring roles ascribed to women. Because

breastfeeding involves sharing bodily fluids, breast blur the boundary between self and other,

violating the culturally-erected borders of the bounded, closed off self" (201). The metal or

plastic-seeming breasts of Lee's as well as Liefeld's female superheroes—like the actually semi-

plastic breasts of women who undergo breast augmentation—can help ease this contradiction;

plasticizing breasts can estrange them from connotations of motherhood and breastfeeding, tying

them more exclusively to sexuality and specifically to patriarchal norms regarding the

performance and consumption of female sexuality. On the other hand, however, we might read

these female superheroes' combination of tiny waists and artificial breasts as similar to

Jacqueline Urla and Alan C. Swedlund's description of the subversive aspects of another

impossibly sexualized female role model, the Barbie doll. According to Urla and Swedlund,

Barbie's torpedo-like plastic breasts help define her as an amalgam of "hard edges [and] distinct

borders" that can evoke "self-control" and render her "literally impenetrable" (305). Similarly,

although the breasts of Lee's as well as Liefeld's male superheroes are clearly objectified by and

for a male gaze, their hardness renders them somewhat untouchable, just as their artificiality

renders them highly uncertain proofs of natural differences between men and women. The metallic or plastic artificiality of these female superheroes also suggests how easy it might be to make or remake femaleness: metallic or plastic breasts might be put on or taken off much like costumes, or like the guns and body armour that their soft-but-hard curves graphically resemble. Just as the exaggerated muscles produced via steroids and the Nautilus machine "present a paradox since they bring together the terms of naturalness and performance" (Tasker 119), so too with the plastic or metallic beasts that emblematize the hard curves of Lee's as well as Liefeld's female superheroes.

The plastic or metallic artificiality of Lee's as well as Liefeld's female superheroes both reaffirms the female body's familiar commodification and potentially denatures it, turning it into a kind of "cyborg" body that, in the word of Donna Haraway, might "[skip] the step of original unity, of identification with nature in the Western sense" (157). Given the longstanding belief, discussed in Chapter One, that women are somehow more natural or biological than men, there is tremendous subversive potential in a female body becoming a cyborg. Anne Balsamo argues that female cyborg bodies disrupt and expose traditional conceptions of gender roles and hierarchies because they "cannot be conceived as belonging wholly to either culture or nature; they are neither wholly technological not completely organic" (33). According to Balsamo, both cyborg bodies and bodies sculpted by cosmetic surgery reveal the constructed, and thus unstable, nature of gender: "Where visualization technologies bring into focus isolated body parts and pieces, surgical procedures actually carve into the flesh to isolate parts to be manipulated and resculpted. In this way cosmetic surgery *literally* transforms the material body into a sign of culture" (58). In other words, both cyborg bodies and bodies sculpted by cosmetic surgery reveal the body as something that can be both read and re-written.

The cyborg quality of Lee's as well as Liefeld's female superheroes is enhanced by the fact that, relative to the previous era, many of these female superheroes tend to embody heightened contradictions, being both more sexualized and displaying increased physicality and capacity for violence. Psylocke, who stars in most of the X-Men comics that Lee penciled or plotted during this era, as well as the characters of Feral and Domino, both of whom were co-created by Liefeld, exemplify these heightened contradictions. Although Psylocke's telekinetic and telepathic abilities mean that she possesses a form of "strike a pose and point" powers, she customarily manifests these powers in highly physical ways; Psylocke is frequently seen manifesting a "psychic knife" that she jams into the skulls of her enemies. Feral is similarly a vicious hand-to-hand combatant who frequently uses her long, sharp claws to go in for the kill, and Domino is a ruthless assassin customarily decked out in an array of phallic weaponry. All three characters pair these highly aggressive, physical powers with extremely revealing and sexualized costumes. Psylocke is best known for her costume[79] that consists of a black, thong-backed bathing suit accompanied by long black gloves and a bondage-evoking series of black ribbons that wrap tightly around her naked legs and arms; both in action and at rest, Psylocke's thong-backed suit is commonly exploited by Lee and subsequent artists to show generous swaths of the characters' buttocks and upper or inner thighs. Feral typically wears a low-cut bathing suit-style costume which always manages to push up and separate her fur-covered breasts and expose her buttocks, as in the aforementioned examples from *X-Force* #6 (Image 17) and the cover of *X-Force* #1 (Image 11). Although Domino's regular costume is not as revealing as those of

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[79] Psylocke first appeared in the Marvel Universe in 1976 as a white British woman and sister of Captain Britain. But in 1989, in a storyline that ran through *Uncanny X-Men* #256-8 (1989-90), she has her mind swapped into the body of a Japanese assassin. The character's increased sexual objectification following her transformation underscores this era's casual racism and sexism, and the continued tendency, discussed in the last chapter, to use the X-gene to consume and overwhelm real-life differences; in this case, Psylocke's mutant condition is literally a tool that allows her to appropriate the sexily exotic skin of a Japanese woman.

Psylocke and Feral, the character is still extremely sexualized. For instance, in *X-Force* #6 (1992), Domino shares a highly sexualized bath with Cable, and in *X-Force* #2, she can be seen wearing a cleavage-enhancing bustier during a training exercise.

Through their combination of extremely aggressive violence and intense sexualisation, all of Psylocke, Feral, and Domino are examples of a new type of character that emerged in superhero comics and the larger popular culture during the 1980s which is colloquially known as the "Bad Girl." Due to the intensity of their contradictions, Bad Girls can be interpreted many different ways. Martha McCaughey and Neal King argue that Bad Girls' combination of violence and sexuality can result in a subversive "weaponization" of femininity. According to McCaughey and King, "[T]he pervasive abuse of women by men is an activity maintained in part by traditional images of women unable to fight and of men immune to injury. Visions of sexually attractive women skilled with weaponry, licensed to kill, beating up men might rather take the wind out of the sails of the culture in which sex difference seems unalterable. Such images might challenge smug oppressors" (6). McCaughey and King argue that the sexy and violent female action hero sends an important, graphic message about a woman's ability to fight back, and to be the things she is told she cannot, and should not, be. Brown similarly argues that Bad Girls' combination of sex and violence makes them potentially subversive. According to Brown, the Bad Girl or "tough action heroine" is "a transgressive character not because she operates outside of gender restrictions but because she straddles both sides of the psychoanalytic gender divide. She is both a subject and an object, looker and looked-at, ass-kicker and sex object" (47). Although Brown admits that the typically extreme sexualisation of the Bad Girl risks reaffirming traditional gender roles and hierarchies, he maintains that the Bad Girl's "hysterical" unification of "disparate traits in a single figure… refutes any assumed belief in appropriate gender roles via

an exaggerated use of those very roles" (45).

Furthermore, although the revealing, dominatrix-inspired costumes of Bad Girl superheroes obviously confirm and reinforce many of the arguments made in Chapter Two regarding the graphically inscribed inequality between male and female superheroes, Elizabeth Behm-Morawitz and Hillary Pennell argue that the "sex appeal" of violent women "may also be constructed as empowering by showing disdain for traditional feminine modesty" (80). Psylocke is a representative example of this possibility. Psylocke's costume, especially when combined with her particular martial and superpowered abilities, can suggest both familiar forms of objectification and their subversion. In a representative scene penciled by Lee from *X-Men* #7 (1992) (Image 18), Psylocke is a perfect mixture of fetishistic objectification and male-coded power. In the first panel of this scene, Psylocke supports the heavy body of injured teammate Wolverine with one arm, and uses the other arm to carry an enormous gun which is tellingly pointed upwards, the butt resting against Psylocke's bare inner thigh. In the third panel, Psylocke turns in shock when Wolverine's body is stolen away by the mechanical tentacles of the villain Cameron Hodge, offering, in the process, an ample view of her firm buttocks (barely) contained by her black bathing suit. In the final panel, Psylocke spreads her legs to thrust her gun forward from her hip, aiming to disable or sever Hodge's sea of penetrating tentacles. In this scene, Psylocke's ability to be both super-powerful and super-desirable can reflect both male-coded sexual fantasies and female-coded fantasies of empowerment, liberation, or even revenge. Psylocke's martial skills, as combined with mutant powers that allow her to maintain a telekinetic aura of impenetrability, make her exposed skin both an invitation and a taunt, symbolizing both capitulation to patriarchal expectations and desires and a liberation from them via the (seeming) inability of male villains to physically penetrate her aura (and, subsequently,

her body). In a sense, Psylocke might be read as similar to Dawn Heinecken's description of the title character in the MTV animated series *Æon Flux* (1991-1995): "By displaying her body and its parts so obviously, some of the power of the image is removed. Her partial nudity becomes interesting only because it signals the vulnerability of her flesh: a flesh that dies in contrast to her sheer physicality and physical power" (73). In other words, Psylocke's ability to be violent and active while potentially exposing herself to both physical harm and the psychological/cultural harm of the male gaze suggests how totally unthreatened she is by such exposure. Psylocke's example proves—or, more accurately, attempts to prove—the Bad Girl's ability to conquer the disempowerment associated with the sexual objectification of the female body.

Of course, similar to the slenderness ideal, there are some obvious limits to this mode of resistance. Firstly, Bad Girls' tendency to express their liberation and resistance through brutal or lethal violence means they can be read as reinforcing the desirability of male-coded forms of power centrally defined by the assertion of power over others. In addition, neither McCaughey and King's nor Brown's advocacy for the Bad Girl's subversive potential fully accounts for the ways in which such potential can be limited or offset by the Bad Girl's juxtaposition with male action heroes. Comparing the Bad Girl to her male counterparts suggests that she represents an evolution rather than revolution in the gender dynamics of superhero comics, which, as discussed in Chapters One and Two, typically offer men and women very unequal access to multiplicity and the power residing in its negotiation and ultimate containment. Because the excesses of Lee's as well as Liefeld's female superheroes depend, in part, on their extreme sexual objectification, these female superheroes cannot subvert the male gaze without attracting it; this makes their multiplicity, and their potential for subversion, always partly dependent on the male gaze. Importantly, too, even as superhero comics grew sexier in the 1980s and 90s, the existence

of the male gaze within the narratives tends to be downplayed. As Richard Reynolds observes, the proposition that sexiness is or can be powerful is continually undercut by fact that, excluding instances of female supervillains with mind-control powers, it is very rarely shown as something truly capable of destabilizing male heroes or villains, or even as something worth noticing or remarking upon. Reynolds argues that the simultaneous display and denial of female sexuality is a central aspect of how modern superhero comics police and control female bodies. In superhero comics, Reynolds argues, "Sexuality is simultaneously presented—from the male point of view—in all its tempting erotic trappings—and then controlled, or domesticated, by a simple denial of its power and appeal" (80). Ultimately, although the female superheroes depicted by Lee as well as Liefeld do possess new and unique potential to subvert gender norms, the inevitability and sameness of their exaggerated sexiness is perhaps just as likely to produce a sense of apathy; the seemingly transgressive unnaturalness of these cyborg-like female superheroes can become, through its ceaseless and flagrant repetition, simply a new convention of representation, or even re-naturalized as "just the way women look."

In addition, it is always important to note the ways in which the potential transgressiveness of superhero bodies is offset or limited by the typically more graphic, more unstable excesses of supervillains. In McFarlane's *Spider-Man*, for instance, the supervillains change to accommodate the increased (or at the very least different) excesses of the superhero. Even as McFarlane emphasises the monstrous and/or female-coded aspects of Spider-Man's body, the Lizard also becomes increasingly deadly and animal-like and the supervillain the Hobgoblin becomes increasingly goblin-like, being transformed by McFarlane from a man dressing up as a goblin into an "actual" goblin (*Spider-Man* #6 [1991]). These modifications of Spider-Man's foes allows them to continue their defining function of confirming Spider-Man's

comparable attractiveness and containment, and thus, his comparable heroism and masculinity. Similarly, in Lee's as well as Liefeld's comics, while all of the male superheroes, female superheroes, and supervillains have potentially destabilizing mechanical, metallic, plastic, and/or cyborg qualities, the supervillains obey superhero comics conventions by incorporating those same qualities in less appealing, less contained, and thus, less heroic gender normative ways. In Claremont and Lee's X-Men stories, the superheroes are pitted against supervillains such as: Deathbird, reimagined by Lee as a cybernetic being with numerous mechanical hoses and tentacles protruding from her body; Mojo, a gluttonous, gender ambiguous cyborg with a stream of multiculoured cables extending from his head, and whose bottom half is a metal platform ending in robotic, claw-like feet; and Omega Red, another cyborg who possesses metal tentacles that conduct deadly poison (Image 19). In Niceiza and Liefeld's X-Force stories, the supervillains include: Stryfe, a man almost fully encased in a highly ornamental, and seemingly awkward suit of metal armour; and the female supervillain Thumbelina, who is an obese, masculinized and/or asexualized dwarf (Image 20). Lee's reimagined Deathbird particularly advertises the limits of the cyborg-like female superhero's ability to function as a tool or symbol of gender subversion. Relative to his female superheroes, Lee's Deathbird is more intensely sexualized as well as more and differently artificial; in a representative image from *Uncanny X-Men* #273 (1991) (Image 19), Lee depicts Deathbird in a metal bustier interwoven with metal tentacles that seem to feed or pump up a set of breasts that are fully the size of her head. Deathbird's sexualisation is thus especially artificial, unstable, and unbalanced in ways that makes her more excessive, more inhuman, and finally less redeemable. In a similar but different way from previous versions of Deathbird (discussed in Chapter Two), this version Deathbird is evil in part because of the ways she too emphatically resists male power or control; whereas the

costumes and bodies of Lee's female superheroes are suggestively metallic or otherwise artificial, Deathbird's costume, and perhaps her body, *is* metallic, connoting a more dramatic, more literal impenetrability.

The *Marvel Swimsuit Special* facilitates additional insights into both the potentially transgressive as well as the ultimately limiting aspects of McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld's superhero bodies. Swimsuit and lingerie specials were produced mostly in the early-to-late 1990s by Marvel as well as Image Comics and its various imprints, such as Top Cow and Wildstorm. For the most part, these swimsuit and lingerie specials are exactly what they sound like: collections of images of superheroes—usually generously endowed female superheroes— striking provocative poses in bathing suits and underwear. Although the five issues of the *Marvel Swimsuit Special* produced between 1991 and 1995 do not lack for buxom female superheroes, they are also atypical in featuring nearly equal numbers of female and male pinups. At first glance, the appeal of swimsuit and lingerie specials might seem obvious, and their images somewhat redundant; superheroes, after all, have never been shy about displaying their bodies. And yet, because these specials render the sexualisation of both male and female superheroes explicit, they represent a unique opportunity to consider the appeal of the superhero as a subject and/or object of desire. The *Marvel Swimsuit Special*, inaugurated at the height of the popularity of the new art style typified and popularized by McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld, is an extremely useful text for examining the ways in which this era's superhero bodies might be perceived as attractive or ideal despite, but also through, their special excess. The remainder of this chapter will argue that by explicitly—if parodically—eroticizing both male and female superheroes and stripping them of narrative context and (most) of their clothing, the *Marvel Swimsuit Special* uniquely exposes the fears and desires that superhero bodies, both from this era and in general,

do or might graphically signify.

Although pinups comprise the majority of the first issue of the *Marvel Swimsuit Special* (known officially as *Marvel Illustrated* #1), these pinups are presented within a loose narrative in which "the greatest superheroes in the world" have travelled to the Savage Land, a magical tropical paradise inside the Antarctic circle, to participate in "not one but two major events of the season; the Super Olympics and the swimsuit charity event sponsored by Stark Enterprises." This first swimsuit issue also features several magazine-style text features that reflect many of the era's prominent body narratives. For instance, the first feature, an "interview" with the superhero Northstar, references steroid use by questioning whether Northstar's mutant powers of speed and flight gave him an "unfair advantage" in winning his Olympic medals for downhill skiing.[80] The second feature, on the Super Olympics, references Title IX by celebrating women's ability to compete alongside men (most of the sports are mixed gender), and/or in traditionally male coded sports; this feature indicates that She-Hulk placed 5th in power lifting, Namorita finished 2nd in the 1000 meter swim race, and that the Bad Girl assassin Silver Sable placed second in the biathlon.[81] Another feature, entitled "Women's Bodybuilding," interviews She-Hulk about her "No Prisoners Workout." The Thing is also interviewed about his participation in professional wrestling.

The *Marvel Swimsuit Special* is obviously comedic in tone, intended as a parody of the *Sports Illustrated Swimsuit Issue*, which began publishing in 1964 but had its most popular issue upon its 25th anniversary in 1989. Interestingly, by far the most overtly comedic element of the first *Marvel Swimsuit* issue is a series of fake advertisements, all of which address the increased

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[80] Importantly, this feature also differentiates Northstar's situation from steroid use, making it clear that mutant abilities are a "natural" advantage.

[81] Tellingly, a woman is only able to win first place in the all-female (and feminine-coded) sport of figure skating.

objectification of men in advertising as well as the burgeoning fitness culture. For instance, an ad

for "Underware" starring Wonder Man in a pair of tight white briefs (Image 21), clearly

references the trend of risqué male underwear ads popularized by Calvin Klein. Other ads feature

Beast selling shampoo ("One side of the Beast was washed with a leading shampoo—the other

with Ultra-X with new improved conditioning factors"), Marvel's version of Hercules hocking a

Nautilus-esque "Atomi-Flex" workout machine, and Quicksilver endorsing "Spike" sneakers,

which allow him to travel "from New York to Los Angeles in less than fourteen hours." Though

generally good-natured, these parodic advertisements nonetheless feature some not-unsubtle

political messages. In each ad, the target of the joke seems to be the trend of male-directed and/or

male body-exploiting advertisements. The "Underware" advertisement is deliberately "cheesy"

rather than sexy, with Wonder Man striking a semi-awkward pose topped with a goofy smile,

while the "Ultra-X" shampoo advertisement mocks the sexualisation of male grooming products

by showing them being used by a de-sexualized, animal-like character. Furthermore, the "Atomi-

Flex" advertisement pokes fun at male bodybuilding, demonstrating the machine's uselessness

by having the magically powerful Hercules lifting it over his head. The "Spike" sneakers

advertisement similarly mocks the merging of sport and fashion, inasmuch as Quicksilver is

actually slower with his designer running shoes than without them. Ultimately, these parodic

advertisements admit the implication of male superheroes in the culture's increasing

objectification of men, but also assert the ability of these male superheroes and their largely male

creators to rise above this trend; this is demonstrated through the literal superiority of the

superheroes to the products they advertise as well as the creators' ability to knowingly parody

popular advertising trends.

Properly assessing the subjects and objects of the humour in the *Swimsuit Special* always

requires looking at who and what is included or excluded, and why. Firstly, it is important to note that the pinups in the *Swimsuit Special* are rendered in a variety of styles. In the first *Swimsuit Special* alone, although there are two pinups by Lee and one by Liefeld, as well as two more in the reminiscent styles of Image co-founders Mark Silveresti and Whilce Portacio, there is also a photo realist-style pinup of Mary Jane Watson by Joe Jusko, and self-described "retro"-style pinup of Thor and Sif by Joe Sinott; there are also pinups in the distinctive styles of Mike Mignola, John Romita Jr., and Kevin Nowlan (Image 22). In almost every instance, however, the artists depict big men and smaller, more curvaceous women, granting men very large muscles and women very large breasts and very small waists. Excluding group pinups (i.e. those pinups including more than 4 characters) as well as anonymous characters and children, the five issues of *Marvel Swimsuit* feature approximately 55% female characters and 45% male characters. These issues also feature approximately 12% non-white characters, with pinups of Storm and Psylocke accounting for about half of that total. Notably, there are no Asian men in *Marvel Swimsuit*, no Hispanic or Latino characters of either gender, and only one Native American character (Forge, featured in *Marvel Swimsuit* #2 [1992]). *Marvel Swimsuit* also features 2% LGBT characters, with Northstar, the first openly gay superhero in mainstream comics, accounting for 75% of that total (three out of four total pinups).

The demographic makeup of *Marvel Swimsuit* clearly paints this era of superhero comics as staunchly white and heterosexual, but, interestingly, far from exclusively male. Although only 5% of *Marvel Swimsuit* pinups are credited to female pencilers (with Jan Duursema accounting for nearly half of that total), the nearly equal split between male and female characters suggests that *Marvel Swimsuit* did—or at the very least aspired to—appeal to both men and women. The reader letters that appear in *Marvel Swimsuit* #3 and #4 (the 4th and 5th total issues) corroborate

this suggestion. 50% of the total letters that appear in *Marvel Swimsuit* are by female-identified

readers. Some significant gender politics emerge in the content of these letters. Whereas the

male-identified letter writers generally compliment the skill of the art and/or point out technical

errors, all of the female-identified letters writers address and critique the art's eroticism. For

instance, in a letter appearing in *Marvel Swimsuit* #4, "Letra Bledsoe" writes: "THOR is truly a

godsend!... Please draw him much more handsome and NUDE in next year's issue!" Similarly, a

letter from "Caroline Richards and Caroline Sawyer" in *Marvel Swimsuit* #3 requests more

pinups of Gambit, asserting that "9 out of 10 female readers" think Gambit is "the most attractive

male comic character in the industry today." In part, these letters function as important evidence

of the actual (or intended) erotic appeal of male superheroes for female readers. They also,

however, help to diffuse the potential homoeroticism of a collection of erotic pinups in which

nearly half of the subjects are men drawn almost exclusively by other men. The female-identified

readers' dissatisfaction also, however, highlights differences in the erotic display of male and

female characters; the complaints of these female-identified letter writers that the male characters

are not attractive enough, or that their favourite characters are excluded, alludes to the fact that

male characters in *Marvel Swimsuit* tend to be presented very differently from the female

characters.

Indeed, although *Marvel Swimsuit* features nearly equal numbers of male and female

characters, male characters tend to be positioned in the background, usually admiring or

approving the female character who is in the foreground as the central subject (or, more

appropriately, the central *object*) of the tableau (for representative examples, see Image 23-26).

To this end, a great many of the female characters in *Marvel Swimsuit* can be viewed as fairly

textbook examples of Laura Mulvey's "*to-be-looked-at-ness*" (11, emphasis in original),

inasmuch as they are very obviously exploited as erotic spectacles in ways that problematically reduce or undercut their subjectivity. The parodic tone of *Marvel Swimsuit* often does little to undercut or add complexity to this conventional understanding of female objectification inasmuch as the female characters are very often excluded from the joke. For instance, in Darick Robertson's pinup of the superhero team the New Warriors (*Marvel Swimsuit* #4 [1994]) (Image 24), the scene's humour is located in the fact that the team is using teammate Speedball as a volleyball. The female team members, posing for the viewer (or "for the camera") in the foreground, are very obviously passive compared to the literally active male team members playing volleyball in the background; they also do not contribute to the joke, suggesting their display is meant to be seen and read at face value. Other times, the joke is actually at the expense of the female characters. This is the case in Liefeld's sole contribution to *Marvel Swimsuit*, which is a pinup of Boom-Boom and X-Force (*Marvel Illustrated* #1 [1991]) (Image 25). In this pinup, the female character is once again in the foreground of the composition, and is the only character truly posing for the viewer; similar to the female members of the New Warriors, Boom-Boom is situated as an object to be investigated, appreciated, and possessed by the male gazes that frame her erotic display. Boom-Boom's erotic display could be considered subversive or liberating to the extent that it is shown to be capable of flustering or un-manning her male teammates. Yet the composition of this pinup also clearly privileges male subjectivity and the male gaze, making Boom-Boom quite literally the butt of the joke.

Where female characters *are* included in the joke, a postfeminist logic prevails. As Stephanie Harzewski observes, postfeminism frequently operates "through 'stylistic alibi' or irony" (9), a state of affairs that, as Imelda Whelehan argues, often has tragic consequences for feminism. "[T]he 'post-feminist' image," argues Whelehan, "amounts to a reclamation of a pre-

feminist image. Any objections we might feel are set up as contradictory because we are supposed to 'know' that this is ironic and therefore not exploitative" (147). In other words, postfeminist culture frequently uses irony to sanction and excuse the continued, and usually fairly traditional, objectification of female bodies under the assumption that this newly empowered generation of women is self-aware and "in on the joke." As Angela McRobbie observes, this state of affairs results in objectification being framed as a "choice and for [women's] own enjoyment" (33). She-Hulk's second solo series, *The Sensational She-Hulk* (1989-1994), in which She-Hulk is transformed into a sexier, fashion-conscious, but also self-aware and occasionally self-reflexive character who often "breaks the fourth wall" to speak directly to the reader, renders her an emblematic postfeminist superhero. Although She-Hulk's self-awareness grants her significant power to address and criticize her own depiction, Lillian S. Robinson's analysis of this series describes many instances in which She-Hulk's self-aware critiques of her own objectification are undercut by her participation in said objectification, as she willingly poses for the reader in revealing lingerie and Playboy bunny costumes and, in one infamous scene, even jumps rope "in the nude" for four full pages.[82]

She-Hulk's defining self-awareness is emphasized in several of the pinups that appear in *Marvel Swimsuit*. For instance, in a pinup by George Pérez (*Marvel Illustrated* #1) (Image 27), She-Hulk plays up (or with) her own objectification, doing aerobics on the edge of a cliff while overloaded with connotatively feminine jewelry. This pinup emphasizes She-Hulk's

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[82] It is revealed at the conclusion of the "nude" jump rope sequence that She-Hulk was, in fact, wearing a tiny bikini the entire time. In the aftermath of the scene, series editor Renee Witterstaetter, who appears as a character in the comic, makes She-Hulk admit that senior editor Mark Grunewald would never have allowed She-Hulk to be actually naked, and says that fans who were expecting it deserve a comeuppance: "Anybody who was dopey enough to think you could really be skipping rope in the nude… deserves to have wasted his money…!" This sequence is typical of the self-reflexive humour of *Sensational She-Hulk*, inasmuch as it both justifies and excuses She-Hulk's exploitation. For a more in-depth analysis of postfeminism in *Sensational She-Hulk*, see Cook, Peppard, Robinson.

contradictions by graphically juxtaposing her potentially deviant strength, athleticism, and, of course, her green skin, with traditional signs of femininity and feminine display; She-Hulk's deviance is further emphasized by her difference from the much smaller Wasp, who is posed in a more traditionally feminine (re: less athletic) manner in the palm of the larger and more powerful She-Hulk. Yet in this and other pinups, She-Hulk's deviance has some identifiable limits. Although She-Hulk's body is more deviant than Wasp's, it is hardly less feminine, at least in terms of traditionally ideal feminine features such as long, full hair, ample breasts, and a narrow waist. She-Hulk's pose in this pinup also downplays the most gender deviant parts of her musculature—namely, her arms and shoulders—in favour of showing off her shapely legs and perfectly round, gravity-defying breasts. Ultimately, in this pinup, She-Hulk's seeming activeness and self-awareness helps to justify her objectification by demonstrating her willing, playful participation. In the real world, questions of choice and consent regarding women's decisions about how and where to display their bodies are very complex. Yet as Robinson observes, although She-Hulk's narratives from this era tend to highlight and emphasize her consent in most displays of her body, the nature of her body belies this consent. Although She-Hulk's "exuberant sexual subjectivity," which is evident in Pérez's pinup and throughout the *Sensational She-Hulk* series, may be read as an important assertion of female agency and sexual desire, "[i]t is rather disquieting… that that assertion coincides so seamlessly with mainstream commercial representations of male sexuality" (Robinson 101).

For *Marvel Swimsuit's* male characters, self-aware humour similarly serves a protective function, but toward different ends; whereas She-Hulk's self-aware humour helps excuse the continued objectification of her body, the self-aware humour of male characters tends to excuse or downplay the potential transgressiveness of displaying male bodies, and especially, certain

types of male bodies. In general, the more graphically unstable or excessive characters are less

represented in *Marvel Swimsuit*. Where such characters are represented, humour is typically

mobilized to deny the possibility that such characters could or should be seen as erotic. For

instance, Steven Butler's pinup of Silver Sable and Sandman (*Marvel Swimsuit* #3 [1994])

(Image 26) once again foregrounds the erotic display of the female character while showing

Sandman in the form of a sandcastle, decisively excluding the potential eroticism—and

specifically, as discussed in Chapter One, the potentially homosexual and/or female-coded

eroticism—of Sandman's fluid, infinitely transformable body. Kevin Nowlan's pinup of

Wolverine, the Thing, the Hulk, and Beast (*Marvel Illustrated* #1) (Image 22) also uses humour

along with a "blocky" art style and the choice of (comparatively) demure swimwear to diffuse

the potential eroticism of some of Marvel's most prominent monster-heroes. In a sense,

Nowlan's pinup pokes fun at the male superheroes' prudishness and defiance, emphasizing the

futility of their attempts to resist being eroticized; to this end, one may witness the not-unsubtle

imagery of the Thing's hands covering his crotch, a gesture which both hides and draws attention

to either the presence or absence of a (presumably huge and rock hard) "thing." And yet, Nolan's

image also upholds the prudishness and defiance of the men. By assuring the reader that the

concept of eroticizing these men is inherently ridiculous, this image shields a set of bodies that,

in their various forms of categorical instability and deviance, might otherwise threaten to subvert

"normal" avenues of desire.

Jeff Johnson's pinup of the Hulk (*Marvel Swimsuit* #3) (Image 28) comes closer than

Marvel Swimsuit's other images of monster-heroes to being a legitimately erotic pinup, inasmuch

as it does expose the Hulk's body in a semi-realistic way that is also more proportional, less

exaggerated, and thus, more attractive than most images of the Hulk, either in *Marvel Swimsuit*

or other comics; notably, this pinup also features the physical presence of a female gaze, sanctioning the Hulk's to-be-looked-ness. Yet the humour of the scene also relies on gender norms, namely, the presumption that it is inherently funny or ridiculous for any man, let alone a green-skinned male monster-hero, to admire himself in the mirror, tailor his appearance to a female gaze, or use grooming products (which are copiously displayed on and around the vanity in this image). In addition, it is significant that this image chooses to justify the Hulk's display by showing him in a private, domestic moment. Pinups of female characters, including the Hulk's cousin She-Hulk, very rarely provide such a contextual excuse for their generally much franker erotic displays. Bordo argues that male bodies are not truly exposed unless their traditional masculine power is somehow threatened. "In a certain sense," writes Bordo, "as long as the male body is 'dressed' in the phallic power to author all definitions and evaluations of its situation, it is not really undressed (or, perhaps more precisely, it is undressed but not naked)" (154-5). The above examples showcasing *Marvel Swimsuit's* typical ways of displaying male monster-heroes may be read as attempts to protect masculine agency, and ensure that the undressing of male bodies does not unman them.

Despite these obfuscations, *Marvel Swimsuit* does display some bodies, sometimes, in ways that are potentially subversive. For instance, *Marvel Swimsuit* does feature many explicitly erotic displays of suggestively passive male bodies which can be considered unusual for a mainstream, popular genre produced and aimed primarily at straight male consumers. Despite the increasing presence of sexually objectified male bodies in the popular visual culture of the 1980s and 90s, the still much greater presence of objectified images of female bodies suggests the continued prevalence of patriarchal logic insisting that "the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification" (Mulvey 12). Mulvey argues that man has traditionally been "reluctant to

gaze at his exhibitionist like" (12); according to Mulvey, such a state of affairs would threaten

traditional masculinity itself, inasmuch as traditional masculinity is above all defined by its

renunciation of the feminine, which is thought to be located in the passivity associated with

being the object of the gaze. This gendered hierarchy of "looker" versus "looked at" is, of course,

embedded in the very fabric of Western culture; in the history of Western visual culture, the

general rule, as John Berger succinctly puts it, is that "*men act* and *women appear*" (47,

emphasis in original). Because popular visual culture caters to the male gaze (and specifically,

the heterosexual male gaze), even displays of obviously beautiful and desirable male bodies tend

to elicit a gaze that is less erotic than narcissistic, the beautiful man on the screen or the billboard

primarily embodying, as Mulvey puts it, a "more perfect, more complete, more powerful ideal

ego" (12). In *Marvel Swimsuit*, even when men are depicted in seemingly passive poses,

demurely looking away into the distance or playfully inviting the gaze while consciously and

obviously displaying their nearly-naked bodies (see Image 28-30), this type of narcissistic

identification is clearly present. Compared to the always smaller and more overtly sexualized

bodies of the female characters, the always very muscular bodies of the male characters in

Marvel Swimsuit connote those bodies' greater physical power and capacity for activity. In

general, the emphasized differences between *Marvel Swimsuit's* exaggeratedly muscular male

bodies and its exaggeratedly sexualized female bodies, combined with the different poses and

contexts typically afforded male characters versus female ones, reflect Steve Neale's assertion

that when it comes to displaying and objectifying the body, "[w]here women are [typically]

investigated, men are tested" (16).

It is important to note, however, that unlike the muscular male bodies displayed in the

action movies discussed by Neale, or, for that matter, regular superhero comics, the muscular

male bodies displayed in *Marvel Swimsuit* are primarily non-narrative and explicitly (if

parodically) erotic; in the absence of overt aggression and violence, the hardness of these

characters cannot completely protect them from "a controlling and curious gaze" (Mulvey 8). In

addition, many images in *Marvel Swimsuit* play up the muscular male body's ability to be both a

narcissistic ideal and a desirable object. As Kenneth R. Dutton relates, in Western images of

muscular male bodies from antiquity to the present, "The heroic tradition can be distinguished in

principle from what might be called the 'aesthetic' tradition." "Both conventions," says Dutton,

"use muscularity as an important element of the visual message, though in the aesthetic

convention the muscularity tends to be subordinated to the overall impression of physical

beauty—whether of the body itself, the facial features, or the graceful elegance of the pose"

(152). *Marvel Swimsuit* offers images that reflect both a heroic ideal and an aesthetic or erotic

ideal.[83] Within the pages of *Marvel Swimsuit*, hulking, square bodies looking directly, defiantly

at the viewer may be compared with and against a slew of still hard but considerably more

passive male bodies, such of Lou Harrison's pinup of Captain America (*Marvel Swimsuit* #3)

(Image 29). Although the turned head and cocked eyebrow of Captain America in Harrison's

pinup implies the character's playful consent, this Sentinel of Liberty is nonetheless framed in a

particularly vulnerable way—namely, back and buttocks first, in a moment of ease and leisure. In

this pinup, although Captain America's muscles are large, the Norman Rockwell-like realist style

and the wrinkles of flesh at Cap's waist also emphasize the buttery, touchable softness of his

muscles; in addition, the penetrability of Captain America's buttocks is highlighted by the

wrinkled fabric sinking ever-so-slightly between them. The passivity of the male body in this

pinup is not fully diffused by its humour, which involves playing up the combination of heroism

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[83] Although the aesthetic ideal described by Dutton is not always erotic, within the context of *Marvel Swimsuit*, the aesthetic the erotic are very closely aligned.

and eroticism; in this pinup, the joke has to do with the multiple meanings generated by the

charged combination of Captain-America-as-erotic-object—as denoted by his passively

positioned, anally erotic body—and Captain-America-as-heroic-subject—as denoted by his

thick, ideal muscles, but also his decision to use his vacation to reacquaint himself with the U.S.

Constitution.

　　As Dutton observes, it is not always easy to distinguish the heroic ideal from the aesthetic

ideal. Although each image of the muscular male body tends to privilege one ideal or the other,

these ideals nonetheless coexist and frequently blend (Dutton 153). Lou Harrison's Captain

America pinup is one example that seems to court this blending; another is Brian Stelfreeze's

pinup of Colossus (*Marvel Swimsuit* #3) (Image 30). Similar to the male superheroes depicted by

Lee as well as Liefeld, Stelfreeze's pinup renders Colossus as an unnatural, biologically dubious

assemblages of parts; like an action figure (or a doll), Colossus' body cultivates the appearance

of being sculpted or molded out of plastic, rock, or steel, and/or inflated with air. In this pinup,

Colossus' literally metallic and thus literally machine-like body helps him to function

simultaneously as an ideal and an idea, both a symbol of male power and an eroticized

commodity. Certainly, Stelfreeze's pinup offers the possibility of narcissistic admiration. It also,

however, offers the voyeuristic desire to *be* the body on display—which is serviced either by or

for a (tellingly anonymous) group of women—as well as the fetishistic desire to *possess* the body

on display, which is rendered object-like via its metal skin and branded clothing. The caption for

the pinup nurtures these multiple meanings: "Despite his large, hard exterior, Colossus can still

be softened up by a good afternoon's rubdown." The most obvious and presumably primary

meaning of this double entendre-laden caption confirms Colossus' heteronormative masculinity,

by referring to an impressive erection and successful coitus with one (or more) of the many

women in the scene. However, read in concert with the image itself, there are different meanings

and implications of the words "hard" and "soft." By softening him up, are the women confirming

Colossus' phallic power, or diminishing it? Similarly, does their plentifulness reinforce his

masculinity, or threaten it? Who is under the power of whom in this scene? And to what end?

Admittedly, it would be a stretch to argue that Colossus and the women in this scene have equal

subjectivity; the women are disempowered by their anonymity and, as usual, by their obvious

physical difference from the more muscular and thus more connotatively strong and active male

body. However, this pinup does demonstrate *Marvel Swimsuit's* ability and willingness to

construct male superhero bodies that are capable of soliciting both connotatively active and

passive subject positions and desires—bodies, in other words, that solicit desires to be both a

hero and an object, both a bearer and a recipient of the look.

Adam Hughes' pinup of the shrinking superheroine Wasp surrounded by the logo-

emblazoned "packages" of Wonder Man and Captain America (*Marvel Swimsuit* #3) (Image 31),

similarly courts multiple modes of desire. This image is significant in part because superhero

comics (under the auspices of the Comics Code Authority) have a long history of not depicting or

even suggesting the penis; in superhero comics, the same miraculous spandex that is capable of

revealing the detailed grooves of a man's muscles almost always possesses the even-more-

miraculous ability to completely conceal the shape of his sex organs. As Richard Harrison puts it:

"for most of the history of superhero comics… erotic need, and the tensions, sorrows, and

ecstasies it brings, is always offstage—gestured to, but never brought into the light. *Sexuality*

was hidden, even while sexual objects were always shown" (157). This pinup continues to

conceal the actual fact of sexuality, which is only present in signs such as the aforementioned

packages and the suggestive shaft of metal on which Wasp is posing. And yet, it is precisely this

pinup's highlighting of the erotic signs of maleness that makes it potentially subversive. In its

erotic fragmentation of the male body, this pinup echoes the typical framing of women in

classical Hollywood cinema as well as advertising and glamour photography. As Dawn

Heinicken describes, in these contexts, sexualized parts such as "breasts, legs, or buttocks" are

isolated "so they seem ultra-sexy," but also as "a way of reducing women to just her parts—she

becomes, not a complete individual with her own unique personality, but a thing, an object—just

a pair of legs or breasts rather than a human being" (10). Of course, the penis is its own sign,

loaded with its own meanings and connotations. Whereas the most frequently fetishized part of

the female anatomy, the breasts, always at some level evoke the connotatively selfless nurturing

of motherhood, the penis is comparatively selfish and connotatively active via its association

with growth and penetration. In Hughes' pinup, however, the penis is not quite what one might

expect. This pinup effectively reduces the male superhero to the sign of his penis, fetishizing his

sexual characteristics at the expense of his subjectivity in a way that is, despite the connotative

differences between the penis and female sex characteristics, still more traditionally associated

with female bodies. The erotic display of the woman in the foreground of this pinup cannot,

furthermore, fully compensate for the scene's obvious homoeroticism, which is compounded by

the concealed (yet highly suggestive) positioning of Wonder Man and Captain America's arms

and hands (not to mention that mysterious metal shaft that bridges the gap between them).

Arguably, this pinup evokes a "gay vague" atmosphere of desire. As Wachs and Dworkin

describe, "'Gay vague' refers to images that create an ironic understanding for those 'in the

know' who are internal to a marginalized community (or are aware of its existence" (57).

Following Calvin Klein's decision to base his first collection on the aesthetics of "clone culture,"

"a style of cultural presentation that took archetypal masculine figures and reinterpreted them for

a gay lifestyle" (McKenzie 160-1), gay vague became relatively common in advertising and men's fashion during the 1980s, despite, or just as likely because of, the rampant homophobia brought to the surface by the AIDS epidemic.

The queerness of superhero comics—which have always featured men drawing pictures of attractive men to be gazed at by other men and boys—was famously highlighted by Fredric Wertham in *Seduction of the Innocent*, in which he claimed that Batman and Robin offered "a wish dream of two homosexuals living together" that might "stimulate children to homosexual fantasies" (190). Wertham's critique of Wonder Woman (and what he called her troupe of "gay girls") as "anti-feminine" and "a morbid ideal" (193) reveals that he did not view this queerness in a positive light. More recently, the queerness of superhero comics has been highlighted in a more positive way by critics such as Aaron Taylor, who argues that "the superbody constitutes a polymorphous sexuality, or at least a sexuality that dualistic logic cannot constrain" (346). In practice, however, the ability of this underlying queerness to meaningfully subvert superhero comics' dominant heteronormativity remains highly uncertain. Jan Duursema's pinup of "out" gay superheroes Northstar and Hector (*Marvel Swimsuit* #4) (Image 32) is a useful case in point. This scene has a strong sexual undercurrent, with the phallic shape of the canal that separates Northstar and Hector's bodies ending in a froth of white bubbles around the area of Hector's invisible hand. Hector's cheeky hand suggests his inclusion in the scene's humour, which seems to partly involve the fun of "putting one over" on superhero comics' heteronormative establishment. It is also, however, significant that this pinup relies on vagueness to the extent that it does. The fact that Northstar and Hector do not actually touch or look at each other sets them apart from the many straight couples depicted throughout *Marvel Swimsuit*; Northstar and Hector are also very literally separated from *Marvel Swimsuit's* straight characters, neither character

being featured in a pinup with any of the straight characters. Consequently, even though *Marvel Swimsuit* consciously includes the possibility of queerness, it also maintains strategies of containment to ensure that this queer potential never becomes a queer reality. Ultimately, segregating the gay characters, and making their presence so miniscule in general—an easy task given how few gay or lesbian characters existed in the Marvel universe during the era of *Marvel Swimsuit*[84]—imposes and maintains boundaries between gay and straight identity and desire, which in turn limits the subversive potential of the gay vague imagery in the other pinups. Readers are assured that characters such as Captain America and Wonder Man are "actually" straight because they do not interact with either of *Marvel Swimsuit's* openly gay characters; they are also assured that homosexuality is aberrant, rather than normal, since it is basically isolated to a single exceptional character who, in the comics, was operatively asexual until 2009, when he was granted his first, on-panel, in-continuity boyfriend in *Uncanny X-Men* #508.[85]

The relative absence of racial diversity in *Marvel Swimsuit* is perhaps more surprising than the absence of sexual diversity, inasmuch as the Marvel universe of the 1990s featured many more non-white characters than gay or lesbian characters. Admittedly, the exclusion of several prominent non-white characters, such as founding New Mutants members Psyche/Danielle Moonstar, Sunspot/Roberto da Costa, and Karma/Xi'an Coy Manh[86], or characters such as Blade and Shangi-Chi (who once carried their own solo titles) in favour of several less well-known white characters, could simply be the result of Marvel wanting to promote the appearance of those lesser-known characters in series that were being published

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[84] Northstar was the only prominent gay superhero in either the Marvel or DC universe at this time, though several supporting characters had, since the early 1980s, been hinted at or revealed to be gay or bisexual. For a history of LGBT representation in mainstream superhero comics, see Kistler.

[85] Northstar would later marry said boyfriend in in *Astonishing X-Men* #51 (2012); this was the first gay wedding in mainstream superhero comics.

[86] The fact that the aforementioned characters are teenagers would not seem to be an impediment to their sexualisation, given the many pinups of teenaged characters already referenced throughout this chapter.

concurrently with *Marvel Swimsuit*. In addition, the demographics of *Marvel Swimsuit* do not

necessarily misrepresent the racial makeup of the Marvel universe, whose best-selling titles and

major storylines were, in the 1990s, heavily dominated by white characters. The racial makeup of

Marvel Swimsuit does, however, emphasize the overall dominance of white characters within the

Marvel universe, and especially highlights which types of racialized bodies are considered

sexually desirable. Besides a single pinup featuring Forge, the only men of colour in *Marvel

Swimsuit* are black, and the only women of colour are black and East Asian. Where non-white

characters are featured in *Marvel Swimsuit*, it is sometimes difficult to say whether they are

represented differently from white characters. Although Storm and Psylocke, in particular, are

frequently exoticized, this is also true of many white characters throughout *Marvel Swimsuit*. As

discussed in Chapter Two, however, different signs mean different things when they appear on or

alongside different bodies. When white characters adopt the trappings of exoticism, it can seem

more obviously parodic than when Storm does the same, inasmuch as a long history of racist

imagery might cause Storm's exoticism to seem more "natural." There are, in addition, some

noticeable differences in the use of exoticism in some pinups of white characters versus some

pinups of, especially, black characters. For instance, in Steve Leialoha's pinup of Howard the

Duck and his human girlfriend Beverly (*Marvel Illustrated* #1) (Image 33), Beverly's exotic

costume is very obviously artificial and costume-like; this artificiality is signalled by the pairing

of exotic signs such as beads, tropical flowers, and coconuts with signs of "civilized"

consumption such as the umbrella decorating Beverly's drink as well as Howard's decidedly un-

exotic logo-emblazoned swim trunks and baseball cap, oversized plastic sunglasses, and cigar. In

contrast, Jim Lee's pinup of Storm from the same issue (Image 33) is less overtly humorous,

helping her exotic garb to seem more natural. The fact that this pinup shows Storm paired with,

and implicitly compared to, exotic and extinct animals further confirms her as a natural part of the exotic landscape.

Ultimately, the diversity of art styles and the smallness of the sampling makes it difficult to identify what, besides absence, is typical of the representation of non-white characters in *Marvel Swimsuit*. What is less uncertain, though, is the presence of racism in several pinups of white characters, particularly in the first *Marvel Swimsuit* issue set in the Savage Land. Significantly, this first issue references the 1985 Live Aid concert, opening with an introductory letter from Super Olympics and the swimsuit charity event sponsor Tony Stark promoting "a benefit concert of enormous magnitude, to be televised around the world… to raise money for an environmental protection fund to help save such precious places as this [i.e. The Savage Land]." Similar to the also white-dominated Live Aid concert, this first issue of *Marvel Swimsuit* often uses nameless, voiceless black or brown bodies as props to the display of white celebrities. Many of the images in this issue, including the cover (Image 34), feature white (or, in She-Hulk's case, white-coded) characters posed against a backdrop of anonymous black or brown characters equipped with the stereotypical exotic trappings of feathers, beads, headdresses, spears, and loincloths. Although black and brown characters are members of fictional races that only exist in the also-fictional Savage Land, their mode of dress is obviously inspired by National Geographic-style portraits of indigenous tribes in (for instance) Africa, South America, North America, and Australia. Michael Golden's pinup of Captain America (*Marvel Illustrated* #1) (Image 34) is an especially problematic mobilization of this trend. This pinup is similar to Harrison's previously discussed pinup of Captain America in the ways it positions the character as both a heroic and an erotic ideal; in Golden's pinup, Captain America's square, heroic pose displays both his patriotism and his sexiness, facilitating as it does the blatant exhibition of both

his American symbol-emblazoned shield and his American symbol-emblazoned crotch (which seems to be the main focus of Diamondback's reverent attention). This is also, however, a very racially loaded image, depicting as it does an Aryan superman genetically engineered to fight the Nazis flaunting his erotic patriotism in the manner of a white colonial explorer against a backdrop of anonymous, black, stereotypically tribal, primitive, and/or savage bodies. When and where this pinup is humorous, it is so at the expense of the subjectivity of these stereotypically savage characters who, similar to the female characters in the pinups previously discussed, are not included in the joke.

The preceding analysis outlines and confirms the overall heterosexism, heteronormativity, and white superiority of *Marvel Swimsuit*. There are, however, moments of gender transgression within this overall promotion of Western culture's traditional sex and racial hierarchies. Ultimately, perhaps the most complicated and most potentially subversive images in *Marvel Swimsuit* are those that depict excessively or unstably muscular but still human-like male bodies that seem to fall outside the scope of either the heroic or aesthetic ideal. Dwayne Turner's pinup of Bishop (*Marvel Swimsuit* #3) and Joe Quesada's pinup of Namor (*Marvel Swimsuit* #4) (Image 35) are representative examples of such bodies. Less obviously humorous than many of the other pinups in *Marvel Swimsuit*, these pinups do not seem to pursue an aesthetic ideal inasmuch as their extremely exaggerated male bodies evoke power more than beauty. Both pinups specifically evoke a very elemental form of male power; the hard, inflated, heavily veined bodies of both Bishop and Namor are incredibly phallic, resembling, in a very direct way, erect penises. However, these bodies are also too disproportionate and graphically unstable to be considered traditionally ideal, and thus, traditionally heroic. Similar to Liefeld's disproportionate, stitched-together renditions of Cable, Turner's depiction of Bishop and

Quesada's depiction of Namor are more craggy than fluid, more wrinkled than smooth. With their exaggerated veins and striations, these bodies—as emphatically as any of the previously discussed examples from the oeuvre of McFarlane, Lee, or Liefeld—advertise themselves as powerful through their ability to contain that which is still ultimately barely contained: Bishop's body seems infinitely inflatable but also painfully full, while Namor seems dangerously dehydrated despite the rivulets of water (or something else) pouring over and through his many deep crevices of muscle. What allows these pinups to deepen and enrich this chapter's previous analyses of excessive male bodies is the fact that the presence of this type of body in this context confirms that these bodies can be, despite and through their excessiveness, viewed as objects of desire or aspirational ideals. Viewing this type of grotesquely exaggerated body in an overtly if parodically erotic context compels us to dig deeper into the meanings and, especially, the appeal of this type of excessive masculinity, an investigation which will, in turn, help us to more fully understand the meaning of some of the common techniques in the artwork of McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld.

Discerning the ways in which these types of monstrously masculine bodies might be a subjects or objects of desire begins with placing them within the context of specific evolutions in professional bodybuilding during the 1980s and 90s. Beginning in the mid-1980s, professional bodybuilding moved into what Adam Locks calls the "Post Classical" era. This era, says Locks, "is based upon the increasingly fragmented body with over-developed body parts often celebrated and displayed over the whole" (4). Post Classical bodybuilding, says Locks, "focuses on an incongruent set of muscles, a fragmentary physique which is now so defined that during various poses, the muscle fibres are clearly visible beneath the skin. With their broad shoulders and narrow hips and enormous muscles of the torso (chest and back), together with bodies so

defined that substructures of muscles reveal further substructures, these bodies exemplify the most desired hypertropic look of the contemporary bodybuilder: a 'shredded mass'" (15-6). Niall Richardson concurs that Post Classical bodybuilding is defined above all by "the celebration of abject freakishness" (182). Post Classical bodybuilding, Richardson argues, rejects "the ideal of the classical physique" in favour of "the disproportionate 'grotesque' physique." "While the classical ideal," says Richardson, "celebrated symmetry, proportions, and overall aesthetic harmony of the body, the 'post-classical body' is an in harmonious shape in which certain parts have been distended so that they are too large and therefore overpower the rest of the physique" (182). To sum up, whereas previous eras of bodybuilding prioritized the appearance of physical symmetry and harmony, the Post Classical bodybuilder rejects this symmetry in favour of gross distortions resulting from the pursuit of all-over massiveness.

Richardson argues that Post Classic bodybuilders pursue a kind of "self-enfreakment" that is actually an excessive display of traditional attributes or signs of masculinity, including, of course, strength and hardness. According to Richardson, the Post Classical bodybuilder is a "freak of conformity'" that "takes something which is deemed ideal in contemporary culture but twist or even carnivalizes it" (189). Many outsiders are fascinated with the grotesqueness of the Post Classical physique but pursue it from a distance, indulging in its spectacle while separating and differentiating themselves from it, much like visitors at a turn-of-the-century carnival freak show. During the 1980s and 90s, however, a growing contingent of bodybuilding fans and practitioners identified with the freakish body of the Post Classical bodybuilder. As Richardson describes, fans demonstrate this identification not only by trying to emulate it, but also by buying posters, products, and videos featuring some of the most famously freakish Post Classical bodybuilders, such as Markus Rühl. The private, intense, personal identification that fans have

with this generation of freakish bodybuilder is evinced by the subject matter of promotional videos, which often feature such bodybuilders interacting with, but also inevitably disrupting, everyday places and people. For instance, as Richardson describes, Rühl's first publicity DVD, *Markus Rühl: Made in Germany* (1992), features both training sequences and nutritional advice as well as scenes taken from Rühl's everyday life; in one such scene, Rühl's freakishness causes a scene at a supermarket, as onlookers are frozen with mixtures of terror and surprise confronting his grotesque physique (Richardson 186). It is, argues Richardson, the "investment/identification which the bodybuilding fan has with the 'freak' body of the bodybuilder which makes this particular strategy of enfreakment markedly different from other contemporary representations" (185).

Richardson asserts that the Post Classical bodybuilder represents a fantasy of selfhood that emphasizes an individual's power to shape and mold his body into new and different shapes that fall outside or beyond traditional rubrics of desire or "good taste." To this end, the particular type of body sought by the Post Classical bodybuilder is physically powerful, in the sense of being physically strong, but is also powerful in its flagrant disregard for beauty norms, and with them, the desires of others; in other words, the Post Classical bodybuilder is powerful in his (supposed) rejection of Western culture's increasingly intense objectification and/or commodification of the male body. According to Richardson, "[t]his rejection of sexual attractiveness, of building a body which is outside the regime of sexual allure," nurtures "fantasies in which men create their bodies to impress other men and disgust women" (192). Ultimately, in Richardson's view, the Post Classical bodybuilder represents "the idea of challenging regimes of normative attractiveness and creating a body which moves outside the dynamics of sexuality altogether" (197). Partly, the Post Classical bodybuilder offers a fantasy

not unlike what has always been offered by a character such as the Hulk; as described in Chapter One, an important aspect of the Hulk's power has always been his freedom to be ugly. The 1980s, however, with its advances in fitness technology, workout drugs, and cosmetic surgery, was the first era to make such a grotesquely exaggerated body a realizable, attainable goal. This era also witnessed an expansion in the practical appeal of such a goal, as evinced by the development and popularity of Post Classical bodybuilding.

Locks' and Richarson's analyses of the nature and appeal of Post Classical bodybuilding allow us to read Turner's pinup of Bishop and Quesada's pinup of Namor not as imagining (and imaging) ideal, normal, perfect, or beautiful bodies so much as bodies that appeal by being bigger and better than both normality and reality. Inasmuch as their every flexed muscle is literally produced and empowered by a flexed imagination, these monstrously muscular superheroes do not celebrate perfection so much as the subjectivity of perception, glorifying in the superhero's ability to stretch and bend to the whims of their creators. Importantly, these bodies to not fully subvert the norm; they are not anti-masculine so much as hypermasculine. This is, of course, similar to the reality of the Post Classical bodybuilder, who resists gender norms by exaggerating them. The Post Classical bodybuilder, similar to what we might call the post classical superhero, contradicts or eschews certain gender norms while also reasserting normative associations of maleness with strength and impenetrability, as well as the masculine privilege, once again discussed in Chapter One, to be monstrous. This fantasy of resistance through excessive conformity usefully informs the artistic styles of McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld. As discussed throughout this chapter, in many ways, the styles of McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld were and are continuous with what came before; all three artists started their careers working within the basic conventions of mainstream superhero comics, writing and drawing the stories of

characters who were, for the most part, created decades before. When and where each artist

managed to create something distinctive or recognizably individual, he did so not by fully

dismantling those norms, but rather by exaggerating them. The superhero bodies that these artists

became known for—bodies that are so finely detailed, fluid, scientifically precise, and/or craggy

and disproportionate that they are impossible to truly imitate or copy—are metaphors for each

creator's own struggle to be treated and recognized as individually creative and talented within a

highly commercialized and standardized system of production and representation. Tellingly, all

three creators cared enough about having and being recognized for their individual freedom of

expression that they were willing to take the considerable financial risk of starting their own

company, one whose name would reflect their belief in the transformative power of pictures:

Image Comics.

Some aspects of this fantasy of enfreakment might also apply to this era's female

superheroes. Certainly, several *Marvel Swimsuit* pinups, particularly those depicting Bad Girls,

feature female bodies that could be considered monstrous via their excessive conformity. Joe

Bennet's pinup of Elektra (*Marvel Swimsuit* #4) (Image 36) is a representative example. In this

pinup, Marvel's original Bad Girl is an especially exaggerated and arguably monstrous

combination of sex and violence, being equipped with sai and swords plus an impossibly curved

spine, rigid, torpedo-like breasts, and exaggeratedly long legs ending in tiny, toe-less feet. In this

pinup, the exaggerations and distortions of Elektra's body, which render it either/both machine-

like or insect like, place her outside of normative beauty ideals. However, even if this image of

Elektra is not ideally attractive, it is certainly not un-erotic. In fact, Elektra's body is specifically

exaggerated in ways that are primarily for and about sex; even the most overly monstrous aspect

of Elektra's body—her impossibly curved spine—is sexual, connoting her body's ability to bend

to accommodate multiple modes and locations of penetration. Where this image of Elektra is freakish, it is so primarily because of the ways the normal rules of anatomy and laws of physics are manipulated and subsumed by Elektra's sexualisation.

Ultimately, although both *Marvel Swimsuit* and the art styles of McFarlane, Lee, and Liefeld tend to uphold traditional hierarchies of sex, gender, or race, they evoke historically and culturally specific transformations in the shape and negotiation of those hierarchies, exposing newly urgent contradictions and potential ruptures. The next chapter will further extrapolate the significance of these contradictions and ruptures by analyzing a text that highlights and critiques the prejudices and exclusions they can never fully conceal.

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CHAPTER FOUR: THE CRITICAL SUPERHERO (2001-2013)

"I just want to feel something… different."

    -Jessica Jones, *Alias* #1 (2001)

The ongoing series *Alias*, written by Brian Michael Bendis with regular art by Michael Gaydos, ran for 28 issues between 2001 and 2004 and was the first title to be published under Marvel's MAX imprint. The "18+/For Mature Readers"[87] designation of the MAX imprint grants the series expanded creative freedoms which it exploits in various obvious and complex ways. *Alias* follows Jessica Jones, a superhero turned foul-mouthed private investigator as she engages in drunken one-night stands and solves various superhero-related cases while navigating the trauma that led to her retirement from superheroics. Jessica's unconventional character is presented within an unconventional narrative. *Alias* is a revisionist text, telling Jessica's origin in a series of flashbacks that insert her into Marvel continuity as a former classmate of Peter Parker and a largely forgotten member of the Avengers. It is also a self-consciously critical text; throughout the series, Jessica's negotiation of her trauma and her role within the superhero community also involves negotiating the meaning and function of female identity and power within a genre historically dominated by the male gaze and masculine fantasies.

Although the superhero genre has produced many revisionist as well as critical narratives over the past several decades, this chapter argues that *Alias* illustrates an underexplored aspect of such narratives, which is their potential for representing protagonists that the superhero genre has

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[87] This is an in-house rating system developed by Marvel when it abandoned the Comics Code Authority; the MAX imprint features violence, sexual content, and language deemed too graphic or "mature" for inclusion under the "T+" rating.

traditionally marginalized. Virtually all of the most-discussed revisionist and critical superhero narratives—a list that includes *Watchmen* (1987) and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), as well as more recent examples such as Marvel's *The Sentry* (2000-2001) and the DC's *Identity Crisis* (2004)—focus on the straight white male characters who have historically dominated the superhero genre. *Alias*, in contrast, features a lead character who is both an insider and an outsider, empowered by a radioactive accident yet consistently disempowered by her gender within a superhero community that is presented as highly masculinist, exclusionary, and even abusive. This chapter will interrogate *Alias*' effectiveness as a critical text by evaluating the ways in which it rewrites and redraws Marvel characters and continuity to challenge superhero comics' traditional (re: sexist) conventions and narratives. It will also interrogate *Alias* as a recuperative text, considering whether it successfully creates a space for new ways of representing female empowerment or whether truly creating such a space would require a more thorough dismantling of the superhero genre. Ultimately, this chapter's analysis will examine the 21st-century superhero genre's awareness of the politics of representation underpinning its conventions and weigh the genre's ability and willingness to meaningfully alter those conventions. Such an analysis will demonstrate the continuing evolution of the superhero genre while also providing insight into the operation of genre fiction more generally, debating whether or to what extent genre fiction can be meaningfully critical given the necessity of maintaining and reiterating certain timeworn conventions.

Admittedly, this chapter's analysis is out-of-step with the project up to this point inasmuch as *Alias* is not a "typical" text. This chapter's close reading of *Alias* also does not allow for a comprehensive overview of the state of superhero comics in the 21st century, something which no single text couple accomplish. However, *Alias*' critical revisionism is

representative of many general trends going on in 21st-century superhero comics. As Henry

Jenkins describes, in the wake of the increased transmedia expansion of superhero characters as

well the increasing availability of back issues via digital platforms such as comixology.com, 21st-

century superhero comics are experiencing a "moment of transition" (22) wherein, for the first

time since Marvel's development of continuity storytelling in the 1960s, "principles of

multiplicity are felt at least as powerfully as those of continuity" (20). Within a context in which

fewer people read serialized Batman comics than ever before[88] yet Batman the character "is now

distributed and publicised across platforms as yet unimagined" in the early 1990s (Pearson et al.

2), superhero comics' continuity has become both more complex and less important; publishers

seek both to reach out to new readers familiar with superhero characters from their appearances

in other media as well as to appease the dedicated fan community that still purchases monthly

comics. According to Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith, the 21st-century era of superhero

comics has "come to be characterized not only by the reintroduction of superheroes with updated

backgrounds and appearances, but also by the coexistence of multiple versions of the same

character coming forth from its publisher simultaneously" (79). *Alias'* critical revisionism

reflects this context of increased multiplicity in the ways it both depends on the reader's

awareness of continuity and reflects a new willingness to re-examine and even rewrite that

continuity. Interrogating *Alias'* modes of critique also allows for consideration of this increased

multiplicity's particular benefits for those subjects who have traditionally not had access to it—

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[88] Comics sales have been steadily declining since the 1970s. As Mark Rogers describes, during the 1970s and 80s, the development of the direct market meant that "the comic book industry was gradually transformed from a Fordist mass medium, which sought to sell comics to as large and undifferentiated audience as possible, to a post-Fordist 'niche' medium which sought to maximize its profits by efficiently selling to a relatively narrow audience" (148). This trend accelerated during the early-to-mid 1990s following the brief surge in popularity generated by the new crop of "superstar" artists discussed in the previous chapter. By some estimates, between 1990 and 1996, Marvel's market share dropped by as much as 40%, and overall comics sales by as much as 50% (Deppey).

namely, those subjects, including women, who are minorities within the superhero genre.

The opening scenes of *Alias* #1 immediately establish the nature and tone of Jessica's place within, and in opposition to, the conventions of the superhero genre. The first word of *Alias* is "fuck" (Image 1). It is fitting that this word is "spoken" violently, in a bold, italic font, inasmuch as it represents a violent departure from the child-friendly world of Code-approved superhero fare; beginning the comic with a vehement "fuck" immediately and flagrantly advertises it as different and implicitly critical of superhero comics' history of censorship. Furthermore, the specific choice of taboo word draws attention to a specific censorship—namely, the censorship of sexuality. As discussed in Chapter Two and Chapter Three (and indeed, throughout this project as whole), sexuality has historically been both obvious and absent in the superhero genre, and the ways and means of this simultaneous obviousness and absence are intimately bound up in the genre's overarching sexism and heteronormativity. Chapter Three, for instance, discussed the ways in which the sexuality of female superheroes tends to be both flagrantly advertised but practically denied, and how this state of affairs both essentializes gender and robs female sexuality of any ability it might have had to destabilize male power. Besides some exceptional moments in the *Marvel Swimsuit Special*, male superheroes, in contrast, have typically been exaggeratedly muscular while lacking evidence of actual sexual characteristics; this absence functions, in part, to preserve male superheroes as ego ideals and protect them from traditional (re: feminized) forms of sexual objectification. In general, while the spandex world of superhero comics always implies eroticism and/or sexuality, Code-approved stories have long denied the physical reality and actual diversity of sexuality; this is indicated, in particular, by the inevitable and largely identical sexualisation of female bodies, and by the near total erasure (until very recently) of homosexuality (at least on a primary, canonical level). Choosing "fuck" as the

first word of *Alias* is an early indication that the comic will attempt to address (and redress) something of this history.

This important and multilayered first word of *Alias* #1 is spoken by a client of Jessica's who has hired her to investigate the wife he suspects of cheating on him. In the course of her investigation, Jessica discovers that the man's wife is not sneaking out at night because she is having an affair, but rather because she is a mutant. The exact nature of the wife's mutant condition is never specifically disclosed. However, the shocked and disgusted reactions of the husband (and later, the police officers) to Jessica's surveillance photos of the client's wife suggest that her abilities are in some sense monstrous, at least to the men who are shown looking at them. (Jessica, importantly, does not react with shock to the photos, suggesting her comparable lack of prejudice, and/or her identification with the man's wife). There are multiple potential readings of this scene's deployment of the mutant metaphor. As discussed in Chapter Two, the mutant metaphor has a problematic tendency to equate different types of real and fantastical difference; the fantastical, all-encompassing nature of the mutant condition also has a tendency to appropriate and/or subsume real-world differences and prejudices. These tendencies are certainly present within the opening scenes of *Alias* #1. The client's claim that discovering his wife is a mutant is worse than discovering she was unfaithful suggests that his misogyny—which is expressly revealed by his use of the gendered insult "bitch" to describe his wife, Jessica, and then all women—could be displaced or overshadowed by his anti-mutant (and thus fantastical) prejudice.

Yet this scene's merging of the real and the fantastical also draws attention to the terms and conditions of the real. Jessica's client is angry because his wife lied to him and because he is both a misogynist and prejudiced against mutants. His wife's mutant condition also, however,

advertises her power. Consequently, the client's anti-mutant prejudice is inextricably bound up in

his misogyny. This scene uses the mutant condition to emphasize and criticize the client's

misogynistic and/or patriarchal need to control or feel superior to his wife. The wife's mutant

condition signals that her husband is not threatened only or centrally by her deception but also by

her unexpected empowerment, as manifested in both her actual superpowers and her ability to

deceive him; ultimately, Jessica's client is angry because his wife's unexpected power has

illuminated the insecurity of his own. In addition, although the client's wife is actually

superpowered, the monstrousness of these superpowers is debatable, with the client's perception

of his wife as monstrous perhaps illuminating the real ways in which patriarchy and misogyny

dehumanizes women. When the client's wife moves outside of his control, he perceives her as

becoming un-human and unintelligible; this inhumanity sanctions his severe retribution, making

it less an act of revenge than an imperative to restore a "natural" order. The ways in which this

opening scene links Jessica to the client's wife additionally emphasizes that the primary target of

the client's anger (or fear) is his perception of the monstrousness of female power. As mentioned,

the client directly equates his wife with Jessica through his use of the word "bitch" to describe

them both. Jessica is also linked to the client's wife through their shared empowerment; similar

to the client's wife, Jessica is empowered by her possession of information as well as her literal

superpowers, which are revealed at the end of the third page of *Alias* #1 when she effortlessly

throws the client out through her own door following his physical attack (Image 2).

The client's physical attack is not explicitly sexual in either goals or execution. It is,

however, sexualized due to the circumstances—namely, the fact that Jessica is investigating a

case of marital infidelity, wherein she is linked, by the client and for the reader, to the wife who

is suspected of cheating. The decision to begin *Alias* #1 with a sexualized attack against the

superpowered female protagonist is politically risky. As discussed in Chapter Two, the

prevalence of sexual or sexualized violence in the origin stories and subsequent careers of female

superheroes is perhaps the superhero genre's most problematic gendered trope. This trope can be

read as an attempt to punish women for their acquisition of power; alternatively or additionally, it

can be read as essentializing female bodies and/or limiting female power, signalling that no

woman, regardless of whether she possesses cosmic armour or unbreakable skin, is

impenetrable.[89] However, *Alias* #1 also refutes the problematic underpinnings of this trope

through its depiction of Jessica's physical power. The several panels depicting the glass window

before and after the client is hurled through it dramatize Jessica's power. At the same time, the

fact that Jessica is not explicitly shown tossing the man through the door domesticates her

power; Jessica's strength is so mundane, this visual choice suggests, that it is not actually worth

showing. In addition, although the excessiveness of Jessica's self-defence suggests a potentially

hysterical outburst of emotion, Jessica's words and demeanour emphasize that the emotions at

play are actually scorn and/or anger rather than fear or anxiety. Jessica does not cry out or yell

during or after the client's attack; instead, using what is implied to be a subdued tone, she simply

tells the battered client, "And then there's the matter of your bill…" This scornful, subdued

emotional response makes this scene of sexualized violence dramatically different from the

depictions of sexual assault commonly seen in previous eras. As discussed in Chapter Two, the

female superheroes of the 1970s and 80s typically appear exaggeratedly frightened and/or

helpless when threatened by sexual or sexualized violence.

      Importantly, too, the one panel in which Jessica does appear anxious or intimidated—

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[89] The frequency with which female superheroes endure sexual assault is evident in the examples of the other critical superhero texts mentioned at the beginning of this chapter; Catwoman is raped by the Joker in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, the Silk Spectre is raped by the Comedian in *Watchmen*, and Sue Dibny, long-time partner of the Elongated Man, is raped by the supervillain Doctor Light in *Identity Crisis*.

namely, the panel in which the client is shown grabbing her throat—does not sexualize her; in this panel, Jessica's body is not displayed, and her face is not eroticized in any obvious way. Instead, this panel helps to illustrate the misogyny that informs the client's attack. The panel directly preceding the client grabbing Jessica's neck depicts a tight view of the client's raised, closed fist, transforming it into an icon of connotatively masculine power and advertising an intent to impose that power on Jessica. In the following panel, which depicts the client's hand on Jessica's throat, Jessica's facial features bleed into anonymity, her eyes and lips becoming smudgy shadows. This depiction can be read as a literalization of the client's attempt to impose his power on Jessica. However, the panel's focus on Jessica's face, combined with the specific ways it manipulates her face, also emphasizes Jessica's subjectivity; in effect, the reader is seeing Jessica's reaction to the attack written (or drawn) on her face. Furthermore, showing Jessica's face losing its individuality helps to expose the client's violence as an attack not only on Jessica's body, but also on her subjecthood. This reading is substantiated by the method of the attack; the client's decision to grab Jessica's throat cuts off not only her breathing but also her words, and thus, her ability to criticize him or convey her superior knowledge. Ultimately, whereas the scenes of sexual or sexualized violence seen in previous eras often eroticize and/or glorify such violence, the rendition of sexualized violence in *Alias* #1 denies this titillation while also revealing the underlying ideology of sexual assault as a gendered attack on subjecthood.

In a way, the physical conflict between Jessica and the client is not totally unlike the superhero battle between the Fantastic Four and the X-Men discussed in Chapter One. Similar to that battle, Jessica's physical conflict with the client is intercorporeal, the method of the client's attack and the depiction of Jessica's reaction illustrating the multifaceted nature of bodies as both forces and signs of culture. In other ways, however, Jessica's physical conflict with her client is

also importantly different from the battle between the Fantastic Four and the X-Men. The latter battle, which pits fire against ice and telekinesis against (literally) rock hard muscles, relates to reality in a fairly oblique way; these fantastical conflicts suggest some potential resonances in real social relations and cultural valuations, but do not insist on such resonances. In contrast, Jessica's physical conflict with her client has causes and consequences that are tinged with fantasy but which are still nonetheless grounded very explicitly in reality. The fantastical elements of the conflict between Jessica and the client—namely, the presence of the mutant metaphor and Jessica's super-strength—do not ignore or negate reality but rather illustrate the really multifaceted nature of power as it intersects with sex, sexuality, and gender. In this scene, Jessica is not physically injured or especially intimidated by the client's attack. Her initial reaction does, however, suggest emotional scars. The client cannot physically harm Jessica, yet this fact does not, and cannot, fully make up for the pervasive, hateful ideology that informs his attack. The client cannot literally overpower (or disempower) Jessica, but his sexualized, gendered violence can still make her *feel* powerless—however briefly.

The second scene of *Alias* #1 brings representatives of institutional authority into this illustration of the complex intersections of sex, sexuality, gender, and power. In this second scene, the police officers who interrogate Jessica about the incident with the client very literally represent institutional power. Initially, these officers seem friendly as they admire photographs of Jessica on the wall, taken during her superhero days (Image 3). In these photographs, a purple-haired version of Jessica wears a strapless white jumpsuit and flashes a broad smile while standing next to members of the Avengers. This more traditionally superheroic version of Jessica is dramatically different from the version of Jessica who appears in the present. Compared to the present version of Jessica, with her brown hair, baggy and shapeless brown, grey, and black

clothing and nearly perpetual scowl, the superheroic version of Jessica is both friendlier and more sexualized. The more sexualized nature of the superheroic version of Jessica is especially emphasized in her side-by-side comparison with Ms. Marvel in the second photograph. Although the superheroic version of Jessica is distinguished from Ms. Marvel by virtue of her much smaller, less Amazonian stature, the two women are ultimately depicted very similarly; both Ms. Marvel and the superheroic version of Jessica pose confidently for the camera, wearing very similar feminine belts around their small waists while also displaying equal though differently distributed amounts of exposed skin.

As the police officers admire the photographs, their friendly interest quickly morphs into blatant objectification; within a page, they become more interested in looking at the photographs of Jessica in the past than discussing her case in the present. Significantly, the officers become hostile toward Jessica directly after she denigrates her superhero past, saying that she "outgrew" it in favour of what she identifies as a more realistic existence; in Jessica's own words, she abandoned her superheroic life because, "Girl's gotta eat" (Image 4). In the same panel in which Jessica speaks this line, the officers' faces become shadowed, suggesting, in this instance, their withdrawal of empathy and/or the faceless inhumanity of their institutional authority; the latter possibility is supported by the dialogue, as one of the police officers reminds (or threatens) Jessica by saying, "You know you're not above the law." This scene once again evokes fantastical prejudices related to the possession of superpowers; in the Marvel Universe, it is fairly orthodox for the police and the government to distrust and sometimes openly persecute all types of superpowered individuals. However, the rendition of this prejudice within this particular scene once again uses the fantastic to meaningfully evoke the real. In this scene, the nature and context of the police officer's implied threat seems to challenge Jessica's rejection of the more

conventionally feminine and more overtly erotic form of female empowerment embodied by her past, superheroic self. In part, the police officers seem to be reminding Jessica that she is not above the laws of gender. In addition, because they are looking at and judging visual representations of Jessica dressed as a conventionally sexy superhero, the police officers might also be read as analogues of sexist superhero comics' fans; in this, the police officers can be seen as reminding Jessica that she is not above the laws of the superhero genre, wherein female power has historically been required to look and act a certain way in order to be acceptable.

The police officers do not stop at threatening Jessica, but also blame her for her own victimization by telling her that they "don't want to get another call like this." This statement implies that Jessica overreacted to her client's attack; it might also suggest that Jessica either provoked or deserved the attack, meaning that whatever injuries she or her business suffered as a result are her own fault. In effect, the police officers move over the course of this scene from potential allies to abetters of Jessica's assault, a move that is additionally emphasized by the ways the police officers are linked to the client from the first scene. The police officers are first equated with the client through their similarly disgusted reactions to Jessica's surveillance photographs of the client's wife. The officers are then equated with the client when one of them criticizes Jessica's "smart mouth," a comment that evokes the client's attempt to silence Jessica in the previous scene. Finally, the police officers are shown expressing empathy for the client. As they leave Jessica's office, one of the officers laments, "Let a super hero catch your wife fucking your friends…" In this line of dialogue, the police officer is clearly identifying with the client and situating him as the true victim in the encounter with Jessica.

The conclusion of this scene explicates the meaning and consequences of the police officers' behaviour in terms of Jessica's access to power. This scene ends with a direct, but

inverted, callback to the client's attack in the comic's first scene. Directly following the panels in which the officers criticize Jessica's "smart mouth" and openly identify with the man who tried to kill her, there is a panel depicting a tight view of Jessica's clenched fist. This clenched fist echoes the panel depicting the closed fist of the client in the comic's first scene. However, while in the first scene, the client's fist was pointed up and led to an actual physical attack, in this second scene, Jessica's fist is aimed down and remains impotent. Jessica's restraint in this scene says something about her character, but it also emphasizes the barriers facing her ability to benefit from her physical power (represented by her super-strength) or her intellectual power (represented by her access to information and her "smart mouth"). In both the scene with the police officers and in the comic's first scene, Jessica's intellectual and physical power provoke attempts to silence her. The scene with the police officers, however, emphasizes that this silencing of women occurs at institutional as well as individual levels; the fact that the police officers can be read as analogues of sexist superhero comics fans furthermore emphasizes that such institutional oppression is both intradiegetic and extradiegetic, occurring both within the story at hand and within the historically male-dominated, masculine fantasy-privileging superhero comics genre and industry more generally. Knowledge of this institutional bias informs Jessica's decision not to physically fight back at the end of the scene. Arguably, Jessica does not physically fight back against the male authorities who objectify and then victimize her because it has been made abundantly clear that there is no point in doing so. Because the police officers represent institutional authority, their power is not isolated; Jessica could defeat them individually, but even her superpowered fists and smart mouth are not enough to fight an entire system of oppression—at least, not easily. Ultimately, these opening scenes of *Alias* signal the inadequacy of physical power when it is not paired with access to social or institutional power;

or, to put it another way, these opening scenes suggest the limits, at least where female superheroes are concerned, of physical power as a means, and even as a fantasy of, self-possession and/or freedom.

The visual depiction of Jessica perhaps represents *Alias*' most direct and sustained critique of the traditional representation of female superheroes. As mentioned above, Jessica is dramatically different in dress, demeanor, and styling from traditional female superheroes. Throughout *Alias*, Gaydos goes to great lengths to avoid sexualizing or otherwise objectifying Jessica's body. This is done, first and foremost, by dressing Jessica primarily in the aforementioned multiple layers of baggy clothing. Jessica's typical outfit consists of a baggy t-shirt or sweater, loose pants, and an oversized leather jacket paired with athletic sneakers. [90] Gaydos' heavy shadows, thick, and somewhat sharp and unpredictable black lines further cloak and hide the actual (or realistic) shape of Jessica's body. In a sense, Gaydos' style might be read as de-emphasizing Jessica's body. This de-emphasis does not, however, mean that Jessica's body lacks meaning. The representation of Jessica's body in *Alias* reflects her character; Jessica is guarded and skeptical about the world, including the world of superheroes, and her bodily presentation, in terms of both art style and clothing, reflects this; the bagginess of Jessica's clothing might also be read as connoting, for better or worse, her considerable emotional baggage. Consequently, what might seem at first glance like a de-emphasis on Jessica's body is really just a different type of emphasis. Jessica's baggy clothing and oversized leather jacket both reject superhero comics conventions and rewrite (or redraw) them. Jessica looks different than

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[90] There is specific narrative significance to each scene in which Jessica is clothed differently from this. For instance, Jessica is sometimes shown stripped down to a white, masculine-style undershirt when she is alone in the office or at home; juxtaposed with her usual dark, baggy layers, this creative choice symbolizes Jessica's unguardedness when she is alone compared to when she is with people (including friends as well as adversaries and clients). On another occasion, Jessica wears a skirt and midriff baring top to gain access to a club in an attempt to rescue Spider-Girl.

most other female superheroes, and most other superheroes in general; yet her clothes also evoke and exploit the conventions of the superhero costume. Though Jessica's baggy, practical clothes do not advertise her "mission, identity, and powers" quite as clearly as a more traditional superhero costume, they do reflect her history and personality. In effect, Jessica's appearance appropriates what had been an almost exclusively male privilege within the world of superhero comics—the privilege of individuality. Whereas the generically sexy costumes of other female superheroes tend to neglect individuality (as well as subjecthood), Jessica's appearance foregrounds it. Of course, because the meaning of Jessica's drab, baggy clothing is bound up in the ways such clothing represents a form of resistance to traditional ways of representing female superheroes, Jessica is never truly free of the superhero genre's sexist conventions. Importantly, though, the specific nature of Jessica's clothing might also be read as a self-critical acknowledgement of this fact; the bagginess of Jessica's clothes may reflect both her personal baggage as well as the baggage of the conventions that continue to weigh her down even as she tries to resist them.

Gaydos' art also focuses on faces, and especially Jessica's face, to an extent that is atypical once again of both comics featuring female superheroes and superhero comics in general. Many of *Alias*' pages are composed almost entirely of tight views of Jessica's face, often accompanied by copious dialogue and/or interior monologue (Image 5). This technique obviously reflects an attempt to depict and capture Jessica's subjectivity; even though the reader is usually looking *at* Jessica rather than truly looking *with* her, the comic foregrounds Jessica's ability to look as a central theme. Jessica's ability to look is obviously necessary for her job as a private investigator, but it also carries symbolic meaning. This focus on Jessica as a character who looks and watches is significant inasmuch as it offers a counterpoint to women's traditional

role—within both classical Hollywood cinema and traditional superhero comics—as erotic spectacle. In both classical Hollywood and traditional superhero comics, the woman is someone (or, more appropriately, some*thing*) to be looked at, rather than someone who looks. As Linda Williams describes, citing Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema," classical Hollywood cinema is characterised by "a dominant male look at the woman that leaves no place for the woman's own pleasure in seeing: she exists only to be looked at" (61). Expanding Mulvey's critique to the more general context of "classical narrative cinema," Williams observes:

> …the female protagonist often fails to look, to return the gaze of the male who desires her. In the classical narrative cinema, to see is to desire. It comes as no surprise, then, that many of the "good girl" heroines of the silent screen were often figuratively, or even literally, blind. Blindness in this context signifies a perfect absence of desire, allowing the look of the male protagonist to regard the woman at the requisite safe distance necessary to the voyeur's pleasure, with no danger that she will return that look and in so doing express desires of her own. The relay of looks within the film thus duplicates the voyeuristic pleasure of the cinematic apparatus itself—a pleasure that Christian Metz and Laura Mulvey have suggested to be one of the primary pleasures of film viewing: the impression of looking in on a private world unaware of the spectator's own existence. (61)

Williams furthermore argues that even in films that do allow women to look, such women are routinely punished for looking. According to Williams, in everything from the "woman's film" of the 1950s to the horror films of the 1970s and 80s, "The woman's gaze is punished… by

narrative processes that transform curiosity and desire into masochistic fantasy" (61).

Jeffrey A. Brown observes that this theme of punishing the female gaze continues well into the 1990s, as particularly evinced by a popular subgenre of films starring female investigators; this subgenre includes such films as *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and *Blue Steel* (1989). In these films, Brown argues, the female protagonist "may be a successful active looker, but she is still punished for looking" (218). In these films, the look and its punishment is routinely sexual and/or sexualized. In both *Silence of the Lambs* and *Blue Steel*, the female protagonists look at sexually charged situations, and are threatened with sexual violence in response to this transgression. According to Brown, in these films, the sexualized nature of the female investigator's look, and the sexualized consequences of her looking, emphasize that she is "as much an object of the investigative gaze as is the serial killer—a pattern that fits well with Hollywood's insistent dependence on casting only established sex symbols in lead female roles" (216). Ultimately, although the female investigative protagonist "does triumph in the final moments… there is often the sense her victory will be forever tainted by her vulnerability. The female investigator's intimate relationship with the killer and her status as a woman in a genre where women are predominantly coded as victims of male violence make her plight exponentially more dangerous than it would be for a male character" (Brown 218-9). Brown additionally argues that many of the same themes and problems are evident in prominent examples of the female action hero subgenre as it manifested in both films and on television during the late 1990s and early 2000s. As a case in point, in the coincidentally titled television show *Alias* (2001-2006) Sidney Bristow is frequently compelled to adopt sexually objectifying disguises and poses in the course of her investigations and cons, often posing as an exotic dancer, a prostitute, a nightclub singer, etc.; although Sidney's actual status as a highly skilled,

physically powerful CIA operative emphasizes that her self-objectifying poses are always merely poses, she is, nonetheless, routinely objectified by the filmic apparatus during her acts of looking (see Brown 68-92).

In *Alias* the comic book, Jessica is, like so many other female investigators before her, compelled to look at several sexually charged situations. For instance, in the series' very first issue, she investigates two cases involving marital infidelity. In addition to the opening scene already discussed, the first story arc of the series, which runs from issue #1 to issue #5, involves Jessica being hired to search for a woman who turns out to be the girlfriend of Steve Rogers, a.k.a. Captain America. After observing said woman in an intimate moment kissing Rogers, Jessica unwittingly sees—and films—Rogers transforming into his superheroic persona. Jessica's possession of this tape has many consequences, not least of which is another attack in which a man tries—and fails—to crush her windpipe. However, the presentation of this not-altogether-unconventional storyline does attempt to emphasize and protect Jessica's subjectivity, resisting the trope of the female investigator who is sexually or otherwise punished for looking.

In the specific scene from *Alias* #1 in which Jessica first watches Rogers transform into Captain America (Image 6 and 7), she is neither visually sexualized nor depicted as sexually interested or involved with the private, romantic interlude she witnesses. This scene consists mostly of tight views of Jessica's face and eyes placed (variously) beside and overlapping the lined, slightly "blurry" panels that represent the view through the video camera. Through the video camera images, the reader directly shares Jessica's viewpoint. Yet even in the panels in which the reader is looking at Jessica looking, Jessica's gaze frames and is imprinted on the action as it unfolds. Jessica's eyes on this page are layered on top of the camera images; they also exceed the grid pattern, overlapping the borders and gutters that delineate the scene being

watched and recorded. This framing and layout ensures that Jessica's eyes have a determining presence; even when Jessica is not in control of what she is seeing, her gaze still controls the presentation of the scene. Hillary L. Chute argues that comics are particularly suited to staging self-reflexive conversations about women's status as "both looking and looked-at subjects" (2). According to Chute, comics ability to "re-view" the world (or, I might add, re-draw it), can "productively point to the female subject as both an object of looking and a creator of looking and sight" (2). Although Chute is specifically discussing autobiographical texts by female creators, her insights can apply to the depiction of Jessica in this surveillance scene; even though Jessica is a fictional woman created by men, her gaze is a creative force to the extent that it so explicitly determines the world the reader sees.

Admittedly, Jessica's gaze becomes less determining in the final part of the scene, in which she watches Steve Rogers transform into Captain America (Image 7); on these pages, the video images overlap with Jessica's face and eyes, suggesting Jessica's loss of control during the ultimate moment of revelation. However, these pages also participate in providing Jessica with a broad range of facial expressions that once again foreground her subjectivity and encourage identification. Throughout this entire scene, Jessica's face moves from boredom to joy to surprise and/or worry to comedically deadpan shock. These varied expressions keep the reader alert to, and focused on, Jessica's emotional responses. In addition, at one point in the scene, the view of Rogers and his girlfriend is cut off as Jessica responds to her leg falling asleep (Image 7). This creative choice emphasizes that the reader is not omniscient, but can rather see only what and when Jessica sees. Forcing the reader to move with Jessica from watching the scene with Rogers to dealing with a sleepy leg further compels the reader to see and experience the scene through and with Jessica, encouraging identification with her physical, embodied experience. Arguably,

the intrusion of this particularly mundane form of physicality also helps the reader to identify with Jessica on an emotional level, demonstrating as it does the vulnerable humanity at the core of her superpowered body.

However, Jessica's surveillance does, as mentioned, provoke a sexualized attack, and the depiction of this attack exploits gendered tropes in some troubling ways. In a scene that begins at the end of *Alias* #4 and continues through the beginning of *Alias* #5, a supervillain named "Man Mountain Marko" attacks Jessica while she is talking on the phone to her lawyer, Matt Murdock, a.k.a. Daredevil. Although Jessica's body is not eroticized in this scene, this attack is still more overtly sexual than the client's attack in *Alias* #1. In *Alias* #4, Marko's attack is presaged by a phallic signifier; when Jessica first sees Marko standing next to his car, her first words are, "Large hands…" The attack is additionally sexualized by Marko's dialogue; as he chokes Jessica in *Alias* #4 (Image 9), Marko smiles with lidded eyes while saying, "Yeah… Oh Yeah…" In *Alias* #5, Marko furthermore advertises his sexual intentions directly, telling Jessica that after he has either subdued or killed her, "Then you'll really find out why they call me 'Man Mountain Marko.'" Importantly, the initial moments of Marko's attack in *Alias* #4 do emphasize that Jessica is powerful even in defeat; when Marko slams Jessica into the hood of her car, her super-strong body makes a large dent (Image 8). The following two pages, however, show Jessica in a highly vulnerable position that is reminiscent of the fear and helplessness that the female superheroes of the 1970s are so often made to enact. On these pages, several tight, enlarged views of Jessica's frightened, helpless face are juxtaposed with images of Marko's confident, smiling expression as he chokes her (Image 9).

On the one hand, these tight, enlarged views of Jessica's face operate as they do elsewhere, resisting objectification by highlighting Jessica's subjectivity. Yet in this instance, this

technique also exaggerates Jessica's fear and helplessness. There is nothing unexpected or especially meaningful about Jessica's expression in these panels; she is, rather, simply and extremely frightened. Jessica is additionally rendered vulnerable in this particular sequence inasmuch as it is placed on the final page of issue #4. In the series' original publishing context, there would have been a month-long gap between these images of Jessica's fear and her eventual resistance in issue #5; this gap allows, and indeed compels, the reader to imagine many terrible and perhaps sexually violent fates for Jessica. Obviously, cliff-hangers concerning the fate of the protagonist are a staple of all types of superhero comics. However, where male superheroes are concerned, such cliff-hangers are rarely (if ever) sexually charged in the same way as this scene from *Alias* #4. Ultimately, the scene of vulnerability that concludes *Alias* #4 sacrifices Jessica's character to exploit a very traditional form of gendered drama, in which the reader is solicited to sympathize with and/or want to help a woman in peril without necessarily empathizing with her or expecting her to save herself. Though this scene does not invalidate *Alias*' other important critiques of gendered tropes, it does illustrate the pervasive nature of such tropes.

As a counterpoint to this troublingly generic depiction of sexualized violence, *Alias* offers depictions of female sexuality that were and remain revolutionary and unique within the context of mainstream superhero comics. By far the most explicit sex scene in the series occurs in *Alias* #1; this scene features a drunken Jessica engaging, on-panel, in what is implied to be anal sex with fellow superhero Luke Cage (Image 10). That this scene depicts anal sex is suggested by the position of Luke and Jessica's bodies, and by Jessica's interior monologue, in which she states, "this was the one night that I let him do anything he wanted." The decision to feature a scene of graphic, anal, as well as interracial sex in the first issue of Marvel's first 18+ comic suggests a blatant attempt to disrupt the status quo, and perhaps shock the reader. However, the "shocking"

aspects of this scene significantly contribute to the themes of the comic, while once again emphasizing Jessica's subjectivity. The nature and depiction of the sex in this scene is very character-driven, reflecting Jessica's complex desires as a (super)powerful woman. In her interior monologue, Jessica expresses a desire to "feel something different," even if it is painful. While these words could express guilt, and/or imply that Jessica is masochistically "giving in" to Luke's desires, they also foreground Jessica's sexual agency. In this scene, Luke does not do things to Jessica so much as Jessica *lets* Luke do things to her; arguably, Jessica's desire to "feel something different" could be read as her wanting to use (or even exploit) the also-super-strong Luke to test the limits of her own super-strong body. Furthermore, that Jessica ultimately enjoys this sexual encounter is suggested by her (unsuccessful) attempt to duplicate it with sometime-boyfriend Scott Lang, a.k.a. Ant Man, in *Alias* #17 (Image 11). In that scene, the sexual incompatibility between Jessica and Scott signals a lack of emotional/physical connection, which in turn signals the comparative strength of the emotional/physical connection between Jessica and Luke.

By far the most revolutionary aspect of the sex scene in *Alias* #1, however, is located in its framing and depiction of Jessica's face. This sex scene is once again composed of tight views of Jessica's face, a creative choice that, in this context is especially significant. As discussed earlier in this chapter and throughout, superhero comics customarily offer exaggerated erotic displays of female bodies coupled with a practical denial of female sexuality. In contrast, this scene in *Alias* emphasizes the practical reality of sexuality while denying the erotic display of the female body. To this end, the un-beautifulness and complexity of Jessica's facial expressions in this scene are extremely important. Throughout the scene, Jessica's heavily lined and shadowed face distorts and grimaces in a mixture of determination, pain, and, perhaps, pleasure. These

expressions deny any easy, traditional eroticism while emphasizing, similar to the surveillance scene discussed above, Jessica's complex subjectivity. It is additionally significant that fully half of this sex scene denies access to both Jessica's body *and* her face; in two of the four panels, Jessica's head is ducked down, so that the reader sees only the top of her head. While the framing of Jessica's face and the nature of her facial expressions emphasize her subjectivity, these denials of Jessica's face preserve her subjectivity as her own. Although the interior monologue that runs throughout the scene allows substantial access to Jessica's thoughts, these denials of Jessica's face mean that the reader is still given incomplete access to Jessica's mind and body. This incomplete access—or, perhaps more appropriately, this disrupted access— suggests an attempt to preserve Jessica's control over her own representation. Although this scene grants the reader privileged, intimate access to Jessica's thoughts and the spectacle of her pleasure, the denial of her body combined with these disrupted views of her face emphasizes the limits of that access. In the end, this scene preserves Jessica's power by limiting the ability of the reader to exercise power over her (a state of affairs that is obviously resonant with objectification).

Another counterpoint to the troubling use of gendered tropes in the scene in which Marko chokes Jessica can be found in the critique and subversion of such tropes within an overarching storyline involving Jessica's sexual abuse at the hands of the mind-controlling supervillain Zebediah Killgrave, a.k.a. the Purple Man. In issues #25-26, Jessica relates the story of how, during her time operating as the superhero Jewel, Killgrave kidnapped her and kept her under his power for eight months. Jessica says she was not raped during this time, though she was often forced to watch Killgrave have sex with other women whom he controlled using his powers; Killgrave additionally made Jessica beg him for sex, and used his powers to convince her that

she loved him (Image 12). Similar to the opening scene already discussed, this storyline, on its surface, risks confirming one of the superhero genre's most troubling gendered tropes. The nature and depiction of Jessica's sexual abuse, however, works to complicate and critique the evolution of such abuse into a trope. A scene in *Alias* #17 makes this critique explicit. In this scene, Jessica's aborted attempt to replicate with Scott her previously discussed sexual encounter with Luke precipitates the series' first direct reference to the sexual abuse in Jessica's past. When Scott asks the preoccupied Jessica what is bothering her, she relates an encounter with the telepathic/precognitive character Madame Web; in a flashback to this encounter, Madame Web expresses sympathy for something "terrible" that happened in Jessica's past, without stating the precise nature of the terrible event in question. In Jessica's hesitation to provide Scott further details—a silence that lasts from the end of issue #17 to the beginning of issue #18—Scott assumes an expression of shock and realization. On the first page of *Alias* #18, Scott directly asks Jessica if she was raped.

Because Scott's expression of shock and realization occurs on the final page of *Alias* #17, the reader is once again encouraged to imagine multiple horrible fates (or, in this case, pasts) for Jessica in the month between issues. Yet Jessica's reaction to Scott's question at the beginning of *Alias* #18 also challenges readers' stereotypical assumptions. Jessica responds to Scott with anger and confusion, while also critiquing what she identifies as the gender essentialism informing his question: "No!! Why would you ask that? Such a *guy* thing to say!! A girl has a secret in her past—she must have been *raped*!" After some more back-and-forth, in which Scott repeatedly professes ignorance about why asking his question was offensive, Jessica gets dressed and leaves, angrily slamming the door behind her. Certainly, Jessica's impassioned, critical rebuttal does not totally negate the ways in which the conclusion of *Alias* #17 leverages the dramatic

possibility of Jessica being sexually assaulted. However, *Alias* #18 does capitalize on the suggestive ending of issue #17 to strengthen the emotional and political power of its critique. The opening of *Alias* #18 uses the suggestion of sexual assault that colours the end of issue #17 to implicate the audience in Scott's sexism. When Scott asks Jessica if she was raped at the beginning of issue #18, he confirms that this was what he was thinking at the end of issue #17, which in turn confirms that readers were right to perceive the conclusion of issue #17 as suggesting Jessica has been a victim of sexual assault. Jessica's subsequent vigorous and specific condemnation of this suggestion criticizes both Scott and the reader for presuming to know her past, and for constructing a version of that past that fits within sexist superhero comics conventions.

Jessica's anger at Scott's question can additionally be read as a reaction against his simplification of her abuse; Jessica is clearly resistant to labelling what happened to her, and this resistance seems to be bound up in a fear that such a label might transform her complex experience into a trope or cliché. Jessica's resistance to labelling her experience is emotionally as well as practically understandable in general, but also due to the multifaceted nature of Killgrave's abuse. Killgrave's abuse is gendered and sexualized, rather than strictly sexual. His abuse is also psychological and physical; he robs Jessica of her free will and appropriates her physical power, forcing her to attack police officers and other superheroes on his behalf. Killgrave's multifaceted abuse suggests the multifaceted nature of sexual abuse as it exists in the real world. As discussed in Chapter Two, rape, in the words of Sharon Marcus, is "neither sex nor simple assault," but rather "a sexualized and gendered attack which imposes sexual difference along the lines of violence." According to Marcus, "Rape engenders a sexualized female body defined as a wound, a body excluded from subject-subject violence, from the ability

to engage in a fair fight. Rapists do not beat women at the game of violence, but aim to exclude us from playing it altogether" (178). Similar to the depiction of sexualized violence in the opening scene of *Alias* #1, the multifaceted nature of Killgrave's abuse draws attention to, and forces the reader to reflect upon, the complicated nature of rape as a political as well as violent and sexual act—an attack not only on the body of a woman, but also on her claim to subjecthood. Importantly, *Alias* uses the fantastical conceit of Killgrave's brain-washing superpowers to make this attack on subjecthood explicit, emphasizing the psychological harm of sexual abuse beyond the violence of the act. The fact that Killgrave forces Jessica to watch him rape other women further confirms sexual assault as a form of gendered terrorism; Killgrave makes a spectacle of his abuse to both humiliate and intimidate Jessica.

 Alias additionally complicates and politicizes Jessica's experience of abuse via the fact that it is not, ultimately, Killgrave's abuse but rather Jessica's subsequent abuse at the hands of the Avengers that is the real cause of her superhero retirement. The Avengers' mistreatment of Jessica is revealed in an extended flashback that occupies most of *Alias* #25-26. In the flashback sequence in issue #25, Killgrave announces that he is "sick of looking at" Jessica and orders her to attack Daredevil at Avengers mansion and kill any superheroes who get in her way. Arriving at Avengers mansion at the precise moment that both the Avengers and the Defenders are returning from a mission, Jessica blindsides the Scarlet Witch before Killgrave's control can wear off. Realizing what she has done, Jessica panics, and the Avengers attack her. The spectacle that follows is deliberately grotesque, with the exaggeratedly aggressive male Avengers attempting to extract vengeance while Jessica, visibly sobbing, attempts to escape and corral her damaged psyche (Image 13 and 14). The violence of the male Avengers in this scene is excessive and almost hysterically emotional; the Vision, the Scarlet Witch's husband, is shown crying with rage

and/or hurt before he punches Jessica, while Thor, whose mystical hammer is responsible for most of Jessica's physical injuries, is depicted in an almost Liefeld-esque manner, with veiny, bursting muscles and a face twisted into a severe, ugly grimace. Notably, the Avengers respond as aggressively as they do in part as a manifestation of masculine pride; their extreme emotional reactions suggest that they view Jessica's attack on a female member of their team as an especially brutal, unforgiveable crime. It is also notable that Jessica is finally saved by Ms. Marvel. Besides the Scarlet Witch, Ms. Marvel is the only female member of this team of Avengers; she is also the only member of the team who recognizes and remembers Jessica, despite Jessica apparently having met the team several times. Ms. Marvel furthermore contrasts her male teammates' tears of rage with tears of fear and/or pain that mirror Jessica's own tears, suggesting her empathy with Jessica.

Jessica is physically and mentally devastated by the Avengers' retaliation. In the present, in *Alias* #26, Jessica relates the full extent of her injuries to Luke: "…my neck was messed up. My nose was broken. Lost some teeth. I did some damage to my spine. Oh, and my retina detached…" She also notes that had she not managed to dodge Thor's initial attack, he likely would have killed her. In addition, Jessica suffers a severe mental breakdown that lands her in the second coma of her life (the first occurring after her exposure to the radioactive chemicals that grant her her superpowers). As Jessica describes, "And on top of it my mind gave up on me…. I just, I checked out. Second time in my life. Just kind of shut down. They said it was more mental than physical." Ultimately, this flashback sequence confirms that the origin of Jessica Jones, P.I.—which is also the story of Jessica's failure to be a traditional superhero—is steeped in trauma. It also, however, reveals that this trauma is as much, if not more, the fault of the sexist good guys as the sexist bad guys. To put it another way: this flashback sequence

reveals that the biggest, most serious threat to Jessica's empowerment and general physical and mental wellbeing is not the sexualized, criminal violence of Killgrave, but rather the physical, but still highly gendered, violence of the institutionally sanctioned heroes, the Avengers.

Following the Avengers' retaliation, male-dominated superhero and military/government institutions are furthermore depicted as incapable of understanding or responding in a humane way to Jessica's trauma. In the flashback sequence that shows Jessica waking from her second coma, Jessica finds herself surrounded by uniformed doctors, nurses, and S.H.I.E.L.D. agents, including S.H.I.E.L.D. director Nick Fury (Image 15). In this scene, Fury's official-sounding, emotionless words are full of truisms, as he tells Jessica that she is being cared for by "the best medical minds in the business," and rattles off thank-yous to Jean Grey and the absent Professor X for their assistance in bringing Jessica out of her coma. Fury's behaviour in this scene reveals that he cares more about formalities and procedures than he does about Jessica's needs; as he recites his truisms and formal thank-yous, Fury ignores Jessica's repeated protests of nausea. Fury's inability and/or unwillingness to listen to Jessica or appreciate the reality of her pain emphasizes the uncaring distance of the masculine institution(s) he represents. Significantly, the lone non-uniformed presence in this flashback scene is Grey, who is dressed in a soft green turtleneck. Grey is also more emotionally understanding than Fury, repeatedly reassuring Jessica and apologizing for entering her mind without permission; it is also Jean, rather than Fury or the other (male) Avengers who is most literally responsible for healing Jessica, as it is her telepathic powers that reach Jessica in her coma and later help to provide a psychic defence against Killgrave. Similar to Ms. Marvel's involvement in the Avengers' hysterically aggressive retaliation against Jessica, Jean Grey's involvement in healing and protecting Jessica is set apart from the masculine institutions that harmed her, suggesting both a critique of those institutions

and an attempt to foreground the importance of female community as a counterpoint and/or base of resistance.

Following Jessica's physical recovery, the Avengers and S.H.I.E.L.D. come together to offer her an official apology and a job as the Avengers' liaison to S.H.I.E.L.D. Still feeling deeply betrayed by the superhero community, Jessica rejects the liaison job (Image 16). This scene graphically emphasizes the distance and difference between Jessica and the more traditional superhero world, as represented by Avengers and S.H.I.E.L.D. In this scene, the Avengers and S.H.I.E.L.D. agents all wear brightly coloured and/or outlandish spandex or armoured costumes. Most of the Avengers also conceal their emotions, and even their humanity, behind full or partial masks, several of which are explicitly robotic in nature; two of the Avengers, the Vision and Jocasta, are actual robots, while Iron Man wears a fully concealing suit of robotic armour. In contrast, Jessica is dressed more realistically (or perhaps, more self-consciously) in baggy pants and a plain white T-shirt. The contrast between the Avengers and Jessica emphasizes, once again, the gap between Jessica's complex trauma and the traditional superhero institutions that are seemingly incapable of properly understanding or addressing that trauma. In this scene, the combined official-ness and fantastical-ness of the apology, which is offered by a group of flagrantly unreal yet exaggeratedly serious individuals posing stiffly within in a bright white room aboard the futuristic S.H.I.E.L.D. helicarrier, renders it ridiculous. In effect, Jessica's rejection of the job offer highlights the historical failure of the traditional superhero comics universe (and, arguably, the superhero comics industry) to seriously address certain realities, including the reality of its underlying prejudices; this scene also, of course, highlights the less-traditional *Alias*' ability (or at least ambition) to fill or address such failures. In the end, Jessica's origin as a P.I. is presented as a form of protest against the men and

connotatively masculine institutions that mistreated her, and that continue to misunderstand the depths or even the true nature of that mistreatment.

Alias also uses its flashback sequences to highlight the existence of these prejudices within the history of superhero comics. A case in point is the splash page of Jewel flying through the New York skyline that opens Jessica's recounting of her past with Killgrave in *Alias* #25 (Image 17). In terms of style, this page, and the flashback sequence that follows it, is very clearly distinguished from the comics' present. There is a striking, and presumably intentional, contrast between the way regular series artist Gaydos depicts Jessica in what might be termed her "private" era (as both a private citizen and a private investigator) and the way Mark Bagley, the guest artist responsible for most of the flashback sequences, draws Jessica in her public, superheroic era. Bagley's Jessica is far more traditionally sexualized than Gaydos' version, possessing the exaggerated curves and aesthetic features of a more conventional female superhero. This more traditionally sexualized version of Jessica is also shown as existing in a more carefree, naïve world than P.I.-era Jessica, in ways that reflect the typical tone and style of superhero comics from the 1960s and 70s. This page does not necessarily reference a precise time period. The "Stan Lee Presents" banner evokes the period from the later 1960s into the early 1980s, while the colourful adjectives added to the creator's names reference the earlier 1960s period. Jessica's blatant, up-beat dialogue on this page also broadly references the 1960s-70s period, evoking both the optimism of Jessica pre-Killgrave and Avengers-induced-coma, as well as the general context of Marvel comics prior to the "grim and gritty" 1980s and "extreme" 1990s. This dialogue also references the ways in which female superheroes, as discussed in Chapter Two, have historically been depicted as a charged combination of connotatively masculine and female traits. In this splash page, Jewel declares, "I tell ya, thank goodness for

flying! It gives me a minute to stop thinking about looking for a job, *or* the fact that I just can't find a *boyfriend*. What's a girl got to do in this town to find a decent guy?" In this scene, Jewel's combination of unconventional empowerment—demonstrated by her ability to fly—and ultra-conventional heteronormativity—demonstrated by her sexualization and her overriding desire for the stability of a "decent" boyfriend—is very similar to the depiction of many female superheroes in the 1970s; similar to Ms. Marvel or the original version of She-Hulk, Jewel is both freed from the constraints of traditional femininity and fundamentally, inextricably mired in them, both visually and narratively.

Jessica's quest to find a "decent guy" is quickly ironized by her discovery of Killgrave in the following scene. On the one hand, the fact that the more graphically sexualized version of Jessica becomes a victim of sexualized abuse suggests the consequences of sexual objectification masquerading as liberation. On the other hand, however, the fact that Jessica's abuse follows this depiction of a more sexualized, but also more carefree, existence, could be read as sanctioning or justifying that abuse. The difference between the more modestly clothed, more street-smart Jessica Jones, P.I., and the more carefree, sexualized Jewel could potentially suggest that Jewel-era Jessica was abused in part because she was naïve (or "dumb"), and/or because she dressed too provocatively; these types of statements are, of course, routinely heard in both the media and the courtroom within the context of real life sexual assault and harassment cases (see Ponterotto). Yet this reading is complicated, if not quite negated, by the possibility that Bagley's style may represent Jessica's perception of herself. This possibility is suggested by the fact that Bagley's rendition of Jessica is located within a flashback sequence that Jessica is orally relating to Luke, and by the fact that Bagley's version of Jessica emerges for the first time within Jessica's subconscious, in the context of a dream sequence in *Alias* #21, in which Jewel kisses a

mysterious stranger who is retrospectively implied to be Killgrave. If Bagley's more sexualized

depiction of Jessica does represent her perception of herself from her time as Jewel, this could

mean that Jessica blames herself for what happened with Killgrave and, subsequently, with the

Avengers; although such self-blame is politically wrong, it is emotionally understandable.

Alternatively or additionally, Jessica's perception of herself as both more naïve and more

sexually objectified during her Jewel days could be a result of Killgrave's influence; this reading

is supported by the fact that, during her conversation with Luke, Jessica professes that

Killgrave's mental manipulations still affect her memory and feelings about the time she spent

under his influence.

Every reading of the difference between Jewel-era Jessica and P.I.-era Jessica is

furthermore complicated by the fact that Jewel-era Jessica and P.I.-era Jessica cannot be read as

wholly separate individuals, or even wholly separate interpretations of the same individual. This

is true first and foremost because both versions of Jessica exist simultaneously—in the same

series, the same comic, and sometimes, on the same page. On a basic level, the comics form

ensures the co-existence and continual interaction between Jewel-era Jessica and PI-era Jessica.

Because comics represent time as space, on any given comics page, past and present are always

available at the same time. Jared Gardiner argues that this compels readers to constantly

interrogate the relationship between past and present. "One of the salient features of comics

narrative," says Gardner, "is the ability to see past, present, and future simultaneously—that is,

literally to be forced to attend (however peripherally and however hard one tries to limit one's

focus) to the panel that precedes and the panel that will follow the one being read in the

'present'" (165). Applying Gardner's observations to *Alias*, we might say that the simultaneous

visibility of Jewel-era Jessica and P.I.-era Jessica ensures that the reader must attend (however

peripherally) to both versions at once. As discussed in the Introduction, the comics form also encourages what Barbara Postema calls "weaving" back-and-forth, wherein "the reader first 'skips over' the gutter to look at the next panel, and then mentally goes into the gutter to fill in the actions, events, or transitions that took place in the gap between the panels" (66). In this, the comics form ensures that the relationship between Gaydos' P.I.-era Jessica and Bagley's Jewel-era Jessica is not straightforward, but rather perpetually uncertain and subjective.

This uncertainty is intentionally compounded by the fact that *Alias* offers not two, but rather at least four distinct visual representations of Jessica[91] from different moments in her life. In addition to the Bagley and Gaydos-penciled scenes already discussed, the flashback to Jessica's teenage years in *Alias* #22, features Gaydos drawing Jessica in a style that deliberately references Steve Ditko's 1960s Spider-Man artwork (Image 18); and in *Alias* #26, a sequence that takes place inside Jessica's own mind is penciled by Rick Mays in a commercial, somewhat Manga-inspired style (Image 19). There is, of course, an argument to be made that Gaydos' P.I.-era version of Jessica is the definitive or "authentic" version of the character. This version of Jessica is, after all, the one that exists in the comics' present and frames all of the other versions. In addition, the various art styles used to represent Jessica could be viewed as a historical progression that ends in Gaydos' P.I.-era version: Jessica's young adulthood is depicted in a style characteristic of the early 1960s, while her late teenage years and/or early adulthood is depicted by Bagley using the clean, smooth lines reminiscent of artists such as Neal Adams and John Byrne, who first rose to prominence in the 1970s. Gaydos' depiction of the adult, P.I.-era Jessica, meanwhile, reflects a more individualistic, "indie" sensibility (in *Alias* #28, Killgrave self-reflexively comments on Gaydos' style by calling it "Mainstream with just a touch of indy").

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[91] The series' painted covers by David Mack are yet another representation. Mack's covers often highlight Jessica's multiplicity in their imagery and through their use of multimedia collage.

Nonetheless, to the extent that Gaydos' P.I.-era version of Jessica does have more authenticity than other versions, this authenticity is partly the result of the fact that this version includes and/or exists in conversation with all of the other the depictions of Jessica. In *Alias*, the simultaneous existence of multiple versions of Jessica highlights, and reflects upon, the increased multiplicity of 21st-century superhero comics. While multiple versions of the same character have always competed for authority within the superhero comics form and genre, the 21st-century context is, as discussed at the beginning of this chapter, more multiple than ever before. Part of this multiplicity includes the increased intrusion of the past into present. In general, the 2001-2004 publication era of *Alias* witnessed an increased interest, both within the superhero comics industry and among the actual and prospective superhero comics readership, in presenting and consuming the past. To cite just a few examples: between 1997 and 2003, Marvel re-issued, for the first time in nearly a decade, a series of "Masterwork" collections reprinting the original issues of iconic series such as *Amazing Spider-Man* and *Fantastic Four*. Just a few years later, in 2006, Marvel would release DVD-roms featuring entire 500+ issue runs of several more iconic series. Several years after this, in 2009, Marvel would also re-launch their digital platform, Marvel Unlimited, making large swaths of their back catalogue more cheaply and easily available than ever before. During this time, illegal downloads of massive back catalogues also become increasingly available.

At the very least, *Alias'* inclusion of multiple versions of Jessica that are reminiscent of different historical contexts yet exist alongside and in conversation with the present, reflects an awareness that the multiplicity of superheroes occurs not only via different interpretations of comics in the present, but also across and between different interpretations of the present in conversation with different eras and contexts of production. *Alias* highlights this multiplicity in

part to stage a debate about the nature of continuity; *Alias'* multiple versions of Jessica compel reflection on the relationship between these versions, including the possibility discussed earlier that Bagley's more sexualized version of Jessica might represent Jessica's self-perception, whether honest or manipulated. However, *Alias* also deploys multiplicity to critique and expand past and present representations of female superheroes. *Alias'* foregrounding of Jessica's multiplicity offers a crucial, important attempt to overcome and/or subvert the contradictions that have long informed the stories and bodies of female superheroes. Rather than the essentializing contradiction between strength and beauty foregrounded in so many other stories starring female superheroes, *Alias* presents multiple potential forms of strength and beauty existing within the same comic series starring the same multifaceted, superpowered woman.

This transformation from duality into multiplicity more truthfully represents not only the actual experience of womanhood (or, more broadly, humanity), but also emphasizes the neglected complexity of female superheroes. Furthermore, *Alias'* insertion of Jessica into previous eras allows *Alias* to not only assert the actual and potential complexity of female superheroes in the present moment, but also to reassert the actual and potential complexity of female superheroes from the past. To put it another way, *Alias* not only presents a complex female superhero in the present, but also, through that female superhero's interactions with historical continuity, suggests that female superheroes have always been more complex than even their own stories and imagery have sometimes given them credit for.

The mere fact that the PI-era version of Jessica includes and/or is the product of so many other versions from different historical periods and contexts suggests the complexity of those contexts. Yet Jessica's interventions in specific historical moments also highlight particular instances in which the superhero genre has denied or limited the complexity of female

characters. *Alias'* insertion of Jessica into the 1960s context of Spider-Man's origin is a case in point. During this flashback, the teenage version of Jessica is shown to be even more ostracized and traumatized than the famously friendless Peter Parker. While Parker is rejected by the popular kids, Jessica is not simply rejected but also patently ignored by the nerdy Parker, on whom she has an obsessive crush. This flashback is significant in part because it implicates Parker in Jessica's marginalization—within the high school context, but also, implicitly, within the world of superheroes, inasmuch as Parker's ignorance in this flashback mirrors the later ignorance of the Avengers during and after their attack on Jessica. In addition, however, the fact the Jessica comes across as more ostracized and traumatized than Parker suggests that girls and women might even more powerfully represent the same themes of difference and persecution that made heroes such as Spider-Man so popular to begin with. This flashback thus highlights the exclusion of complex female stories from the era of the 1960s as both a moral and a creative injustice, limiting not only the complexity of female characters but also of the superhero genre as a whole.

The suggestion that a teenage girl might inhabit the themes of Spider-Man comics as well or better than a teenage boy also speaks to *Alias'* recuperative impulses. Importantly, although many iconic superheroes as well as superhero teams and institutions are directly or indirectly critiqued or otherwise disparaged in *Alias*, the comic does not depict all superheroes in a negative light. Indeed, the degree to which Jessica feels betrayed by the world of superheroes is emphasized by her initial and underlying optimism about the world of superheroics, and by her initial belief in some of the same superheroes who later abuse her. Certainly, the harsh reality of Jessica's childhood and teenage years—in which she is a friendless nerd harbouring an unrequited crush on Peter Parker, then witnesses her entire family die, then falls into a coma,

then becomes even more of an outsider after waking from said coma, and is finally adopted by a family who pities her—is greatly assuaged by her discovery of her superpowers. A flashback sequence from *Alias* #23, in which Jessica experiments with flying and accidentally stops the Scorpion from robbing a bank by landing on top of him, is the first time in this two-issue-long flashback sequence that Jessica is depicted as smiling (however subtly) (Image 20). Within this flashback, Thor, the same superhero who later does Jessica the greatest physical harm, is also depicted in a positive light; in *Alias* #23, a majestic and chivalrous version of Thor rescues Jessica from drowning following her first attempt to fly, becoming, in the process, somewhat of an inspiration. *Alias'* present context similarly depicts Captain America in a relatively positive light; at the conclusion of *Alias* #5, Jessica and Steve Rogers share a companionable laugh in a scene that also includes Rogers thanking Jessica for not giving up the tape that reveals his secret identity, telling her she is being too hard on herself, and offering to help her if she ever wants to resume being a superhero. In addition, the callous behaviour of Nick Fury is contrasted with the more sensitive behaviour of his S.H.I.E.L.D. subordinate, Clay Quartermain; Jessica is shown developing a relationship with Quartermain during her recovery from the Avengers attack, and Quartermain later assists Jessica in multiple investigations. Jessica's relationships with Scott Lang and Luke Cage also help facilitate her emotional healing. In *Alias* #25, Luke asks Jessica if she has spoken to "a doctor" about her experience with Killgrave; he quickly agrees, however, that their private conversation is more useful, since someone from outside the superhero community could not truly appreciate the nature of Jessica's experience.

Significantly, though, where Jessica does finds commiseration and understanding among other superheroes, these superheroes tend to be fellow outsiders. Quartermain and Scott are "second-tier" superheroes who have primarily appeared as supporting characters rather than stars

of their own series; while Luke Cage has starred in several solo series since the 1970s, his blackness marks him as an outsider. In addition, within the context of *Alias'* critique of superhero conventions and institutions, all three men possess a certain degree of legitimacy or authenticity due to their distance from the superhero "establishment," as represented by the oldest, and most recognizable heroes such as Captain America, Thor, Iron Man, Spider-Man, etc. On this theme of commiseration among outsiders, Jessica's relationship with Luke is particularly significant. As discussed in Chapter Two, comics starring female superheroes have not historically done a good job of representing intersectionality. *Alias*, however, through the relationship between Jessica and Luke, does make some effort to foreground points of commonality between female superheroes and superheroes of colour. In *Alias*, the white, blonde, ideally attractive Scott, who, though an outsider, is also officially employed by the Avengers, is depicted as unable to properly understand the nature of Jessica's trauma. As discussed above, Scott responds to Jessica's initial attempt to tell him about her past by jumping to the conclusion that she was raped; though Luke also asks Jessica if she was raped in *Alias* #25, he precedes the question with a point of commonality, by remembering his own encounter with Killgrave. Historically, the character of Luke Cage has much in common with the female superheroes of the 1970s. Similar to those superheroes, who were created in part to cash in on the "fad" of women's liberation, Luke Cage was created to cash in on the fad of Blaxploitation; in the aftermath of the 1970s, Cage has often been excluded and marginalized by his link to that historically specific and generically limited context (Cunningham 54). Through Luke's greater sensitivity and Jessica's ultimate rejection of Scott in favour of Luke, *Alias* suggests that a male superhero of colour is better positioned to understand Jessica's gendered trauma; this in turn suggests a link between the superhero genre's historical (and continued) marginalization of female characters and characters of colour, and the

necessity of nurturing those links in order to redress that marginalization.

The most persistent and important healing forces in Jessica's life are, however, other female superheroes. *Alias'* depiction of female companionship and community is both similar to and different from the representations of the same in the comics starring female superheroes from the 1970s, discussed in Chapter Two. Significantly, unlike the female superheroes from the 1970s, Jessica does not fight any female villains in her series. Consequently, *Alias* does not pit different types and forms of female empowerment against each other, but unites different powerful women against literally male or connotatively masculine threats. Initially, Jessica is at odds with the 1970s-created superheroes Ms. Marvel, a.k.a. Carol Danvers, and Spider-Woman, a.k.a. Jessica Drew. Danvers' issues with Jessica seem to revolve around her relationship Quartermain and her long avoidance of Danvers' calls and emails since leaving the superhero life behind; Drew, for her part, is briefly in conflict with Jessica when she mistakes her for a villain. Jessica's conflict with Danvers is overcome in part when Jessica enlists Danvers' aid in the context of the Captain America case, while Jessica's conflict with Drew is overcome for the good of Drew's young mentee, Mattie Franklin, who is being held captive by a male pimp who is using her body to create gene-altering drugs. The ability of these female superheroes to overcome their conflicts and unite against male or connotatively masculine threats situates Jessica as both a catalyst for repairing the feminist failures of the past, as well as a product of the past's real but highly imperfect feminism.

As discussed earlier, Jessica also recovers from her second coma and finally defeats Killgrave through the assistance of Jean Grey. The use of Grey is significant given the particularly loaded history of that character. In the early 1960s, Grey went by the name Marvel Girl, and was easily the weakest member of the original X-Men; much like the Invisible Girl,

Grey possessed a "strike a pose and point" powerset and was primarily involved in the narrative as a love interest or kidnap victim. Grey was transformed sometime after the X-Men franchise's 1975 relaunch into an extremely powerful character with the codename Phoenix. Although Grey's telekinetic and telepathic powers as Phoenix still fit into the "strike a pose and point" category, the destructive capabilities of these powers are greatly enhanced relative to the original version of the character; in her origin in *X-Men* #101 (1976), Phoenix uses her telekinetic abilities to rebuild her own body after she is annihilated in a solar flare, and in *Uncanny X-Men* #135 (1980) Grey easily defeats her teammates and decimates an entire planet. Unfortunately, Grey's increased power corrupts her. The aforementioned planetary decimation begins a story arc in which Grey's new powers are revealed to be the result of her possession by a cosmic force that lusts for destruction; in *Uncanny X-Men* #137 (1980), Grey's destructive rampage is finally halted when, in a brief moment of clarity, she takes her own life. This storyline cannot help but suggest the dangers of female power and/or feminism. As T. Keith Edmunds observes, Marvel has repeated this gendered narrative several times since the original rise and fall of Phoenix; similar power increases for the Scarlet Witch and the Invisible Woman presaged storylines in which these characters are ultimately unable to wield their newfound power responsibly and "cause great damage to those they love most" (Edmunds 213).

And yet, Grey's revamped codename, Phoenix, also represents a capacity for continual rebirth; since her suicide in *Uncanny X-Men* #137, Grey has returned to co-star in many hundreds of comics. Her original rebirth also represents one of the first, and most successful, attempts to redesign an existing female superhero in ways that make her more popular, more complex, and more actually and connotatively powerful; along with greatly increased powers, Grey's original rebirth also included a redesigned costume that, in contrast to the mini-skirt

costume that the character wore prior to her transformation, covers her whole body, and features a specific, character-specific symbol that became and remains popular on merchandise such as T-shirts. Grey's assistance in the rebirth and subsequent protection of Jessica highlights the feminist implications of Grey as a character, while also using those implications to situate Jessica, once again, as a catalyst for, and product of, Marvel's long though imperfect feminist history.

Alias also presents Jessica as a mentor for younger women. Before she helps save Mattie Franklin, Jessica assists a teenage girl, Rebecca Cross, who has run away from home to escape the bigotry of her small town. Jessica is hired to investigate the disappearance of Rebecca in *Alias* #11, beginning a story arc that lasts until issue #14. The connections between Jessica and Rebecca in this storyline importantly highlight and rehabilitate female fandom. Marvel's brief flirtation with 1970s feminism notwithstanding, both the superhero comics industry as well as scholars producing histories and analyses of superhero comics have historically neglected and even outright ignored the real existence and even the possibility of female fans (see Healy, Peppard, Scott). As Karen Healey describes, within both the superhero comics industry and the academic study of comics, there is a long and pervasive tendency to assume that superhero narratives "are inherently uninteresting to the female reader" (145). Rebecca's passionate fandom intervenes in this neglect. Rebecca's bedroom features posters of Elektra, the Punisher, and Daredevil[92] (Image 21). Rebecca also creates "collage books" that feature drawings and pictures of superheroes interspersed with poetry and Rebecca's thoughts (Image 22). Finally,

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[92] Partly, the choice to show Rebecca as a fan of these particular characters is a moment of self-reflexive cross-promotion, all three characters were concurrently featured in solo titles in the MAX line, and Bendis was also the writer of Daredevil's PG-13 rated (i.e. "main") ongoing series. However, these characters also represent Rebecca's attachment to those characters whom she identifies, prior to her recitation of her poem about Daredevil, as "ambiguous"—i.e., those whose crime-fighting tactics are not always accepted by the superhero "establishment," typically represented in Marvel comics by the institutionally sanctioned Avengers.

when Jessica finally finds Rebecca, she is reciting a poem about Daredevil. Rebecca's collage books and particular fandom of Daredevil directly link her with Jessica. Jessica reveals that she also made collage books as a teenage girl, and is, throughout *Alias*, connected to Daredevil on practical and emotional levels. Jessica admires Daredevil because he is responsible for the imprisonment of Killgrave; Matt Murdock also helps extricate Jessica from a brutal police interrogation in *Alias* #3; later, as shown in *Alias* #15, Jessica works for Murdock as a bodyguard. Rebecca's fandom also highlights female-connotative fan practices such as crafting and fan fiction that, as Suzanne Scott describes, have been traditionally disparaged by mainstream (re: male-dominated) fandom, and once again neglected by scholars. Finally, the links between Rebecca and Jessica suggest a link between female fans and the development of female heroes. Although both Rebecca and Jessica are primarily inspired by Daredevil, a male hero, it is obviously significant that it is Jessica, rather than Daredevil, who eventually "saves" Rebecca. Ultimately, although Rebecca and Jessica are initially connected primarily through their shared passion for a male superhero, the connection itself suggests the possibility of new role models as well as new fandoms (or, the possibility of rediscovering fandoms that always existed but have long been neglected by critics and mainstream comics).

The Rebecca storyline also mobilizes the mutant metaphor in a manner that promotes intersectionality. Rebecca is rumored to be a mutant, and it is originally suggested that this may be the reason she fled home. Rebecca's small town is presented as actively promoting anti-mutant sentiments; in *Alias* #12, the town's young church pastor is shown preaching that mutants are "an abomination brought on by man's greed." This sermon evokes the classic X-Men story "God Loves, Man Kills" (*Marvel Graphic Novel* #4 [1982]), in which a popular televangelist attempts to eradicate the mutant race; it also, of course, alludes to the social persecution of

various minority groups—in particular, LGBTQ individuals—by many contemporary religious institutions. The suggested parallels between anti-mutant prejudice and LGBTQ prejudice are made explicit when Jessica finally finds Rebecca and discovers that, unlike the client's wife in the first scene of *Alias* #1, Rebecca did not run away from her family to exercise her mutant powers, because she is not a mutant. Instead, Rebecca runs away to explore her sexual identity; Jessica discovers Rebecca living with a girlfriend in the next town over. Initially, the ways in which this storyline links real-life prejudices against lesbianism to fantastical prejudices against mutants once again evokes the mutant metaphor's problematic tendency to equate real and fantastical prejudice, and/or replace real prejudice with fantastical prejudice. The proposition that being gay is the same as being a mutant is directly suggested by a former friend of Rebecca's, who tells Jessica, "being a mutant is like being gay or Jewish—you don't want to pretend you are if you're not, right?" (*Alias* #11).

This storyline also takes steps, however, to subvert the mutant metaphor's tendency to equate real and fantastical prejudice. It does this first and foremost by foregrounding the complex nature of Rebecca's investment in the idea of being a mutant. In this storyline, Rebecca's investment in the mutant condition is treated as both positive and negative. On the one hand, Rebecca's identification with mutants and other mutant superheroes encourages her well-intentioned rebellion against the real bigotry of her small town. Certainly, Rebecca's desire to run away is presented sympathetically. Readers are shown what Rebecca is reacting to, in the form the church's open persecution of difference and her less-than-ideal family life; Rebecca is also rendered sympathetic in the ways she is linked to Jessica. On the other hand, the method of Rebecca's rebellion is also shown to have tremendous consequences. Rebecca's decision to run away from home results in her mother and aunt blaming her father for her disappearance, which

in turn leads to the aunt's retributive murder of Rebecca's father. In the end, Rebecca's decision to run away and her related decision to misrepresent herself as a mutant are presented as sympathetic but childish—a literal adolescent fantasy that is ultimately destructive as well as liberating. This storyline thus highlights the limits of the mutant metaphor as a tool for confronting real world prejudice. Although both *Alias* and X-Men comics are obviously set in a fantastical world, in the world of X-Men comics, it is usually acceptable and even commendable for teenagers to run away from home and become superheroes; in the world of *Alias*, however, Rebecca must return to her family for the simple, practical reason that she is a minor, who lacks the legal ability and emotional maturity to start a new life in a new town.

The conclusion of the Rebecca storyline maintains the multiplicity—or ambiguity—of the mutant metaphor as a potential force for good and/or ill. The final scene between Jessica and Rebecca foregrounds both the limits and the possibility of fantasy and creativity as ways of managing trauma. Seated with Rebecca inside a church steeple, Jessica tells Rebecca that she is a "really talented girl," and suggests that she continue to channel her anger and hurt into creative outlets; there is nothing better, Jessica claims, than a "fucked up childhood" for being a writer. Yet this scene also suggests the superhero genre's limitations in terms of its ability to depict the ongoing messiness of a more realistic world. When Rebecca asks Jessica, "Why is the world like this?" Jessica replies, "Well, it just is. But when I leave here, all of this will kind of disappear." This ambiguous conclusion might be read as somewhat of a cop-out, acknowledging the traditional limits of the mutant metaphor, and of the superhero genre more generally, while also revealing an unwillingness or inability to push those limits beyond a certain point; Rebecca's world of complex, messy problems only has to disappear because Jessica's comic is, at the end of the day, a superhero comic, rather than a domestic drama. However, this scene's ambiguity

can also be read as subverting certain tropes. Firstly, the ambiguity of this conclusion is an important counterpoint to the superhero genre's often overly polarized conflicts. In addition, Jessica's ambiguous heroism in this scene is an important counterpoint to the aspirational, but ultimately highly limiting, perfection of female and/or (supposedly) feminist characters such as the original Ms. Marvel; Jessica's ambiguity is an important aspect of her complexity, which is in turn an important aspect of her feminism.

The importance, from a feminist standpoint, of Jessica's ambiguity is perhaps most powerfully revealed in its decline following the cancellation of *Alias*. Following the cancellation of *Alias*, Jessica is absorbed into the main, PG-13-rated Marvel universe, appearing first as a starring character in the ongoing series *The Pulse*, which ran for 14 issues between 2004 and 2006. Written by Bendis and originally penciled by Bagley, *The Pulse* initially attempts to maintain Jessica's status as an insider/outsider who is able to critique the superhero genre from within. *The Pulse* is a "backstage" comic, focusing on the staff of a weekly section in the Daily Bugle newspaper dedicated to the personal and professional activities of the superhero community. The opening scenes of *The Pulse* #1 echo both the original *Ms. Marvel* series and act as a self-reflexive reference to the evolving complexity or "maturity" of the superhero genre in the wake of boundary-pushing series such as *Alias*. In this issue, Jessica is hired by J. Jonah Jameson as an on-call investigator for *The Pulse*; Jameson wants Jessica to use her knowledge and connections within the superhero community to help *The Pulse* offer a more nuanced perspective on superheroes than what is generally offered by his notoriously polarized, anti-superhero, and increasingly unpopular newspaper.

Relative to *Alias*, *The Pulse* suffers for its less innovative visual presentation of Jessica. In *The Pulse*, Bagley's style often attempts to reference Gaydos' style; for instance, in direct

contrast to his often-objectifying depictions of Jessica's body in the flashback sequences in *Alias*, in *The Pulse*, Bagley frequently employs the tight views of Jessica's face that are a hallmark of Gaydos' style in *Alias* (Image 23). And yet, Bagley's style in *The Pulse* still feminizes and sexualizes Jessica far more than Gaydos' style in *Alias*; in *The Pulse*, Bagley often depicts Jessica dressed in heels, long skirts, and dresses, clothing choices that seem thoroughly at odds with the characters' previous representation. Later series artists, including Brent Anderson and Michael Lark, put Jessica back in the baggy clothes and athletic shoes that became her signature look in *Alias*; Gaydos also returns to pencil *The Pulse's* final four issues. However, these stylistic variations ultimately affect the quality of the series as a whole. Whereas the multiple styles in *Alias* deliberately foreground historical and gendered processes of interpretation, the multiple styles at play in *The Pulse* suggest an uncertain vision of Jessica's meaning as a character.

The Pulse's most urgent feminist failure, however, is located in the ways in handles Jessica's pregnancy. Jessica is first revealed to be pregnant with Luke's baby in the closing scene of the final issue of *Alias* (*Alias* #28). This revelation is problematic inasmuch as it presents motherhood as the end-point of Jessica's journey, and/or as the ultimate solution to her gendered trauma. *The Pulse* allows for a potential subversion of this reading, demonstrating as it does that pregnancy and motherhood are not the actual end of Jessica's journey, but merely the beginning of new journeys. Unfortunately, however, *The Pulse* often depicts these new journeys through gendered clichés that essentialize Jessica's femininity and/or femaleness. Virtually every pregnancy cliché is on display in *The Pulse*: Jessica's "pregnancy hormones" render her comically hyperemotional (*The Pulse* #3, Image 24); she reacts hysterically when her baby is threatened (*The Pulse* #7, Image 25); and she is subject to repeated fainting spells (*The Pulse* #8, Image 26). These clichés neglect the specificity of Jessica's character as well as the foundational

gender deviance of her super-strong body, subsuming both within a normative femininity/femaleness connoted most prominently by a loss and/or lack of physical and emotional control. In *The Pulse*, Jessica nearly becomes consumed by the dramatic spectacle of her pregnancy; in almost every issue of the series (and sometimes multiple times in the same issue), the status of the Jessica's baby is threatened for the sake of drama, as representative examples from *The Pulse* #7 and #8 demonstrate (Image 27). Although it is not, of course, unreasonable to assume that pregnancy might significantly alter Jessica's life, the use of pregnancy clichés and the extent to which the fact of Jessica's pregnancy overwhelms all other potential motivations cannot help but simplify her as a character.

Following the cancellation of The Pulse, Jessica is increasingly confined to traditionally gendered roles, being presented primarily in the context of motherhood and as a supporting player in stories starring Luke, who becomes her husband in *New Avengers Annual* #1 (2006). As a recurring character in *The New Avengers* Volume 1 (2005-2010) and Volume 2 (2010-2012), once again written by Bendis and penciled by various artists, Jessica sometimes functions as a voice of critique; in both series, she is often vocally frustrated with aspects of the superhero establishment and frequently at odds with Luke over parenting responsibilities. In *New Avengers* #38 (2008), for instance, Jessica defends her decision to sign the controversial "Superhuman Registration Act" against Luke's wishes by pointing out the unfairness of the fact that, relative to Luke, her options for political resistance are limited by the obligations of motherhood. However, because the stories in both *New Avengers* series are primarily action-based rather than domestic or based in the "civilian" world, Jessica's perspective is inevitably sidelined. Though *New Avengers* Volume 2 does place Jessica in a more central role by having her resume active duty as a superhero, this change is temporary, and does not necessarily represent a step forward for the

character. Jessica's new attempt to become a superhero does not come with a new costume, but rather sees her dressed very generically in tight jeans and a very tight T-shirt, an outfit that is extremely sexualized by the arc's main penciler, Mike Deodato (Image 28). In addition, Jessica adopts a new name that once again signals her subservience to Luke; at Luke's suggestion, Jessica agrees to call herself Power Woman, a name that is inspired by Luke's original superhero moniker, Power Man. As of this writing, Jessica is once more retired from active duty as a superhero, while Luke stars in the ongoing series *Mighty Avengers* (Volume 2, 2014-present), while also frequently appearing in other Avengers franchise titles.

Admittedly, the post-*The Pulse* depiction of Jessica as a responsible mother who is still at least peripherally involved with superheroics can be read as a rebuke of certain gendered tropes. As both Christopher Paul Wagenheim and Jeffrey R. Brown observe, superhero comics commonly celebrate fatherhood and/or male mentorship while vilifying or simply erasing motherhood. Furthermore, the conflicts between gendered responsibilities that Jessica is sometimes used to illustrate can present a different perspective on the meaning of heroism. As Brown argues, "It is Jessica's steadfast refusal to put her responsibilities as a mother in the background that marks her as a strong character rather than a selfish one" (83 "Supermoms"). And yet, it is also impossible to ignore the fact that Jessica's non-starring role as a mother and as the wife of an active male superhero consistently sidelines her in relation to, and in favour of, her husband. Ultimately, similar to how Anita McDaniel describes the change in the presentation of the X-Man Storm following her 2006 marriage to the Black Panther, following the conclusion of *Alias*, Jessica experiences "a shift from being known as someone who maintained a *lead* character position in *her* book toward being known as a *supporting* character in her *husband's* book (127).

Though *Alias* suggests the benefits of 21ˢᵗ-century superhero comics' intensified multiplicity for telling stories about the types of subjects who are typically marginalized in superhero comics, Jessica's fate following the cancellation of *Alias* suggests the potential drawbacks of that same multiplicity. The increased multiplicity of 21ˢᵗ-century superhero comics allows for newly aggressive forms of critique while also providing more ways and modes of walking back such critiques, and re-incorporating would-be revolutionary characters and stories into more traditional veins. To put it another way: the current diffusion of meaning, and with it, authority and/or authenticity, across so many different titles and publishing contexts, creates many new creative opportunities, but at the same time, it ensures that different interpretations of the same characters are always competing with one another, and potentially undercutting one another. Despite the recent and continued weakening of the continuity model, tradition and convention, as well as simple things like visibility and popularity, still have tremendous sway. Even though *Alias* was a critically acclaimed series, *New Avengers* was a best-selling one; Jessica's appearances in titles that are not *Alias* also greatly outnumber her appearances in *Alias*. Ultimately, within its comparatively confined and creatively adventurous publishing context, *Alias* can deploy multiplicity in ways that promote critique and enhance Jessica's complexity, and thus, her feminist potential. Yet the further multiplication of Jessica into more traditional publishing contexts, with their longstanding history of sexism, also risks that potential. Interestingly, these issues are evoked in the final issues of *Alias*. In *Alias* #27, Jessica confronts a self-aware version of Killgrave who "breaks the fourth wall" to address the style of the comic. Within the context of a misogynistic spiel in which he repeatedly calls Jessica a "whore" and accuses her of prostituting herself for "the readers," Killgrave also tells Jessica not to "contradict the continuity," warning that "something bad" will happen to her if she does so (Image 29). In

Alias #28, Jessica's final victory over Killgrave resists this warning. Yet Jessica's subsequent diminishment within the main, PG-13-rated Marvel universe unfortunately confirms it.

In the end, though, as much as Jessica's incorporation into the main Marvel comics universe has hurt her, her most recent multiplication may yet save her. Following the critical and commercial success of the Marvel and Netflix-produced television series *Jessica Jones* (2015) (in which Jessica was, for the first time, under the direction of a woman in the form of showrunner Melissa Rosenberg), Marvel has hinted at a new ongoing comic starring the character ("ECCC"). How and whether this new ongoing series will address, critique, or repair the damage that has been done to Jessica's character in the years since the conclusion of *Alias* is anyone's guess; certainly, however, if it chooses to use Jessica to once again critique gendered tropes, it will have a lot of material from Jessica's own recent history to work with.

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CONCLUSION

A 2011 issue of *Cinema Journal* brings together some of the most influential names in North

American Comics Studies to discuss the current state of the field. In his Introduction to the issue,

Bart Beaty observes that Comics Studies has grown tremendously over the past twenty years, a

growth that has accelerated in the past decade with the creation of several new peer-reviewed

journals dedicated to comics,[93] as well as the increasing presence of comics on university

syllabi[94] and at prestigious academic conferences.[95] Beaty also argues, however, that comics still

have a long way to go before they achieve the level of academic legitimacy achieved by other

mediums, such as literature and film. As Beaty describes, "there are no signs on the horizon that

departments of Comics Studies are soon to be created, and tenure-track jobs for comics

specialists are extremely scarce" (107). Beaty claims that "the gains made by [comics]

scholars… remain tentative" in large part because Comics Studies continues to lack a distinct

critical apparatus; within Comics Studies, scholars are still experimenting with terminology and

investigating the basic history of the medium and its various genres. In his essay in the same

journal, Greg M. Smith agrees that until we "recognize that comics are a distinctive form of

cultural expression in their own right" (112), they will continue to be treated and viewed as a

subset of other fields, such as Film Studies, Literature, and Art History. Within a roundtable

discussion, Scott Bukatman similarly extols the "bold energy" ("Surveying" 142) of comics,

while bemoaning the lack of a "poetics" of comics ("Surveying" 141) that might properly

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[93] Among the recent additions: *The International Journal of Comic Art* was founded in 1999; *ImageText* in 2004; and the *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* in 2009 (Ndalianis 116).

[94] Beaty claims that in 2011, more than one hundred courses centered on comics were offered at North American postsecondary institutions (107).

[95] The annual conference of the Society of Cinema and Media Studies has offered panels on comics since 2005; in 2010, the annual conference of the Modern Language Association voted to create a comics research area (Beaty 107).

describe or capture that energy, and in doing so, make a case for how and why studying and understanding the specific representational properties of comics might enrich other mediums and fields of study. Beaty agrees that Comics Studies' failure to develop what he calls a "cogent critical apparatus" means that Comics Studies has failed to demonstrate both its own value as a distinct field of study and the value that treating it as such might offer to other fields (108).

No single project could, on its own, establish such a critical apparatus. This dissertation has, however, attempted to develop and practice a mode of analysis that meets the specific challenges of the medium and genre being analyzed. Throughout, this project has emphasized the ways in which the superhero genre extends outwards from the comics form. The secret or multiple identity convention, for instance, is intimately bound up and in some sense dependent on what Michael A. Chaney describes as comics' representation of "multiple yet simultaneous timescapes and competing yet coincident ways of knowing, being, and seeing" (5); in films, representing the simultaneous difference and continuity between Clark Kent and Superman has always required more suspension of disbelief than it has in the comics, wherein such simultaneity is embedded in the form. The ways in which this project has analyzed superhero comics as a body genre similarly extend outwards from the comics form. As discussed throughout this project, comics' ability to function as "a metaphor for the subjectivity of perception" (Wolk 21) enables the exaggeration, metamorphosis, and juxtaposition of superpowered bodies to various politically progressive and regressive ends. The comics form's aforementioned multiplicity also highlights and nurtures the superhero's status as a particularly modern character, whose power is located not only or even primarily in physical strength but rather in that multiplicity—in his or her ability to transform and adapt to everything from the changing shape of the modern city to the mainstreaming of Civil Rights and feminism.

Although this project has focused on a specific genre, it is a genre that has indelibly influenced the development of North American comics. Just as the comics form has shaped the superhero, the superhero has helped shape the comics form, particularly in its North American context. Since the superhero genre's late-1950s resurgence, it has dominated American comics; today, Marvel and DC, the so-called "big two" of superhero comics publishing, control as much as 70% of the North American comics market. The superhero genre's dominance has meant that, for better or worse, virtually all American comics have been fated to respond to it—to negotiate a place in relation, or in opposition to, its styles, themes, and typical (or perceived) audience. Many critics and creators have lamented this state of affairs. Randy Duncan and Matthew J. Smith typify this lamentation in the Introduction to their textbook-style history of American comics. Write Duncan and Smith: "Superman assured the financial success of the new industry. Unfortunately, he also assured that that [sic] the comic book medium would be forever (well, at least so far) associated with adolescent power fantasies of muscular men in tights" (32). As Jacob Brogdan observes, the supposed adolescent and thus immature, simple, or "non-serious" nature of the superhero genre has long haunted many advocates of Comics Studies as well as comics creators, to the point where, "Any progress that comics make toward critical acceptance is cast as a turn away from the superhero, a movement that is seemingly never complete and that informs the reception of each new graphic narrative" (14-5). Brogdan argues that it is no coincidence that one of the most critically lauded American comics of the 21st century, Chris Ware's *Jimmy Corrigan, the Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000), participates in staging this rejection of the superhero. According to Brogdan, the proposition that superheroes are "the forefathers of all new comics texts… clearly troubles Ware"; Ware confronts this trouble by subjecting the superhero to "symbolic murders or spectacles of debasement" that succeed in "rendering ambivalent his

work's relationship with the putative influence of the superhero" (Brogdan 14).

Jimmy Corrigan also, however, engages with many themes that are common and even emblematic of the superhero genre, such as the multiplicity of modern identity and the burdens of modern masculinity. Some of *Jimmy Corrigan*'s imagery also displays a deep knowledge of the superhero genre. For instance, a scene depicting the title character looking out his office window at a red-caped superhero hovering between towering skyscrapers evokes some of the earliest and most iconic images of Superman. This scene presages one of the "symbolic murders" mentioned by Brogdan; several scenes later, a news report suggests that the red-caped figure may have been a former superhero actor in the process of committing suicide. There is, however, another way to read this sequence of images and events. Though this sequence rejects the superhero as an uncomplicated image of freedom or escape, it also emphasizes the superhero's complexity by highlighting the dark undercurrents that have always been present in the superhero fantasy. As discussed in the Introduction, images of Superman within the urban landscape evoke both freedom and stasis, depicting Superman as both better than a skyscraper but also like a skyscraper; Ware's referential imagery evokes the fact that Superman has always been able to survive and overcome modern urban existence only by becoming at least somewhat inhuman. Similar to Charles Hatfield's description of the use of superhero imagery in an earlier Ware story, "I Guess," originally published in the anthology *Raw* in 1991, *Jimmy Corrigan* can be read as both rejecting superheroes and reinvigorating them, "inviting the reader to reconsider the genre's psychological appeal" (Hatfield 37).

A significant and influential branch of Comics Studies has attempted to draw clear and absolute distinctions between the superhero genre and the work of so-called "indie" creators such as Ware by encouraging use of the term "graphic novel" to describe non-superhero, non-

humorous comics. Catherine Labio argues that there are tremendous consequences and dangers to academia rejecting comics in favour of graphic novels:

> [T]he eagerness with which the phrase "graphic novel" has been adopted in academic writing points to a stubborn refusal to accept popular works on their own terms. "Comics" reminds us of this vital dimension. "Graphic novel" sanitizes comics; strengthens the distinction between high and low, major and minor; and reinforces the ongoing ghettoization of works deemed unworthy of critical attention, either because of their inherent nature (as in the case of works of humor) or because of their intended audience (lower, less-literate classes; children; and so on). Indeed, much would be lost if scholars were to jettison the comparative study of the complex sociolinguistic and cultural codes associated with comics in favor of a monocultural, one-note "graphic novel" in a sad search for respectability, relevance, and larger classes. (126)

Henry Jenkins argues that one way to combat the ascendance of the graphic novel at the expense of the comic may be a more rigorous consideration of "the degree to which comics do indeed represent a medium which has been dominated by a single genre" (17), namely, the superhero genre. Jenkins acknowledges that it would be reductive to read all American comics through the lens of superhero comics, yet also suggests that we cannot build a true or accurate picture of the history or formal properties of American comics without "examin[ing] the implications of the superhero's dominance" (17). Although it is obviously important emphasize comics' ability to do

more than document the action-based stories of men and women in capes and brightly coloured

tights, even the brief address of Ware's work above suggests some of what might be lost by

failing to acknowledge the superhero genre's historical significance, complexity, and inescapable

influence on the wider world of American comics.

Careful attention to the themes and forms of American comics most dominant genre can

even benefit those comics that do not directly address or engage with superheroes. For instance,

this project's investigation of how the comic book form contributes to superheroes' status as

graphic metaphors for various bodily anxieties and fantasies has tremendous relevance to the

increasingly prominent genre of autobiographical comics. Both autobiographical comics and

superhero comics powerfully exploit cartooning as a metaphor for the subjectivity of perception

and capitalize on comics' multiplicity to ruminate on the nature of modern identity and reality.

As Chaney describes, autobiographical comics frequently use "stylized, exaggerated

illustrations" to express "skepticism for the possibility of objective truth" related to everything

from political history to personal identity (7). Hatfield similarly argues that "the serial and iconic

capabilities of the cartoon self both express and complicate self-reference in autobiographical

graphic novels" (7). On a basic level, both an autobiographical comic such as Alison Bechdel's

Fun Home (2006) and a superhero comic such as Rob Liefeld's *X-Force* (1991-1992) use highly

subjective "stylized, exaggerated illustrations" to interrogate and reenvision deeply held cultural

beliefs; although this project has highlighted many instances in which superhero comics

reenvision such beliefs in ways that ultimately preserve and reinforce them, both Bechdel's *Fun*

Home and Liefeld's *X-Force* do emphasize comics' ability to subjectively and radically revision

the body in ways that express and metaphorize gendered anxieties and desires.

For a practical example of how analyzing superhero comics can productively enrich

analyses of autobiographical comics, we can turn to the example of a recent article on *Fun Home* by Marjorie C Allison. Allison argues that Bechdel's graphic memoir is innovative because "she places cells of varying size and shape on the same page," forcing the reader "to decide in which order to read them." Continues Allison: "This style is further complicated because the images and words become multilayered, as she uses both word bubbles and captions and both of these word elements exist inside and outside of the individual cells." Allison concludes this portion of her analysis thusly:

> There is simply no way to read or process the images and ideas in a linear manner. Bechdel forces the reader to come up with his or her own method of making it through the labyrinth of images, metaphors, and plotline. There are no longer any clear "white space" or margins dividing material into separate components. The graphic material and themes of her narrative bleed into one another to underscore the complex world in which we all live.

Allison's descriptions of Bechdel's style, and her argument as to the implications of that style, are not incorrect, but this project's form-focused analysis of superhero comics suggests that they are not as precise as they might be. All of the formal techniques that Allison describes are common within superhero comics, and are in fact extravagantly exploited in the widely disparaged work of Liefeld. If employing multiple layers and variations in panel size are always enough to "underscore the complex world in which we all live," then Comics Studies has either been gravely underestimating the artistic and critical sophistication of Liefeld, or grossly

overestimating that of Bechdel; ultimately, Allison's analysis suffers from not being attentive enough to the ways in which the same or similar formal techniques can serve different purposes within different moments and types of iteration.

This project has repeatedly demonstrated that although the comics do, as Allison describes, encourage particularly active processes of interpretation, wherein readers are "engaged in the creation of meaning and reality" (75), this type of engagement does not make comics inherently subversive or transgressive. Rather than generalizing about the nature and effects of the comics form and comics images, this project has attempted to enact Gillian Whitlock's argument, expressed in an article about Marjane Satrapi's autobiographical comic *Persepolis* (2003), that accurate and politically responsible comics scholarship "must… place readers and texts in context, and… be wary of claiming universality in mediations of comics and cartoon drawings." As Whitlock describes, "graphic art moves as a commodity in a global market across various econo-, ethno-, and ideoscapes," and "visual images are processed within vastly different communities of interpretation, and easily co-opted as propaganda" (970). Consequently, the meaning of comics and cartoon images is not universal or generalizable, but rather culturally, historically, and situationally specific. This project has attempted to foreground this reality by situating its analyses of superhero comics within the eras in which these comics were first produced and consumed. Future projects might build off this analysis to further address the question of situational specificity, comparing the operation of similar themes and formal techniques within different genres, and how these themes and formal techniques might generate different sets of meanings in one context of production and consumption versus another. This type of analysis could include an investigation of how and why the employment of exaggeration and non-linear layouts does (or does not) connote differently in the work of Bechdel versus that

of Liefeld.

Given the 21st-century prominence of the superhero blockbuster, analyzing superhero comics can also significantly contribute to Film Studies. As discussed in Chapter Four, for the past two decades, superhero comic book sales have been declining even as superheroes become more popular in other mediums, especially film. As Scott Bukatman summarizes, "The superhero film has displaced the superhero comic in the world of mass culture," to the extent that the 21st-century American public is "far more likely to be familiar with Tobey Maguire's Spider-Man than they are with Steve Ditko's, and the Fantastic Four are more likely understood as the stars of two terrible movies than as the center of one of the great comics of the 1960s" (118). Within the growing field of adaptation studies, some critics have focused on the ways in which the properties of superhero comics have informed and influenced the struggling American film industry's recent and current attempts to appeal to an increasingly universal, globalized audience. James N. Gilmore and Matthais Stork, for instance, argue that "Iron Man's technologically informed vision apparatus or Spider-Man's mutational sensory enhancement" are desirable to the American film industry to the extent that they can serve as ideal showcases for the new digital technologies that have become a main selling point of Hollywood blockbusters, both domestically and globally (12). Gilmore and Stork also observe that superheroes, who, even before the 21st-century blockbuster era, already proliferated among many different types of media (e.g. comics, action figures, animate cartoons, etc.), are ideal locations to study the increasing importance of transmedia storytelling (Gilmore and Stork 12).

As Jared Gardner observes, some fans and critics have praised the 21st-century American film industry's adoption of comic book storytelling techniques as encouraging increasingly diverse and active forms of audience participation. Gardner, however, is skeptical of these

progressive effects. According to Gardner, the 21st-century American film industry's adoption of comic book storytelling techniques—and especially superhero comic book storytelling techniques—is more often informed by a desire to control increasingly active, and thus, increasingly fickle audiences. Writes Gardner:

> In truth, the increasingly intimate reunion between comics and film has everything to do with Hollywood seeking out ways of engaging an increasingly unruly spectator without ultimately surrendering much, if anything, in the way of meaningful power. Comics are sought out in the twenty-first century by global media corporations, not because comics are understood as transgressive, but precisely because they are largely perceived as unthreatening, safe access to a different kind of storytelling that is increasingly in demand. (191)

This project's analysis of the different ways that the superhero genre has exploited its formal and narrative multiplicity to suggest transgression while upholding the status quo would be very useful for advancing this critique of the politics of comic book adaptation. In addition, analyses of the nature and significance of superheroes as uniquely marketable commodities is usually informed by the superhero's foundational intersection, as discussed in the Introduction, with the rise of modern advertising, as well as the superhero's continued and ongoing intersection, discussed throughout this project, with changes in popular representations and understandings of the body as a sign and vehicle of identity and self-expression.

　　Many superhero films have also borrowed representational techniques from the realm of

comics. Martyn Pedler describes a few recent examples of this phenomenon:

> Certain superhero films are now attempting to approximate [comics]
> visuals. Ang Lee's underappreciated art-blockbuster, *Hulk* (2003), uses
> shifting splitscreens as panels, at one point pulling back from the frame
> to reveal a whole wall of "moments" before zooming in on another—
> much as the eye might on a page. In Zack Snyder's recent adaptation [of]
> *Watchmen* (2009), the director's stylistic trademark of "exhibiting
> velocity and action by jumping between painstaking slow-motion and
> abrupt fast-forward" served to mimic the unpredictable progress of a
> comic reader's time and attention across still images. (qtd. in Ndalianis
> 115)

The most recent scholarship (see especially Wandtke, Gilmore and Stork, and Jeffries) argues that studying the influence of comics on film can importantly inform the nature and reception of popular 21st-century films in general, inasmuch as the popularity of superhero films has affected—and is continuing to influence—a wide variety of American films. Dru Jeffries' forthcoming book, for instance, argues that "*comic book film style's interest in remediating comics and its concomitant emphasis on intermedial aesthetics represents a non-classical approach to film style*…. that may well become the entrenched cinematic conventions of tomorrow" (emphasis in original).

This project's form-focused reading of the conventions and historical evolution of comic book superheroes can aid this increasingly significant field of adaptation studies for the simple

but important reason that one cannot study how or why superhero films are similar or different from comics, or how or why superheroes are so translatable and appealing, without looking closely at where they came from, and how they have evolved into the multimedia moguls they are today. In addition, this project's analysis of superhero comics conventions provides insight into how and why superheroes have survived and thrived while other once-popular genres, such as the Western, have fallen by the wayside. This project had argued that unlike Western heroes, superheroes harken not to the past, but the future; fundamentally modern, superheroes remain popular because of their modern multiplicity is as relevant in Metropolis in 1939 as in our own 21st-century world of social media, mobile internet, and augmented and virtual reality.

Above all, though, this project has hopefully used superhero comics to make us think more deeply and complexly about the body as a location of modern fantasy and cultural myths. Regarding bodies as texts enriches the superhero genre, which enriches Comics Studies, which in turn enriches analyses of the adaptation of comics into other mediums. On an even more fundamental level: as discussed in the Introduction, regarding bodies as texts also challenges one of Western culture's most pervasive and destructive ideologies—that of mind/body dualism, wherein the mind (and/or language) is viewed as the true repository of culture, while the body (and/or images) are viewed as blank or passive slates. In defiance of this ideology, this project's analysis of superhero comics emphasizes our ability to reenvision and redraw the body. Even more importantly, though, this project has showcased our historical and ongoing *desire* to reenvison and redraw the body; this desire emphatically demonstrates that the body is not a silent partner in the creation of culture, but is, instead, always an important sign, symbol, vehicle, and product of culture. Even when the body is redrawn in ways that promote old cultural values and hierarchies in new guises, our ability and desire to redraw the body shows that the body is always

mobile, and subject to endless new mutations multiplicities. And for a world that still too often denies the complexity of all of superheroes, comics, genre fiction, and bodies, there is great hope—as well as power and responsibility—in that.

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APPENDIX A
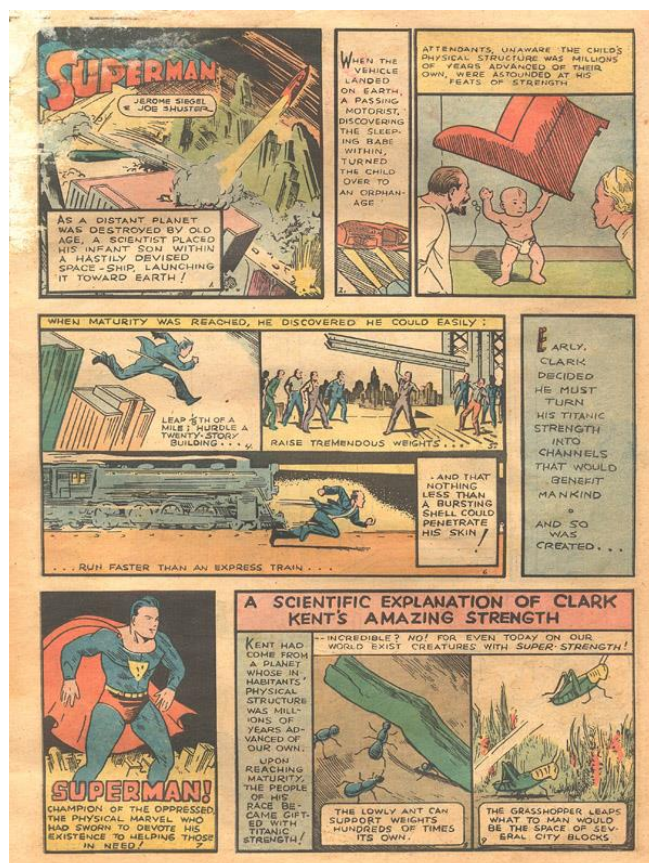
Image 1: Superman's Origin, *Action Comics* #1 (1938)
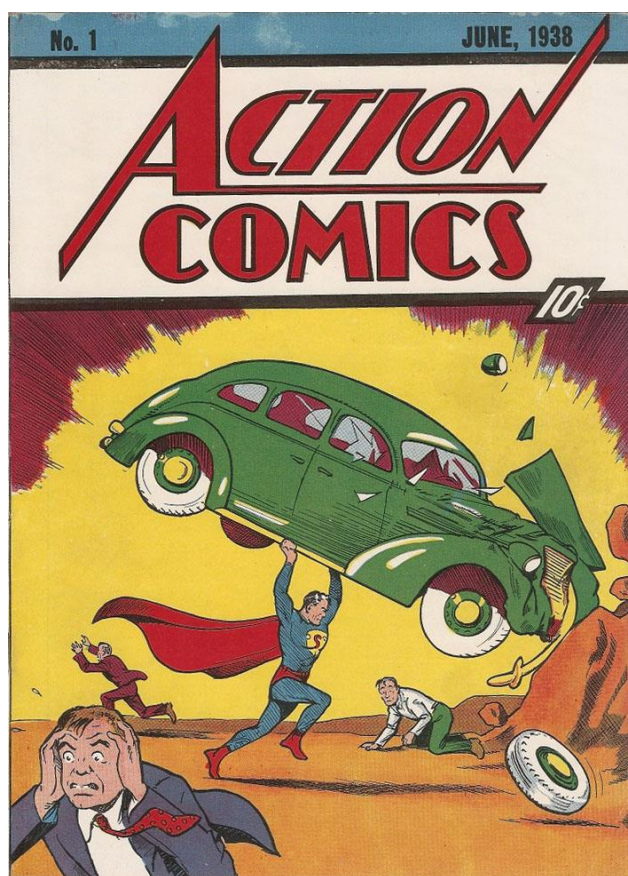
Image 2: Superman versus Modern Machines, *Action Comics* #1 (1938)

Image 3: Superman versus Modern Machines, cont'd, *Action Comics* #10 and #13 (1939)

Image 4: Superman versus Modern Machines, cont'd, *Action Comics* #15 and #17 (1939)

Image 5: Superman versus Modern Machines, cont'd, *Action Comics* #21 and #22 (1940)
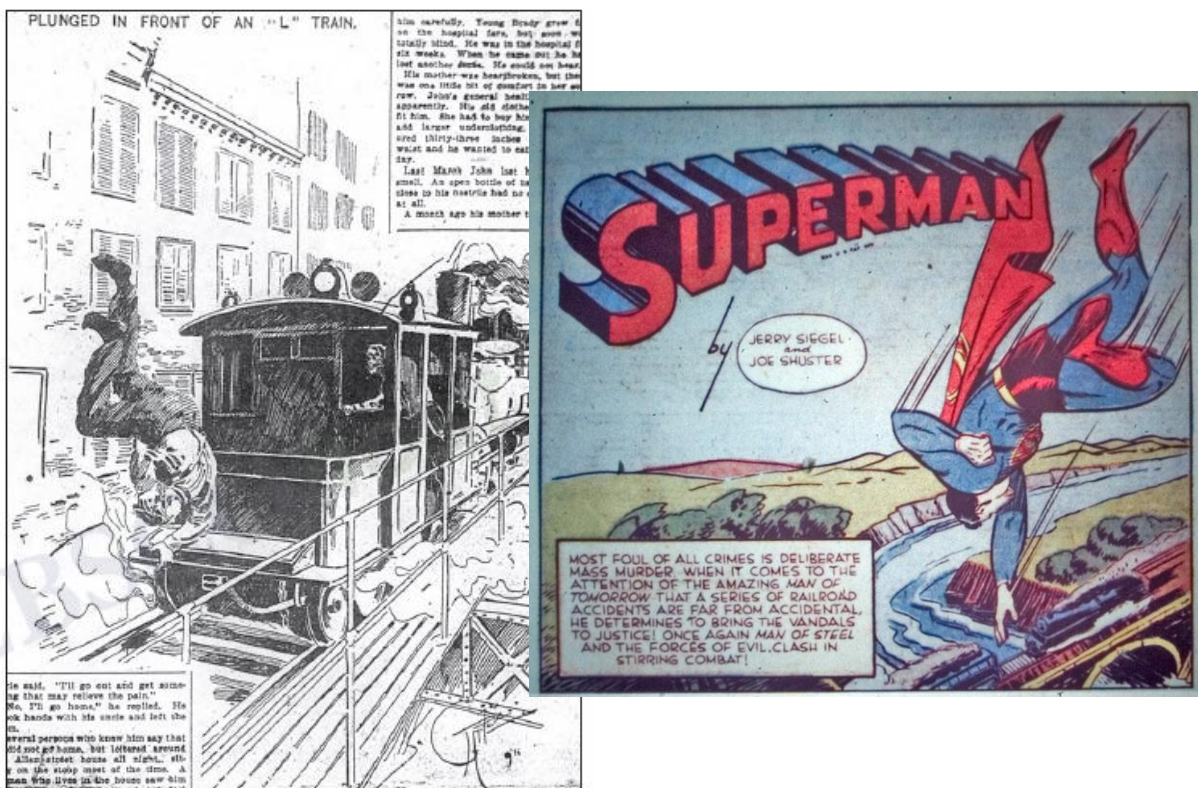
Fig. 3.30 "Plunged in Front of an 'L' Train." (*New York World*, May 18, 1896)

Image 6: Turn-of-the-century man versus the Golden Age superman, *World's Finest Comics* #3 (1941)

Fig. 3.28 "Perilous Night Work on Sky Scraper." (*New York World*, November 29, 1896)
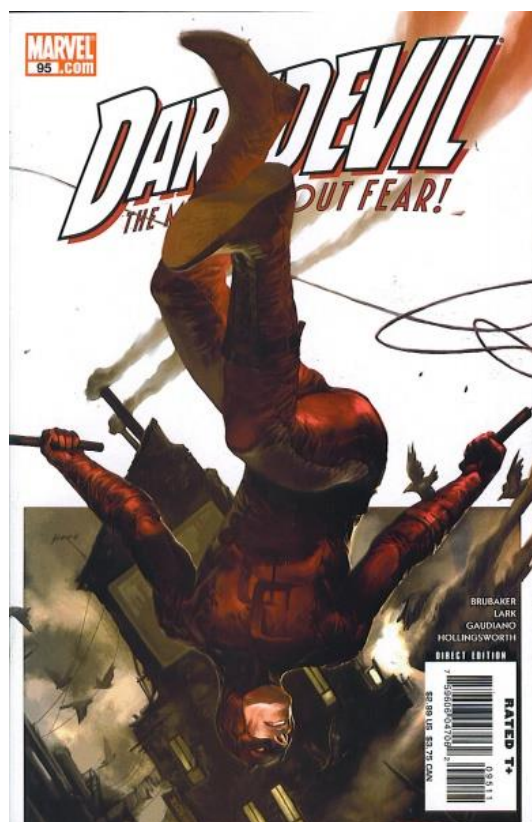
Image 7: Turn-of-the-century man versus the contemporary superman, *Daredevil* Volume 2 #95 (2007))

Image 8: Batman's origin story, *Detective Comics* #33 (1939)

Image 9: Superman navigates the modern city, *Action Comics* #1 (1938)

Image 10: Superman navigates the modern city, cont'd, *Superman* #10 (1941)
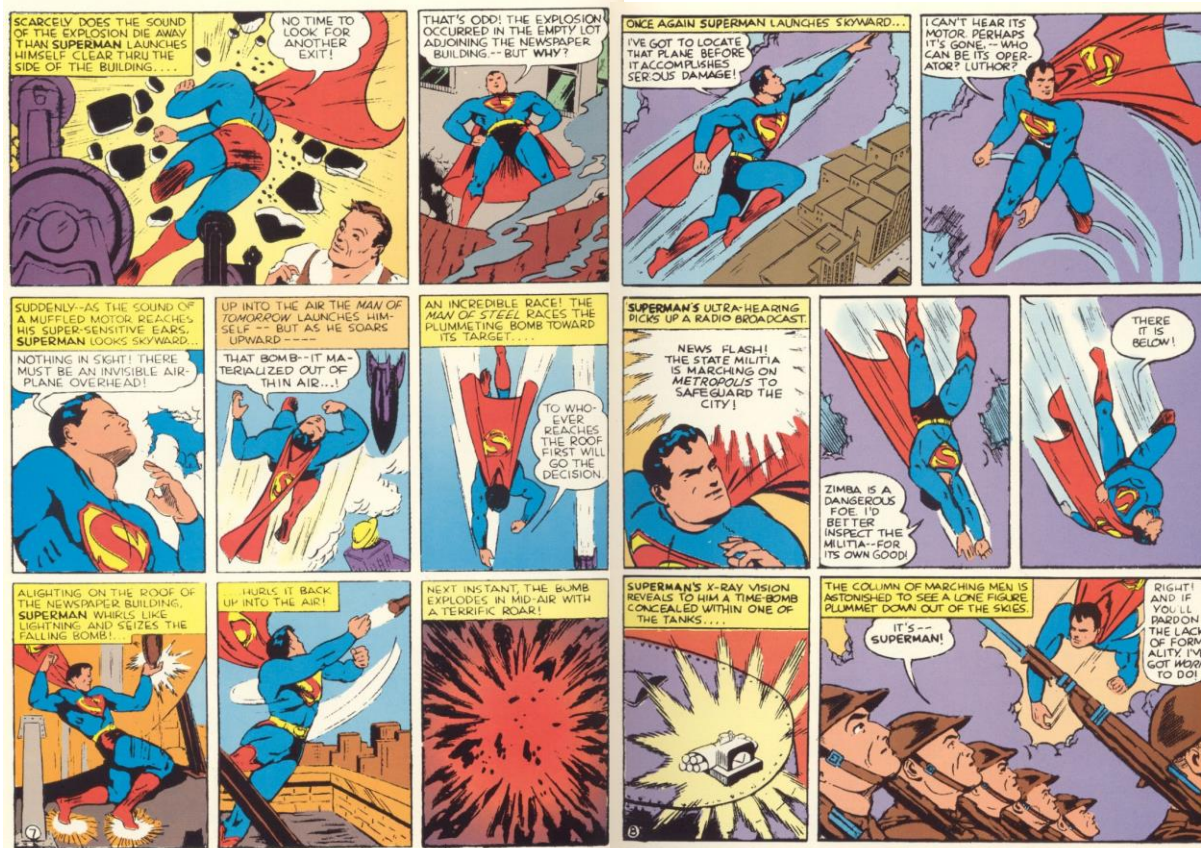
Image 11: Superman navigates the city, *Superman* #11 (1941)
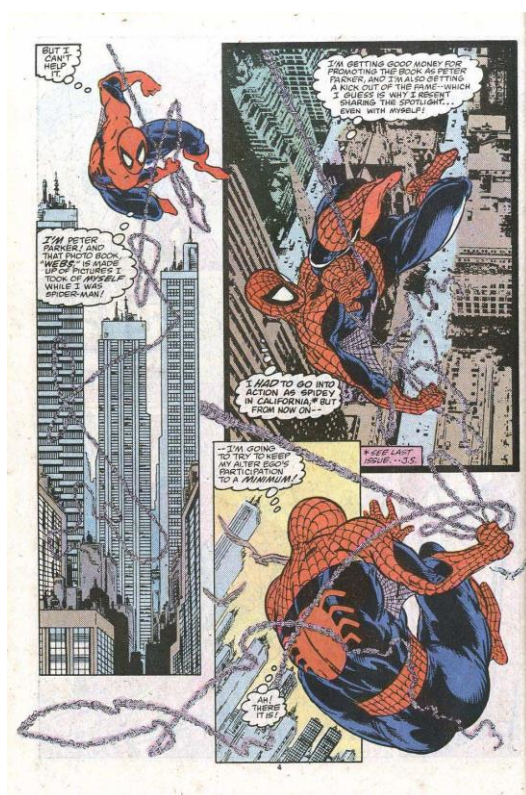
Image 12: Spider-Man weaves through the urban grid, *Amazing Spider-Man* #306 (1988)

APPENDIX B

Image 1: Monsters fighting monsters, *Fantastic Four* #1 (1961)

Image 2: Spider Man as "freak," "public menace," *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (1962) and *Amazing Spider-Man* #1 (1963)

Image 3: The Thing in disguise, *Fantastic Four* #12 (1963); original poster and still from *The Invisible Man* (1933)

Image 4: The Hulk/Banner panics himself small, *The Incredible Hulk* #6 (1962)

Image 5: Why J. Jonah Jameson hates Spider-Man, *Amazing Spider-Man* #1 (1963)

Image 6: Spider Man's spider-like body, (clockwise, from top left) *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (1962), *Amazing Spider-Man* #3
#4, #5 (1963), #8, #9 (1964)

Image 7: A painful birth (from top), *The Incredible Hulk* #2, #4 (1962)
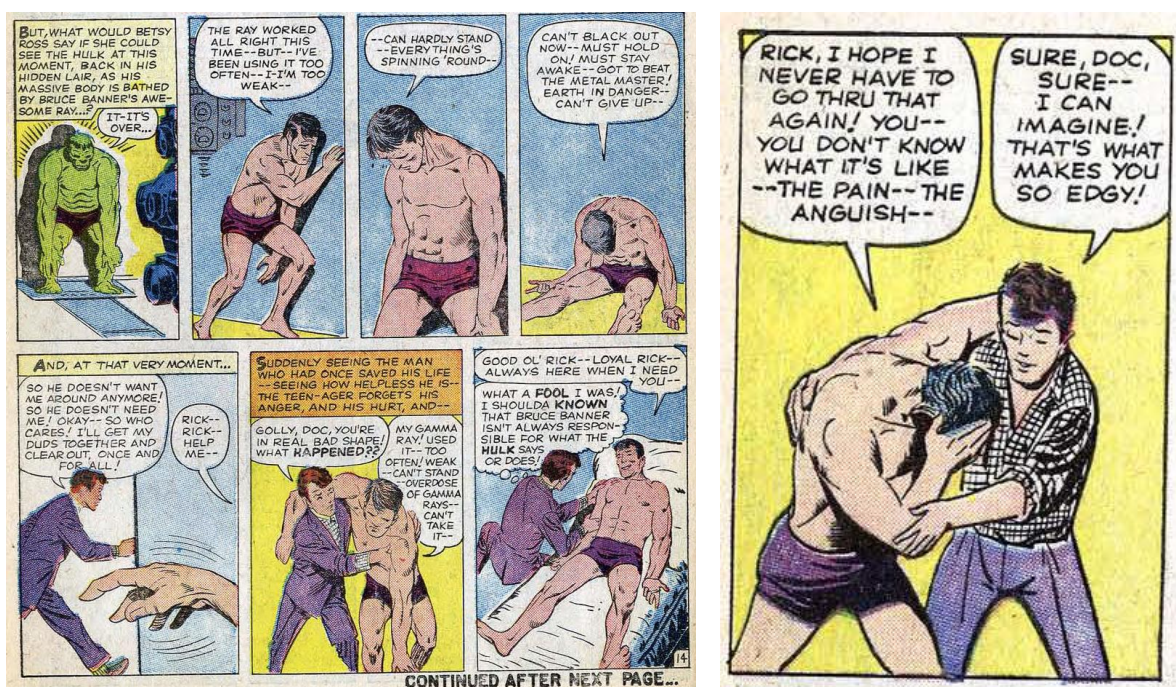
Image 8: Post-organism quietude or postpartum depression?, *The Incredible Hulk* #6 (1963)

Image 9: The Hulk fights violence with violence, *The Incredible Hulk* #1 (1962)

Image 10: Change-related cliffhangers (from top), *Tales to Astonish* #62 (1964), #72 (1965), #80 (1966)

Image 11: An anguished transformation, *Fantastic Four* #4 (1962)
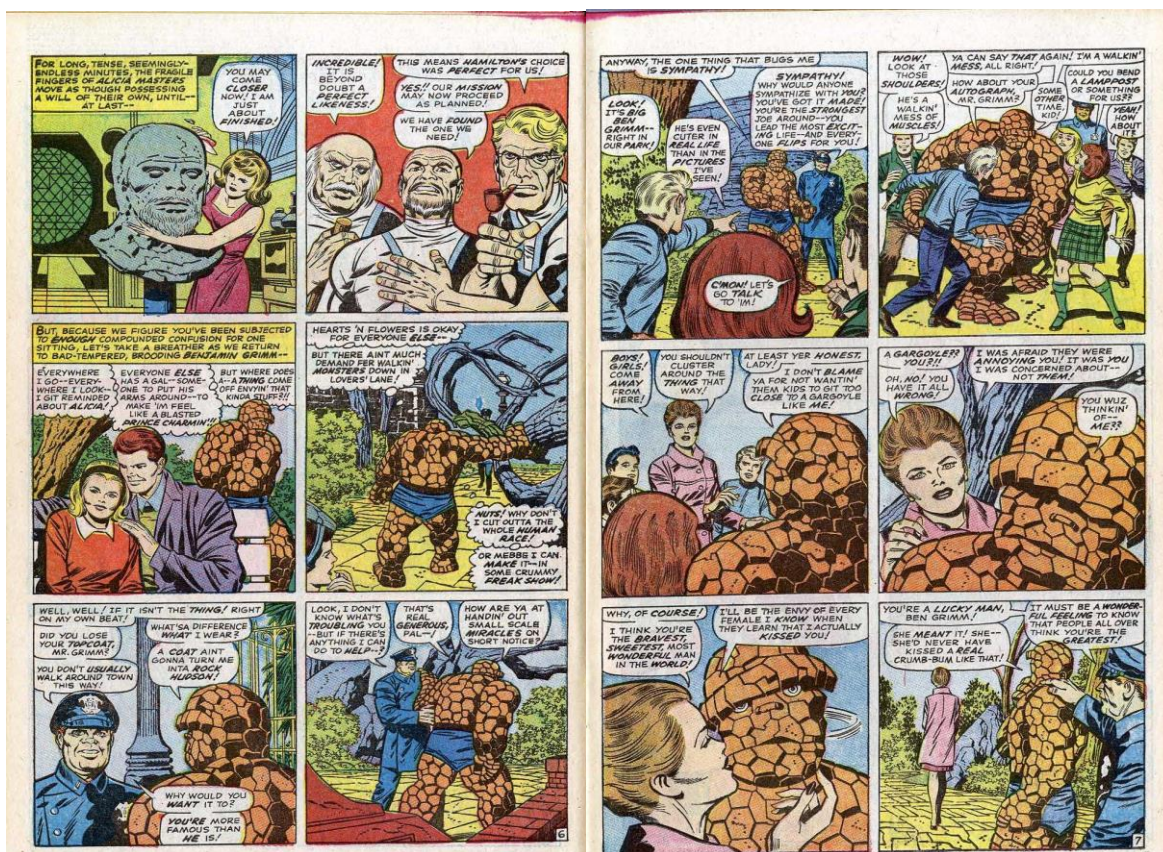
Image 12: The Thing's body as public spectacle, *Fantastic Four* #66 (1967)

Image 13: The Thing is body shamed, *Fantastic Four* #1 (1961)
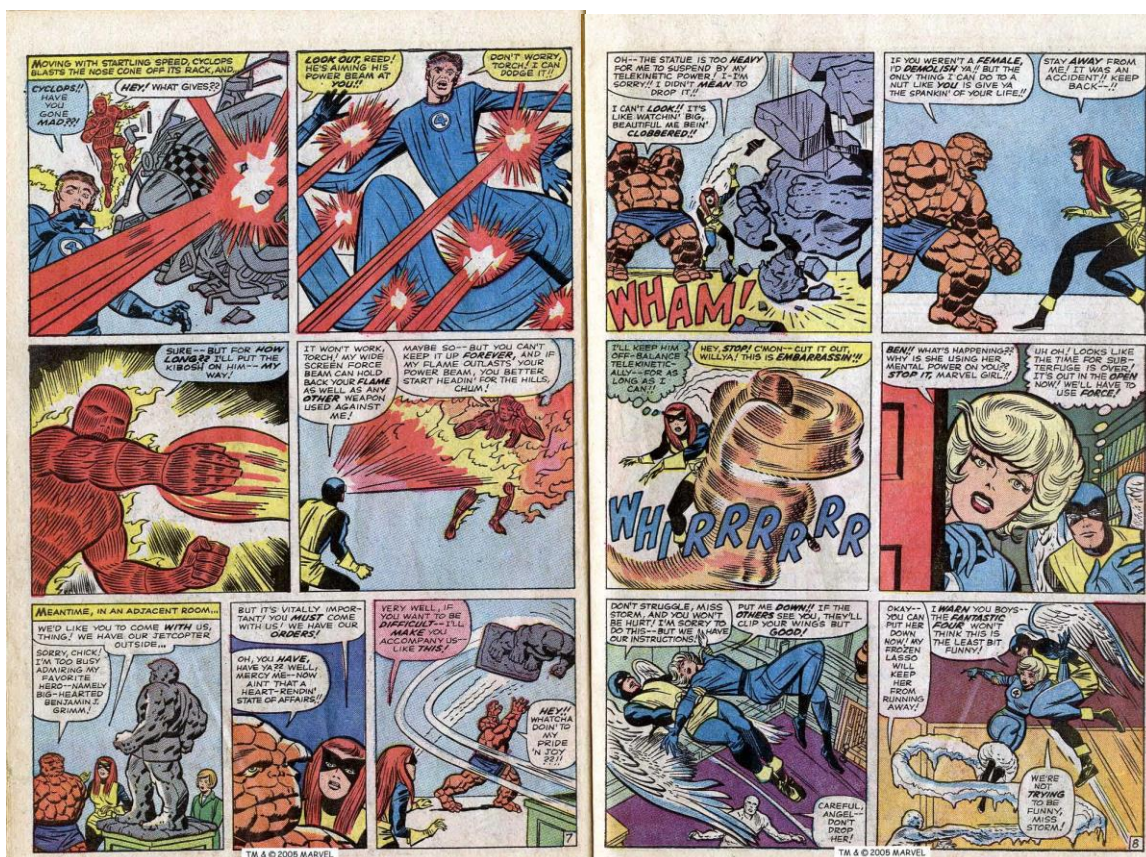
Image 14: Intercorporeality between the X-Men and the Fantastic Four, *Fantastic Four* #28 (1964)
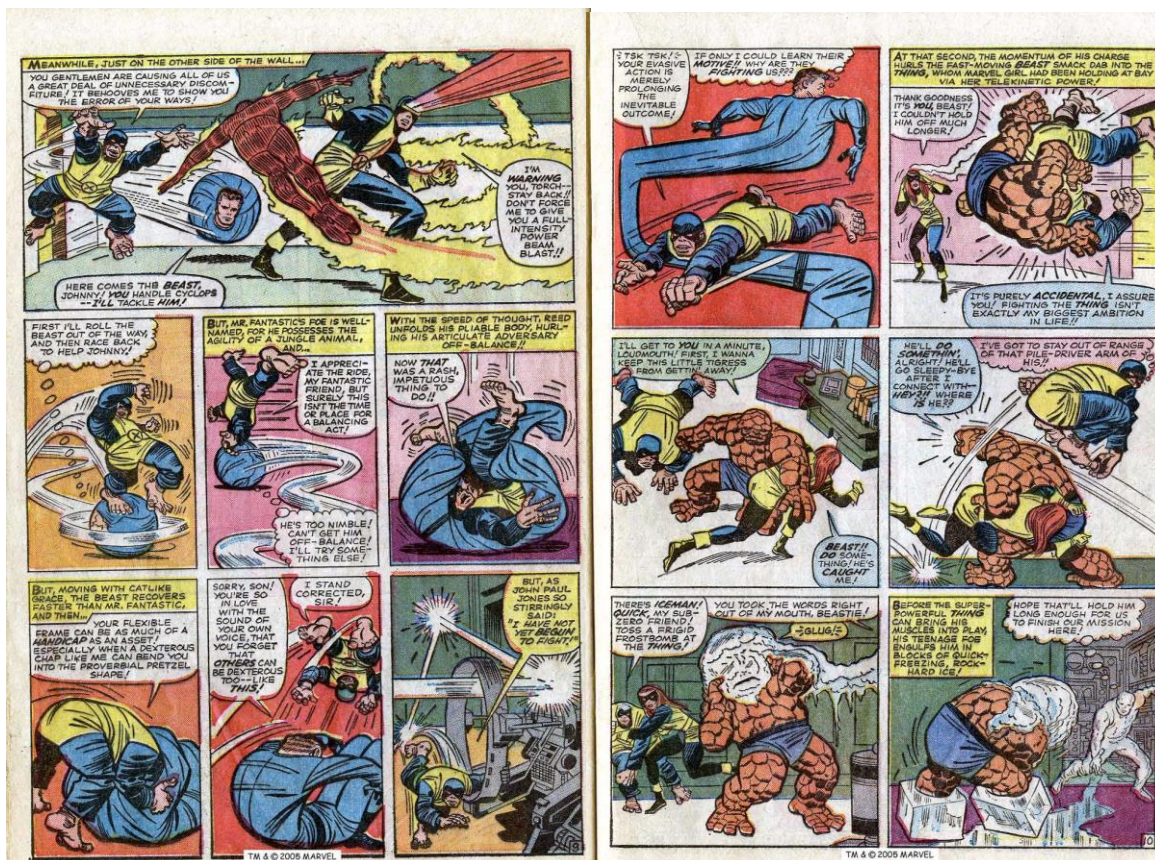
Image 15: Intercorporeality between the X-Men and the Fantastic Four cont'd, *Fantastic Four* #28 (1964)

Image 16: Mr. Fantastic tries to pull himself together (clockwise, from top left), *Fantastic Four Annual #2, Fantastic Four* #31, #32 (1964), #49 (1966)

Image 17: Mr. Fantastic loses integrity (from left), *Fantastic Four* #64, #65 (1967), #74 (1968)

Image 18: Mr. Fantastic protects his family (clockwise, from top left), *Fantastic Four* #31 (1964), #36 (1965), #49 (1966), #74 (1968)
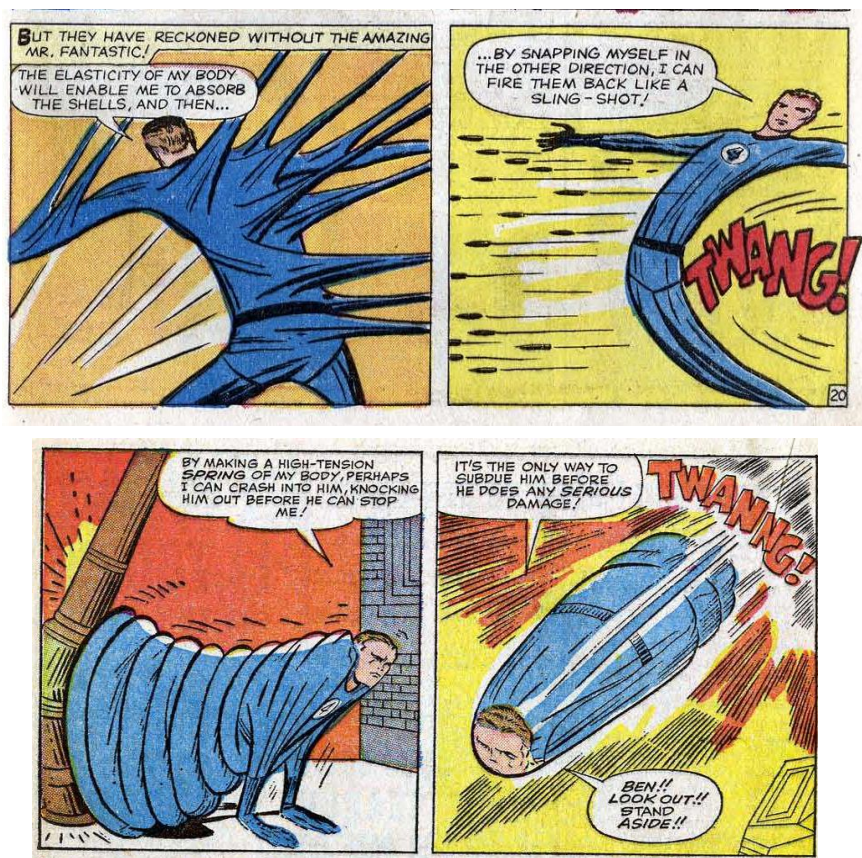
Image 19: Mr. Fantastic absorbs and repels bullet, becomes a spring and a bullet, *Fantastic Four* #8 (1962), #32 (1964)
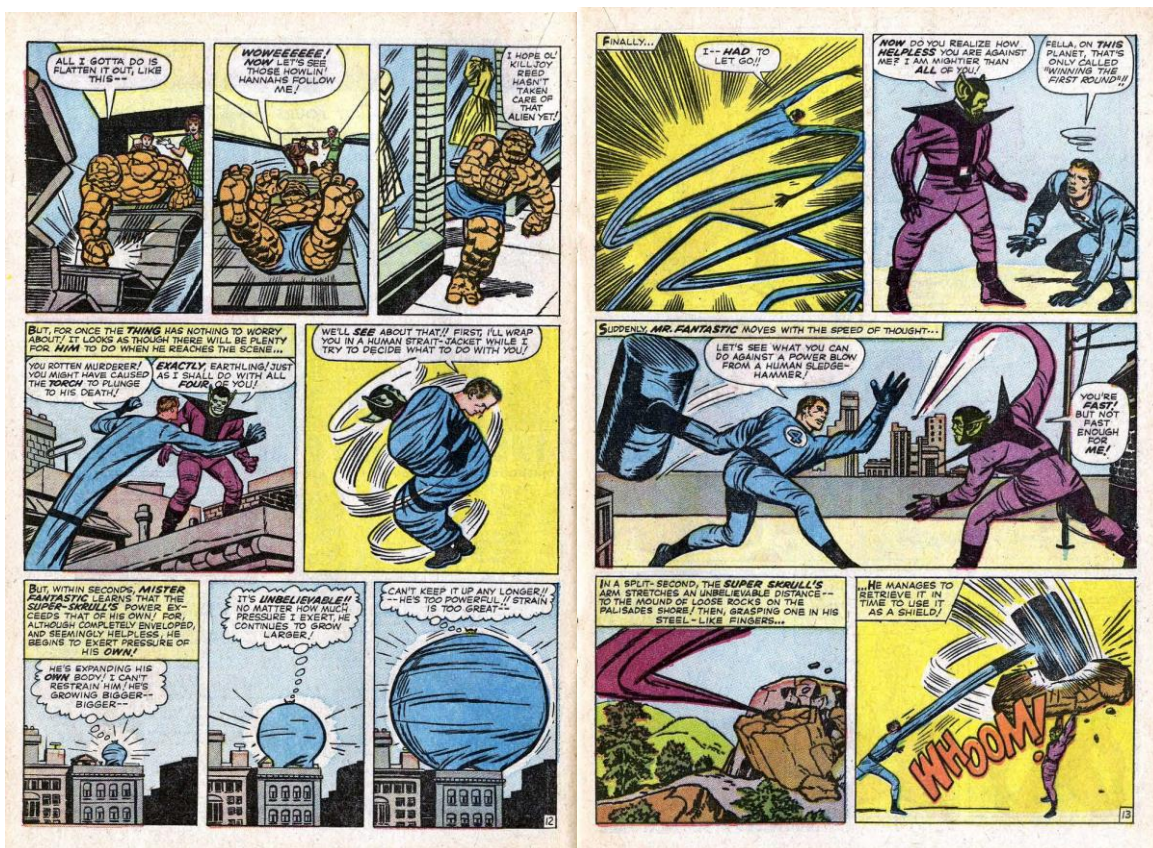
Image 20: Attacking to contain, *Fantastic Four* #18 (1963)

Image 21: Mr. Fantastic contains the Sub-Mariner, *Fantastic Four* #27 (1964)

Image 22: Mr. Fantastic contains the Sub-Mariner cont'd, *Fantastic Four* #27 (1964)

Image 23: The female superhero as lingerie pin-up, 1966 Marvel pin-up and Playboy Club costume, circa early 60s

Image 24: Supervillian/superhero symmetry, *Amazing Spider-Man* #12 (1964)

Image 25: Supervillain/superhero symmetry, *Amazing Spider-Man* #29 (1965)

Image 26: The Thing "crying," *Fantastic Four* #51 (1966)

Image 27: Spider-Man "prone, bound, and cowering in fear," *Amazing Spider-Man* #12, #18 (1964)

Image 28: Spider-Man versus the Sinister Six, *Amazing Spider-Man Annual* #1 (1964)
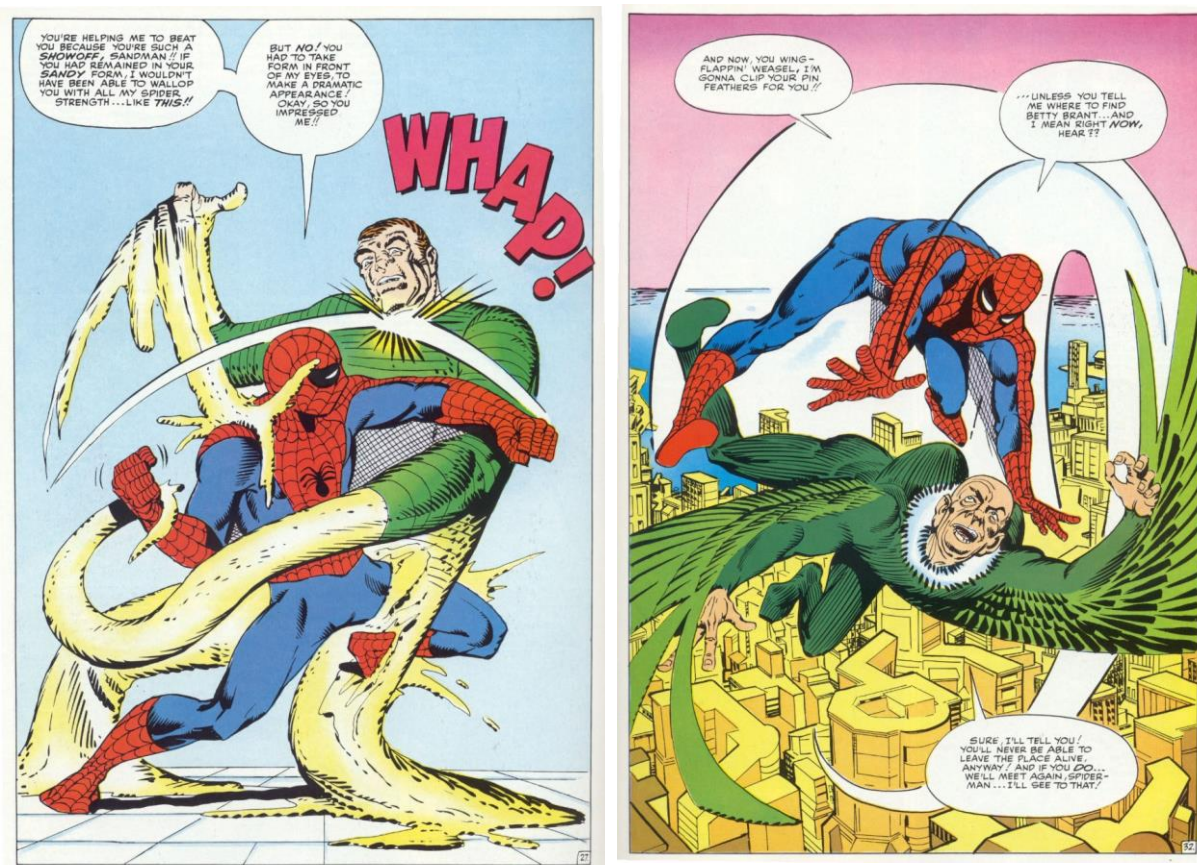
Image 29: Spider-Man versus the Sinister Six, *Amazing Spider-Man Annual* #1 (1964)

Image 30: Spider-Man versus the Sinister Six, *Amazing Spider-Man Annual* #1 (1964)
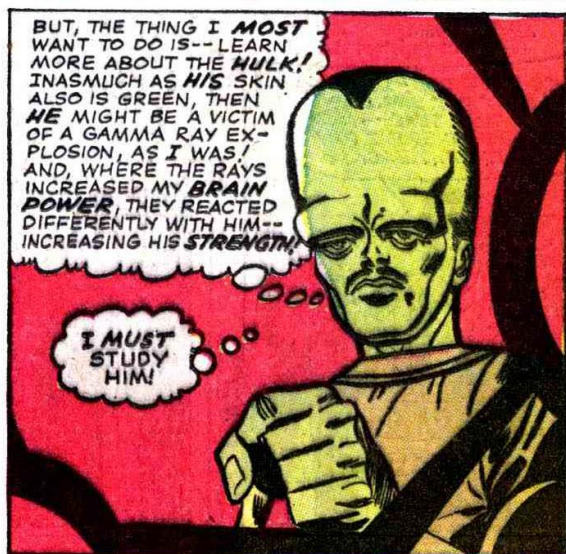
Image 31: The Leader as effete strategist, *Tales to Astonish* #64, #68 (1965)

Image 32: Medusa as too feminine/too masculine female supervillain, *Fantastic Four* #41 (1965)
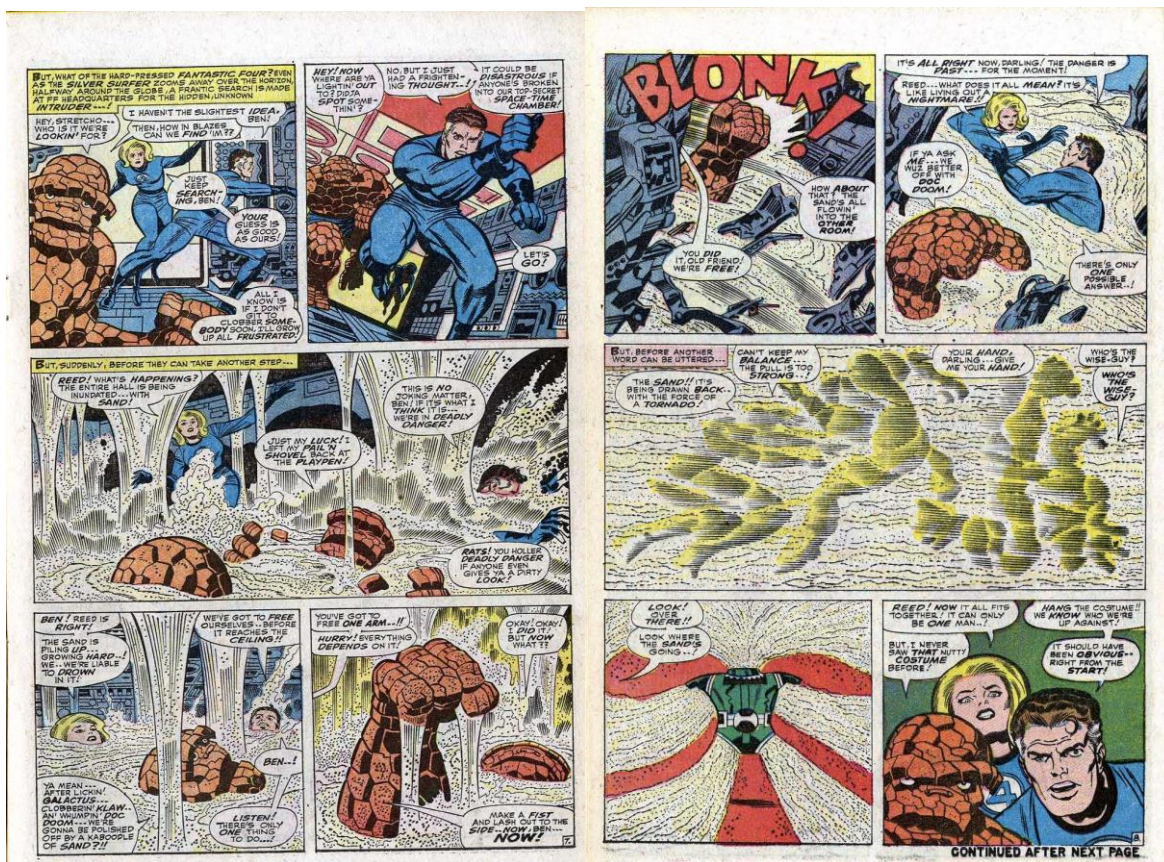
Image 33: The porous, leaking fluidity of the Sandman, *Fantastic Four* #61 (1967)
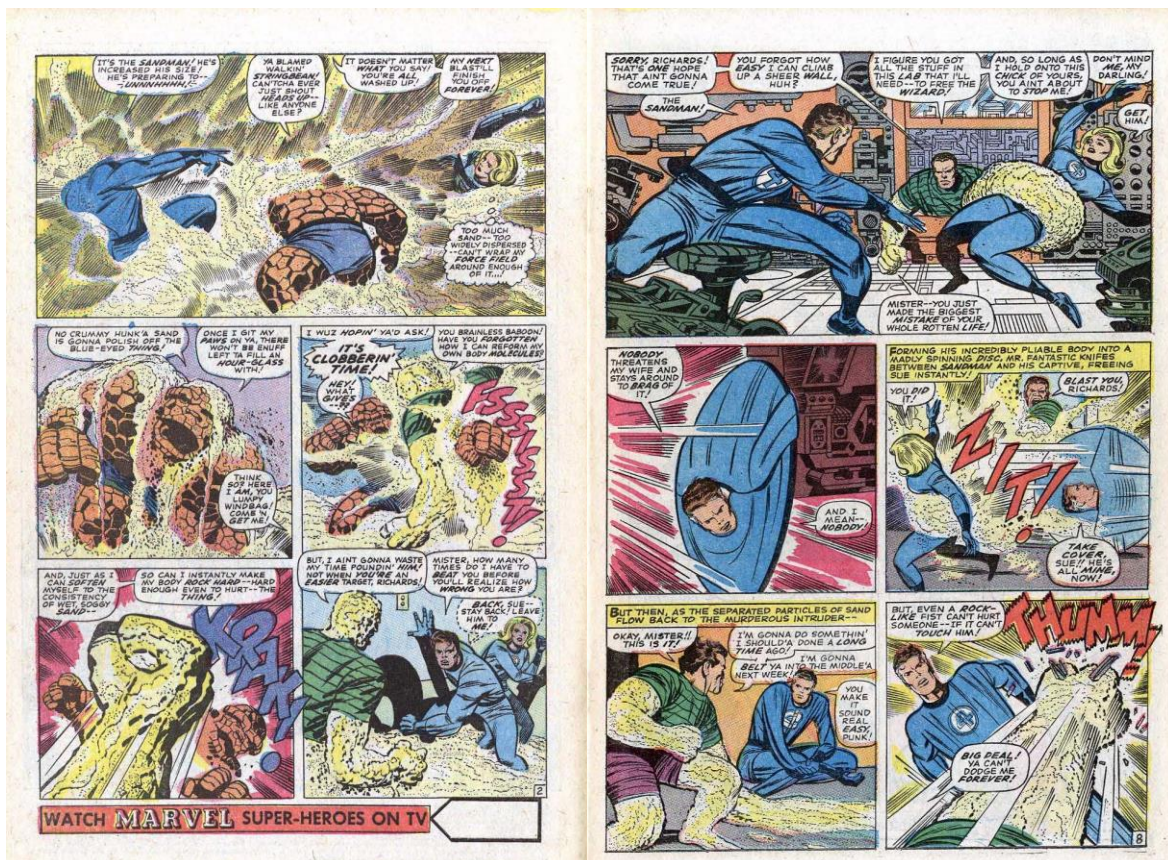
Image 34: The porous, leaking fluidity of the Sandman, *Fantastic Four* #61 (1967)

APPENDIX C

Image 1: The racially caricaturized villain Wong-Chu, *Tales of Suspense* #39 (1963)

Image 2: First appearance of the Black Panther, *Fantastic Four* #52 (1966)

Image 3: Introduction of the villainous Klaw, *Fantastic Four* #53 (1966)
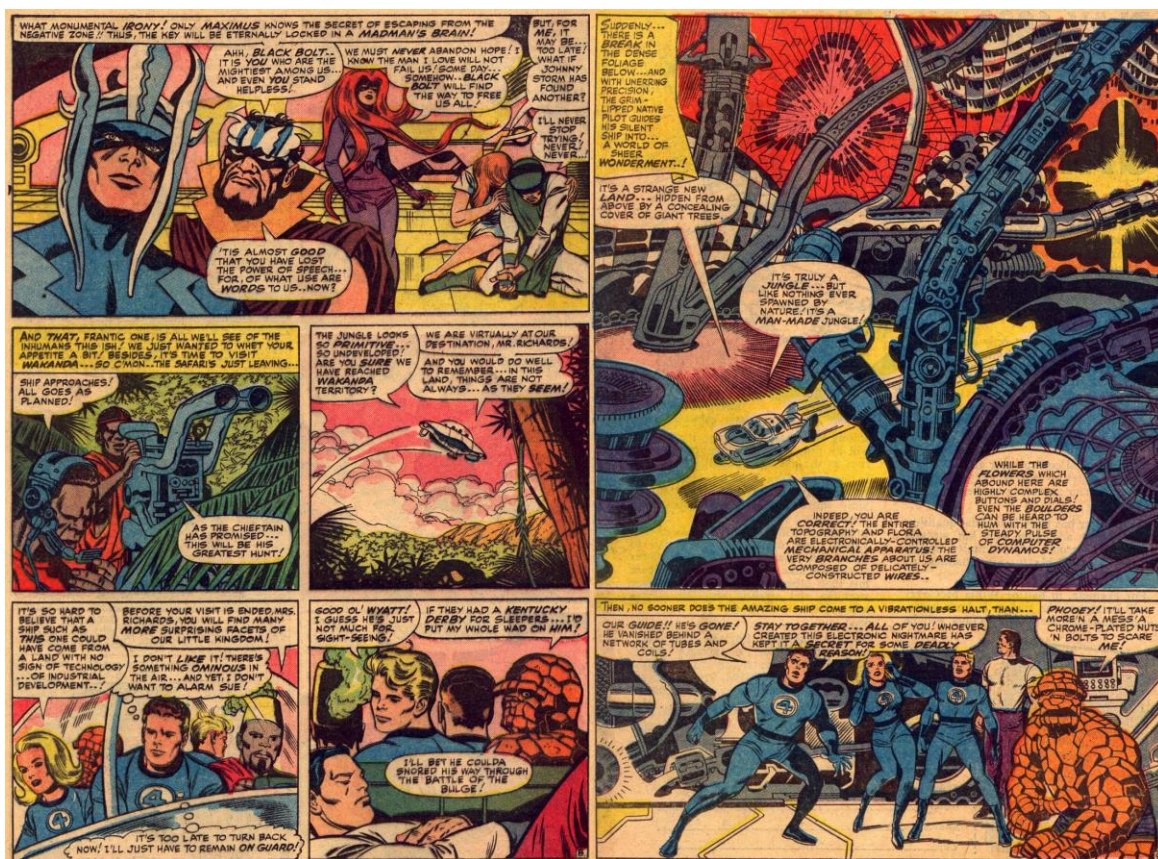
Image 4: "Things are not always what they seem," *Fantastic Four* #52 (1966)

Image 5: Wakandan technology *Fantastic Four* #52 (1966)
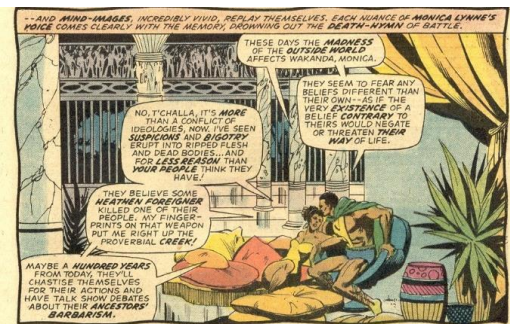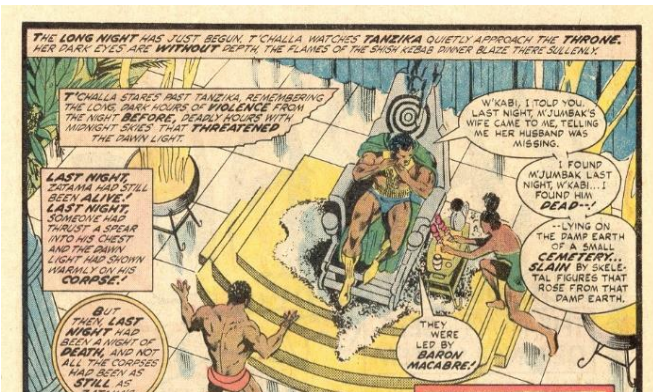
Image 6: Clockwise from left, images of subservient women, *Jungle Action* #9, #10, #11 (1974)

Image 7: Black Panther's animism, *Avengers* #73 (1970)
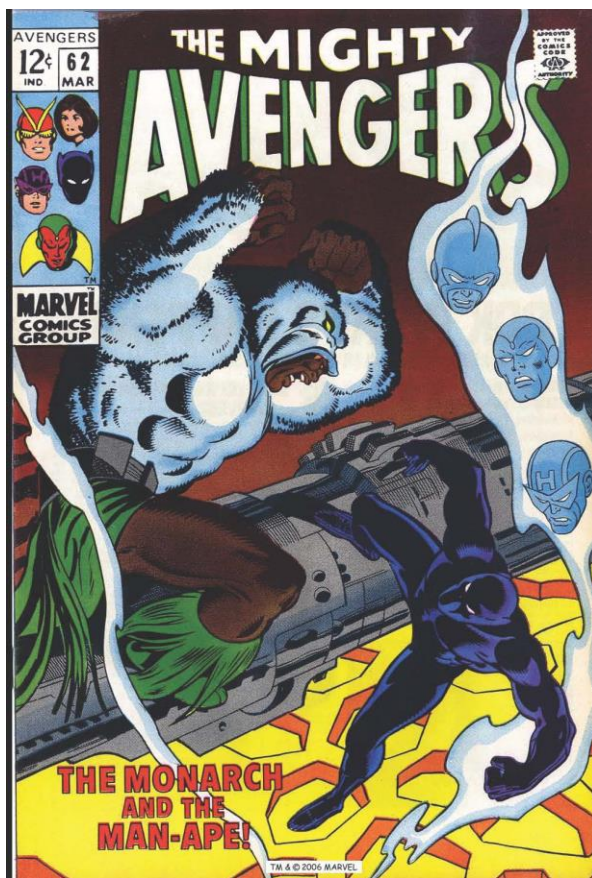
Image 8: First appearance of Man-Ape, *Avengers* #62 (1969)

Image 9: Recurrence of white gorilla imagery, *Jungle Action* #5 (1973), #13 (1975), *Black Panther* #5 (1977)

Image 10: Tharn battles animals, *Jungle Action* #1, #2 (1972) and #3 (1973)
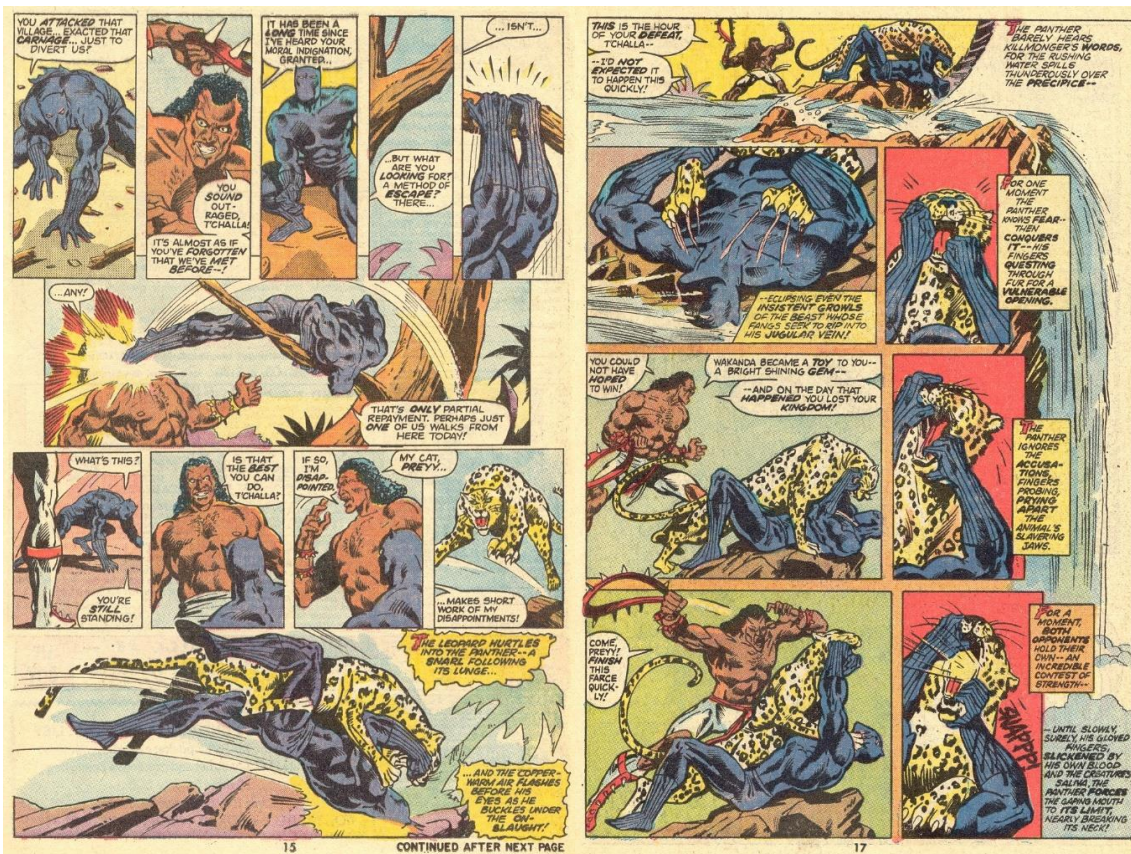
Image 11: Black Panther battles Killmonger's leopard, *Jungle Action* #5 (1973)
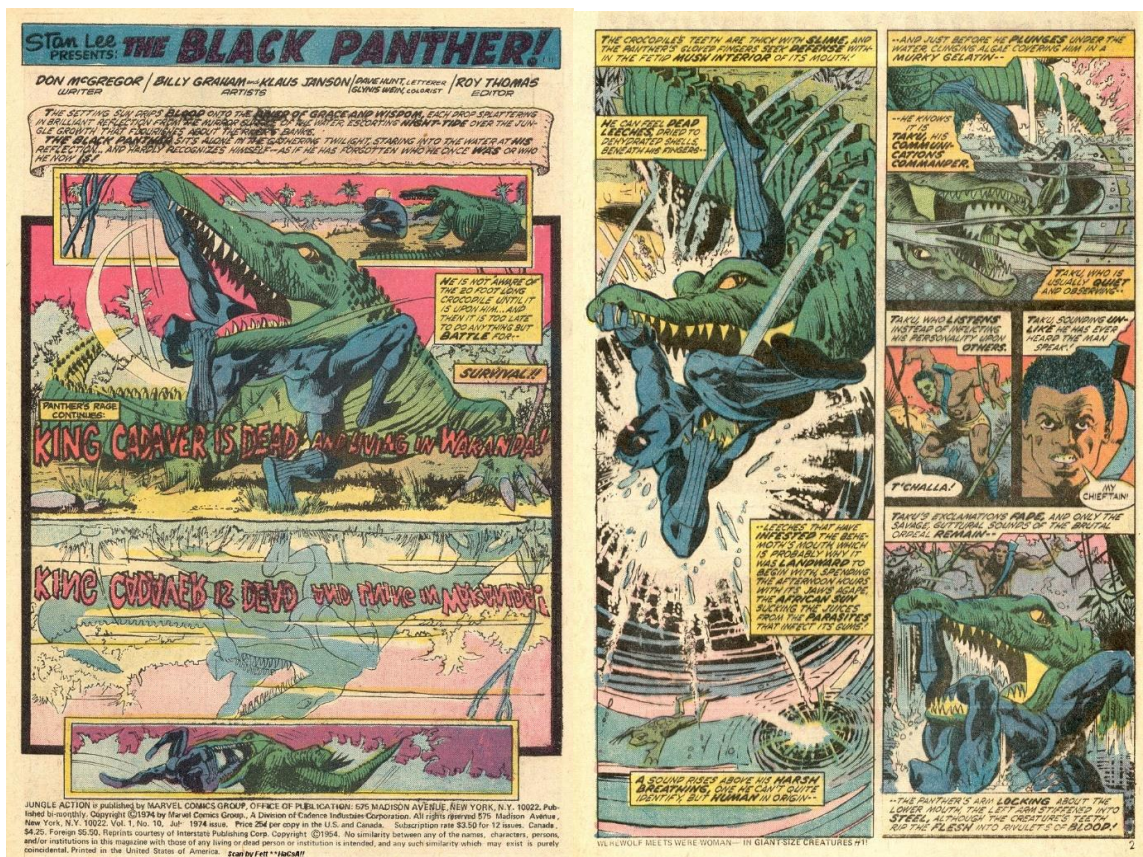
Image 12: Black Panther battles a crocodile, *Jungle Action* #10 (1974)
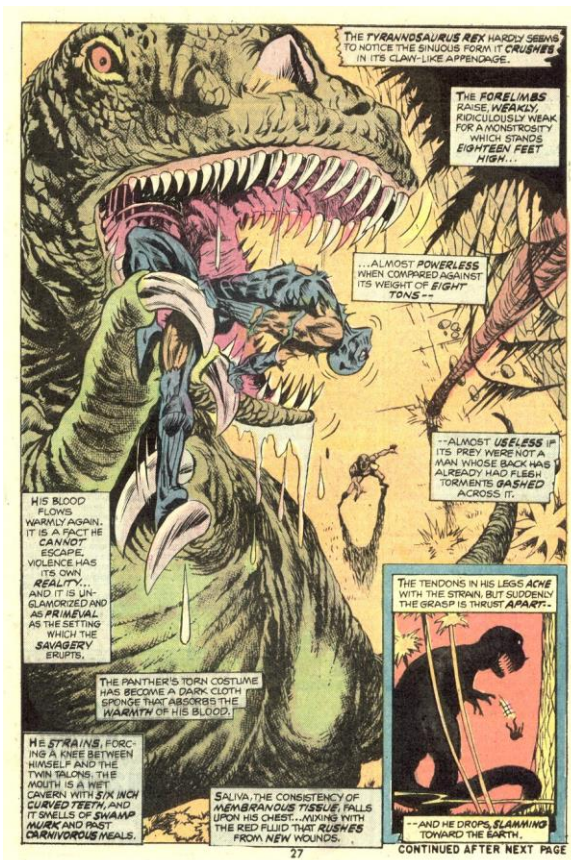
Image 13: Black Panther battles a dinosaur, *Jungle Action* #14 (1975)
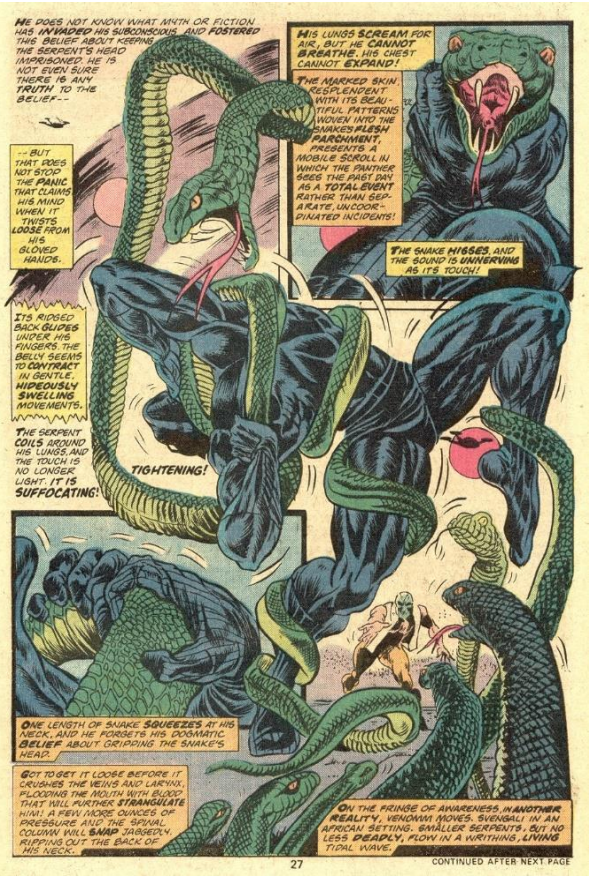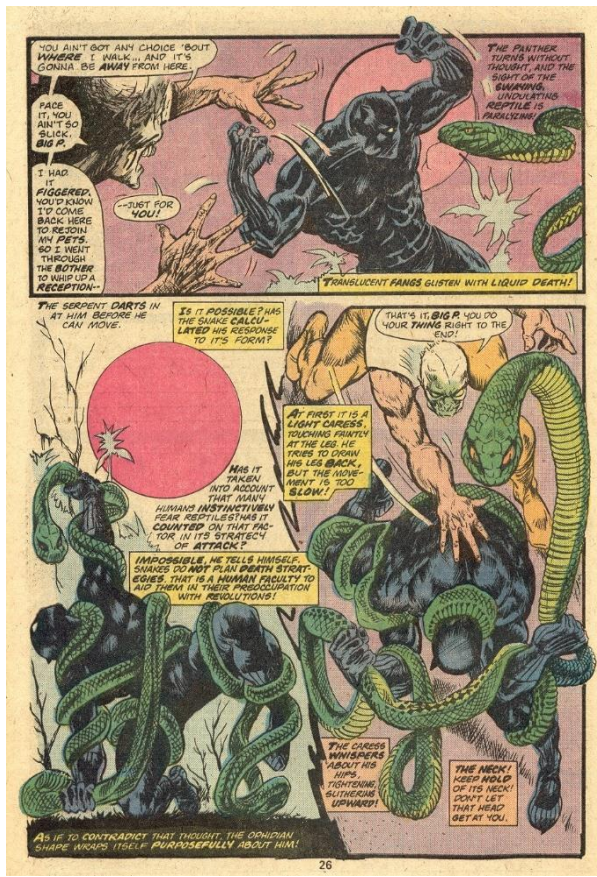
Image 14: Black Panther battles snakes, *Jungle Action* #16 (1975)

Image 15: Representative image of Black Panther in extravagant chains, *Avengers* #74 (1970)
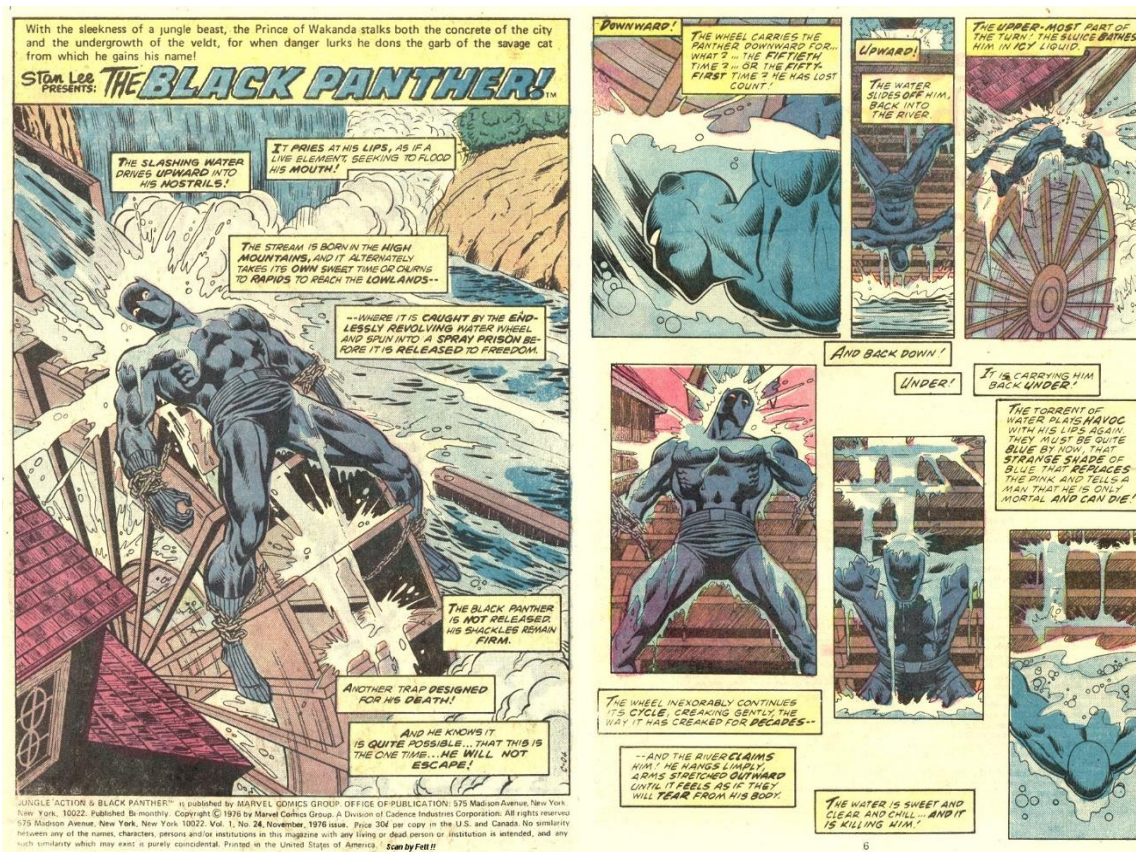
Image 16: Black Panther back in chains, *Jungle Action* #24 (1976)
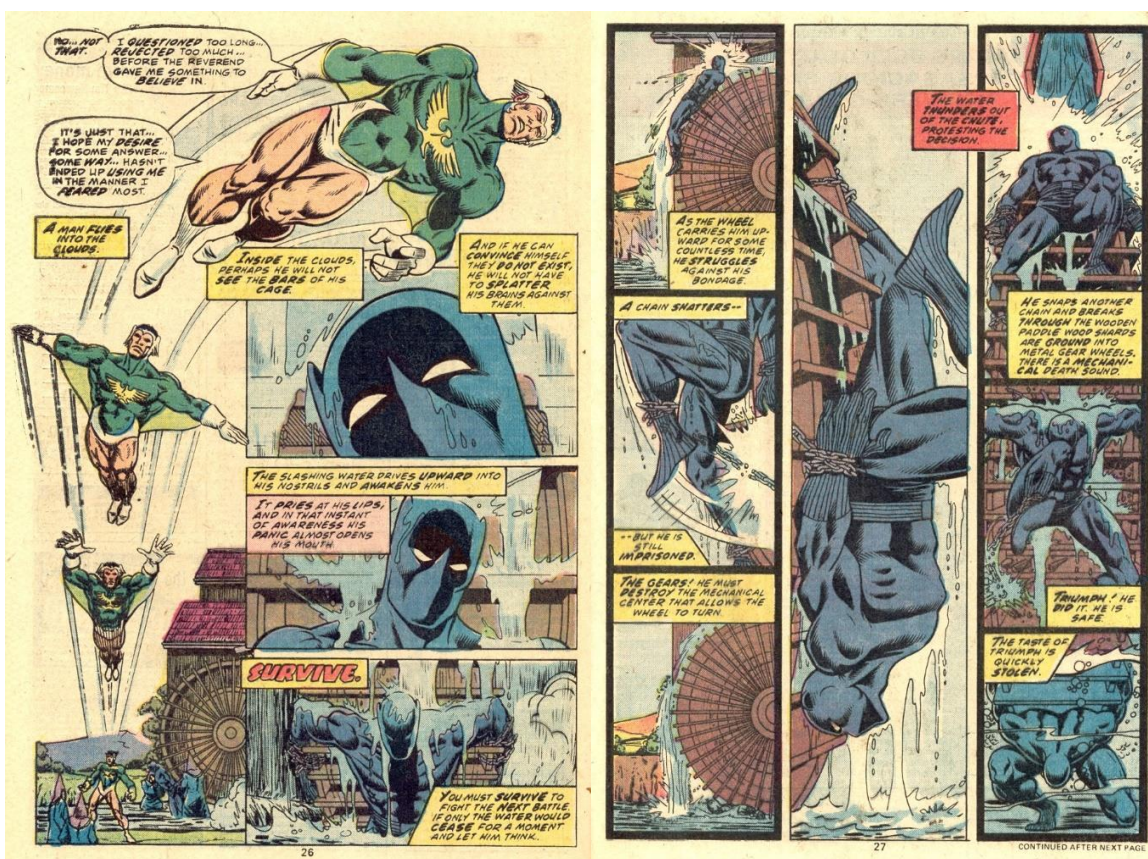
Image 17: Black Panther back in chains, cont'd, *Jungle Action* #24 (1976)

Image 18: Black Panther breaks his chains, *Jungle Action* #24 (1976)
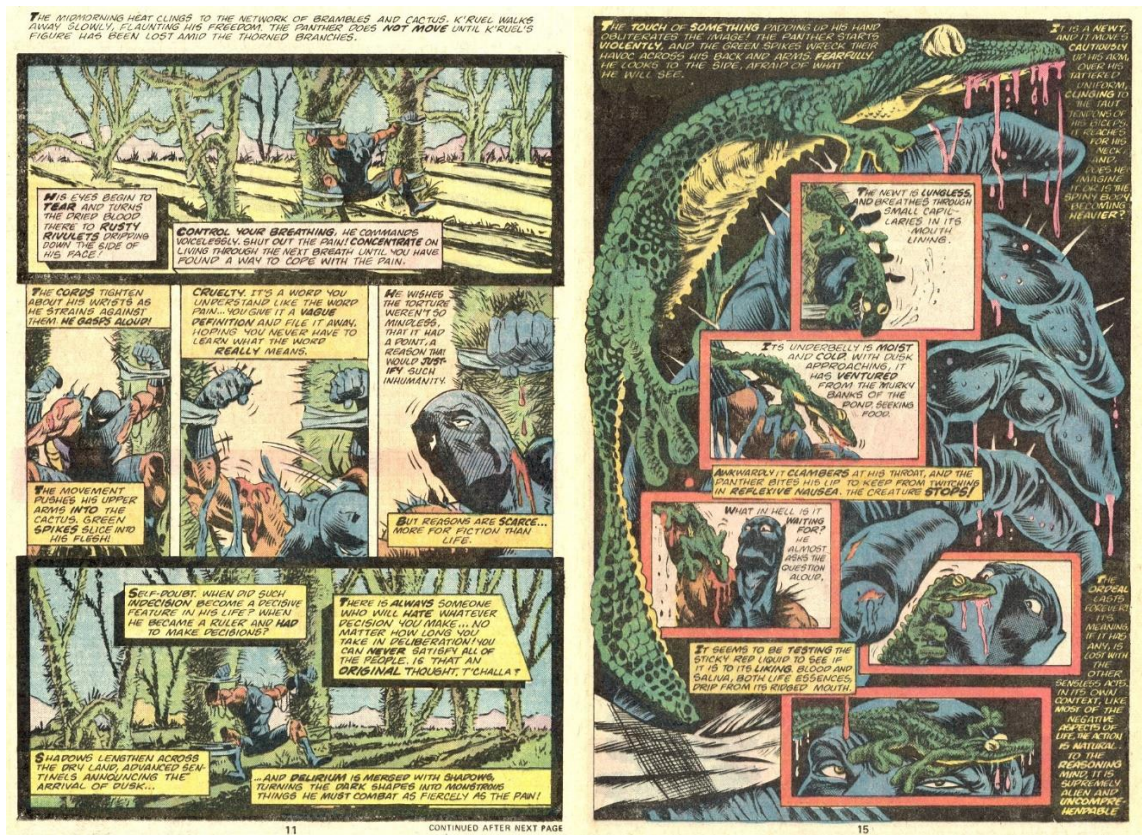
Image 19: Black Panther crucified on a cactus, cont'd, *Jungle Action* #15 (1975)

Image 20: Black Panther crucified by the Klan, *Jungle Action* #20 (1976)

Image 21: Black Panther crucified by the Klan, cont'd, *Jungle Action* #21 (1976)
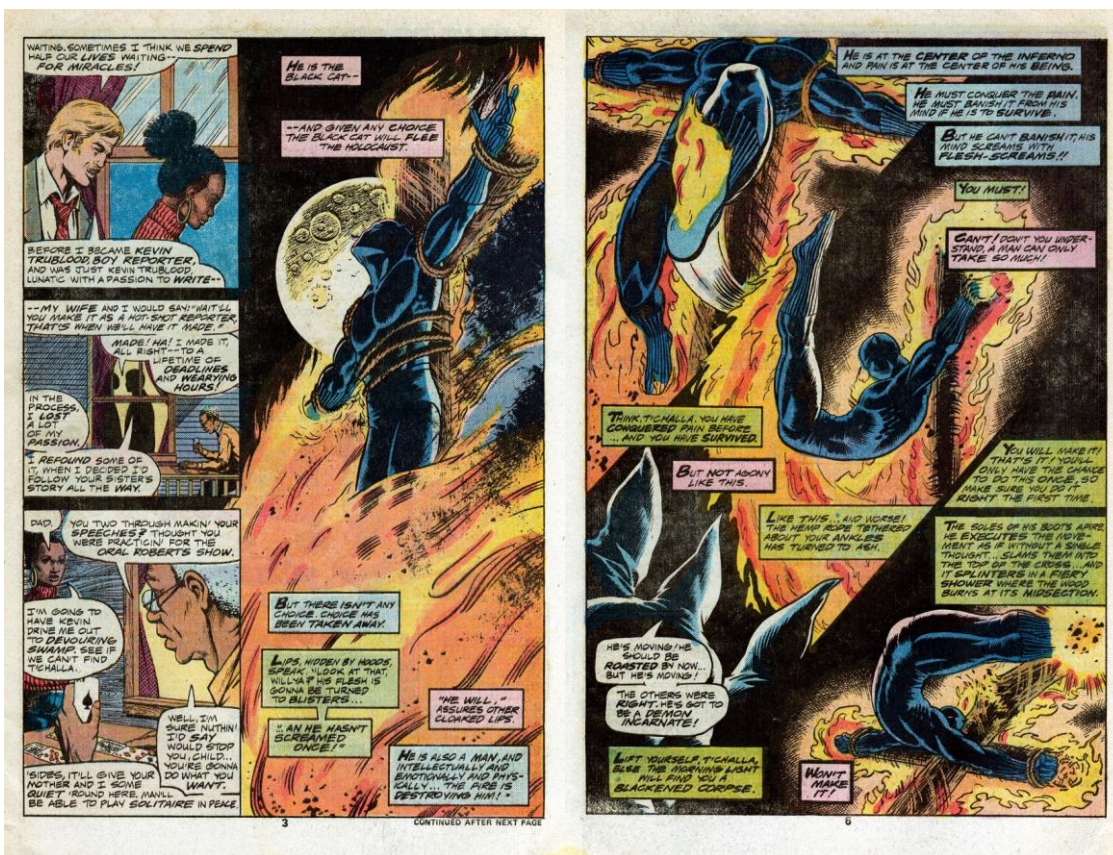
Image 22: Black Panther crucified by the Klan, cont'd, *Jungle Action* #21 (1976)
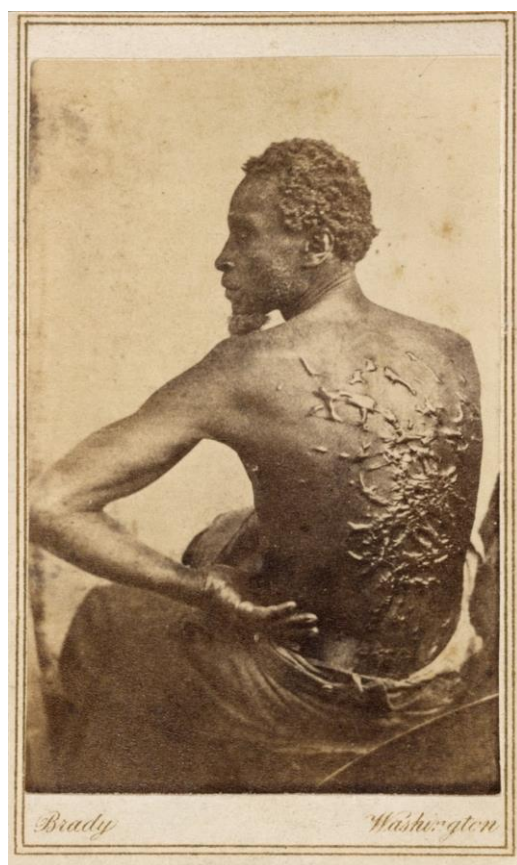
Image 23: "The Scourged Back" (1863)

Image 24: The snakes of colonial critique and fantasy, 1906, 1973, 1975

Image 25: Ms. Marvel appears on the cover of Woman #1, *Ms. Marvel* #6 (1977); *Ms.* debut issue (1972)

Image 26: Ms. Marvel throws a car and inspires the next generation, *Ms. Marvel* #1 (1977)

Image 27: Nelson's mix of "masculine" and "feminine" powers, *The Claws of the Cat* #1 (1972)

Image 28: She-Hulk tells but does not show her strength, *Savage She-Hulk* #7 and #8 (1980)
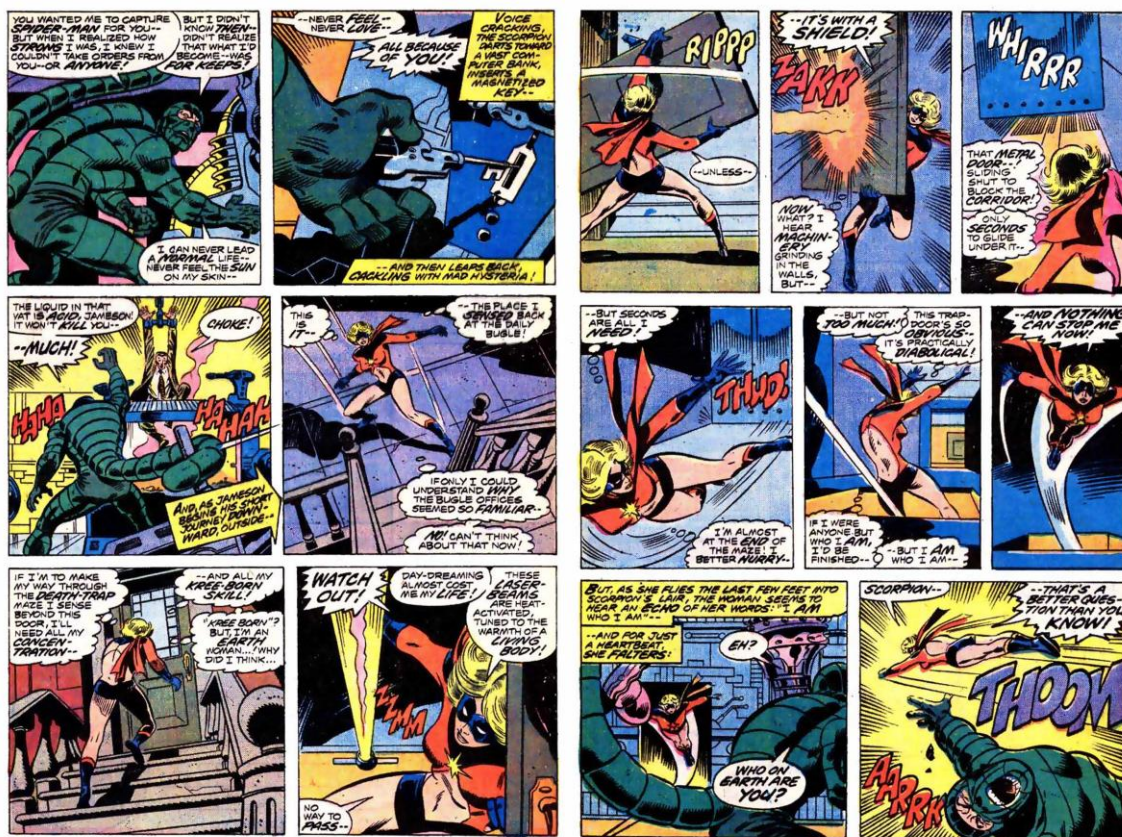
Image 29: Ms. Marvel is framed and posed for erotic rather than heroic appeal, *Ms. Marvel* #1 (1977)

Image 30: Ms. Marvel is framed and posed for erotic rather than heroic appeal, cont'd, *Ms. Marvel* #1 (1977)
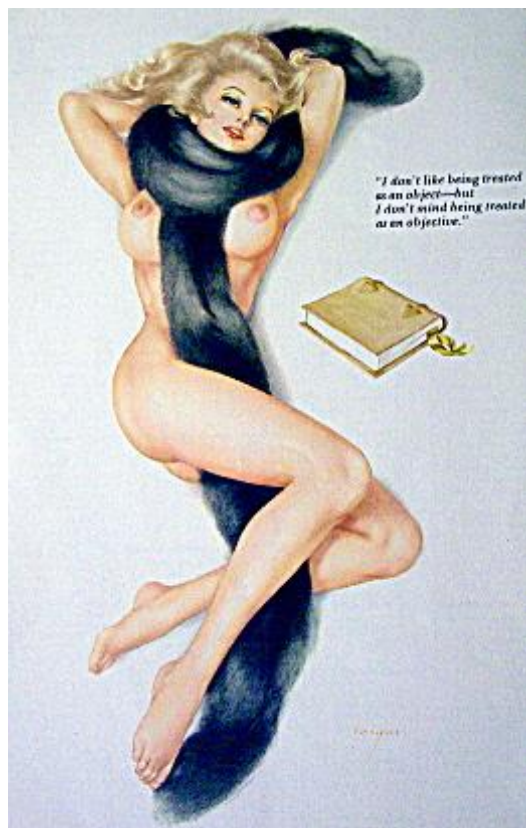
Image 31: The Cat as Playboy pinup, *The Claws of the Cat* #1 (1972) and Playmate Calendar, circa 1960s
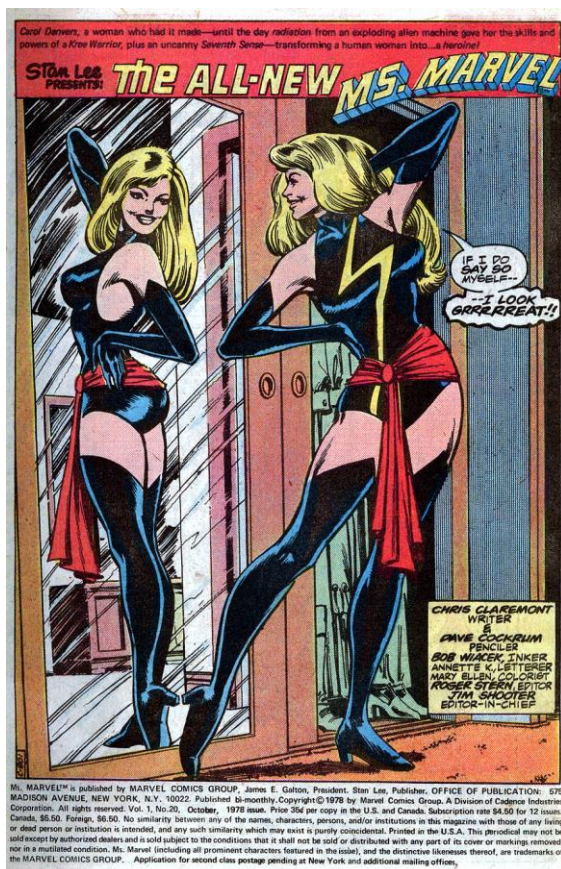
Image 32: Ms. Marvel gets a new, sexier costume, *Ms. Marvel* #20 (1978)

Image 33: The Cat as gender monster, *The Claws of the Cat* #1 (1972)

Image 34: Gendered monstrousness, *Amazing Spider-Man* #1 (1963) and *Spider-Woman* #1 (1977)
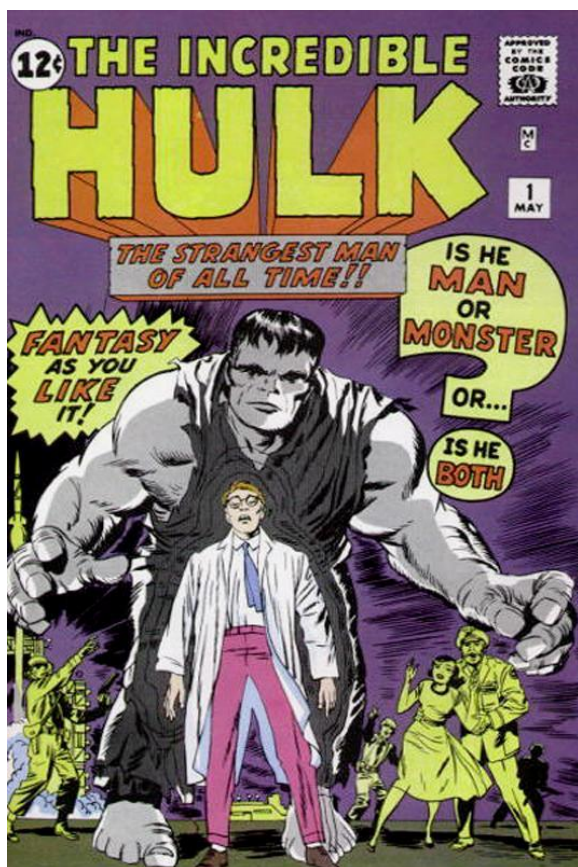
Image 35: Gendered monstrousness, *The Incredible Hulk* #1 (1962) and *The Savage She- Hulk* #1 (1980)

Image 36: Male bondage and incapacitation, *Amazing Spider-Man* #85 (1970), #107 (1972), and #191 (1979)

Image 37: Male bondage cont'd, *Captain Marvel* #40 (1975), #46 (1976), and #52 (1977)
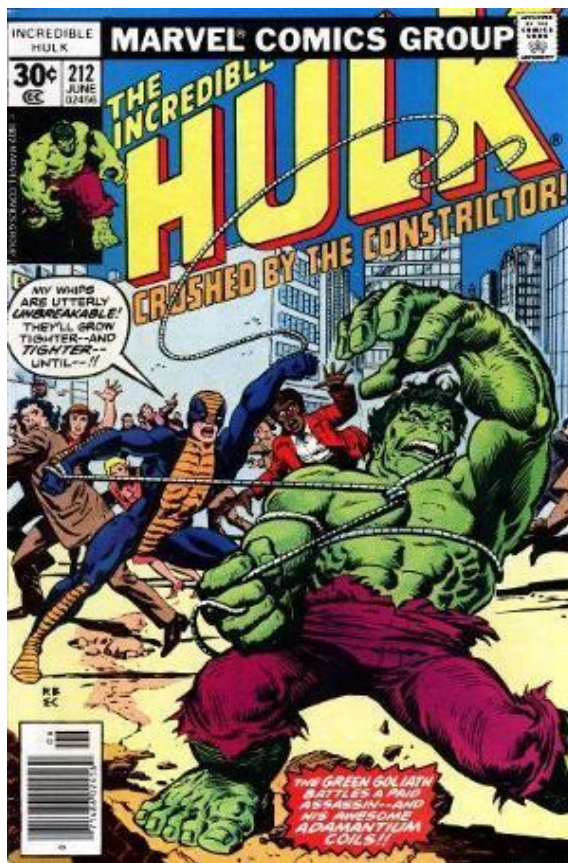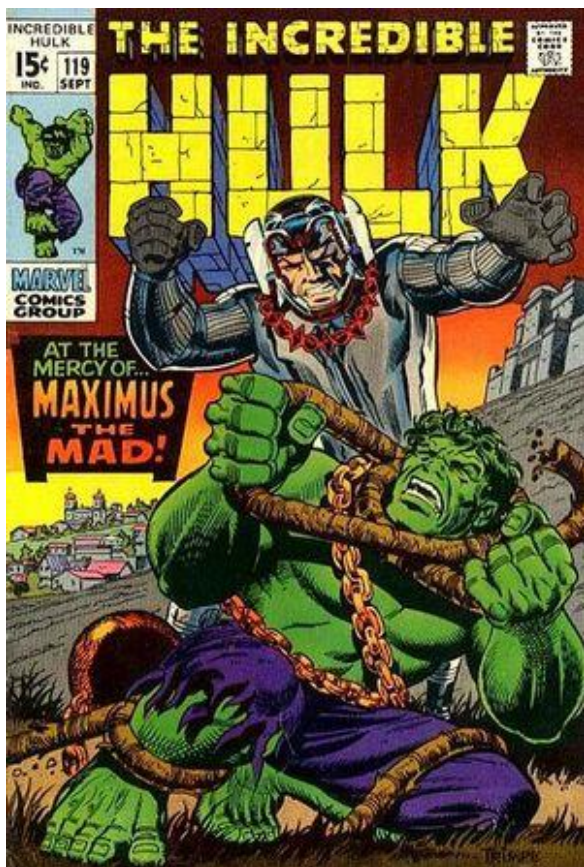
Image 38: Male bondage cont'd, *Incredible Hulk* #119 (1970) and #212 (1977)

Image 39: Female bondage and incapacitation, *Ms. Marvel* #6, #8, and #16 (1977)

Image 40: Female bondage cont'd, *Ms. Marvel* #17 and #19 (1978)

Image 41: Female bondage cont'd, *Spider-Woman* #4, #6, and #8 (1978)

Image 42: Female bondage cont'd, *Spider-Woman* #33 (1980), #43 (1982), and #48 (1983)

Image 43: Female bondage cont'd, *Savage She-Hulk* #3, #11 (1980), and #18 (1981)

Image 44: Male incapacitation, cont'd, *Amazing Spider-Man* #197 (1979), *Incredible Hulk* #187 (1975), and *Captain Marvel* #34 (1974)

Image 45: Danvers confronts the Avengers about the Marcus affair, *Avengers Annual* #10 (1981)

Image 46: From left, Morgan Le Fay, Nekra, Viper, and Gypsy Moth, *Spider-Woman* #5 (1978), #16 (1979), #44 (1982), #10 (1979)

Image 47: From left, Death-Bird and Mystique, *Ms. Marvel* #9 (1977) #19 (1978)

Image 48: X-Men's new multiethnic, multiracial superteam, *Giant-Size X-Men* #1 (1975)

Image 49: Professor Xavier recruits Nightcrawler, *Giant-Size X-Men* #1 (1975)

Image 50: Kitty recites the X-Men's message of inclusion, *Uncanny X-Men* #210 (1986)

Image 51: The Morlocks, *Uncanny X-Men* #169 and #170 (1983)

Image 52: Nightcrawler's X-gene proves more slippery than expected, *Uncanny X-Men* #210 (1986)
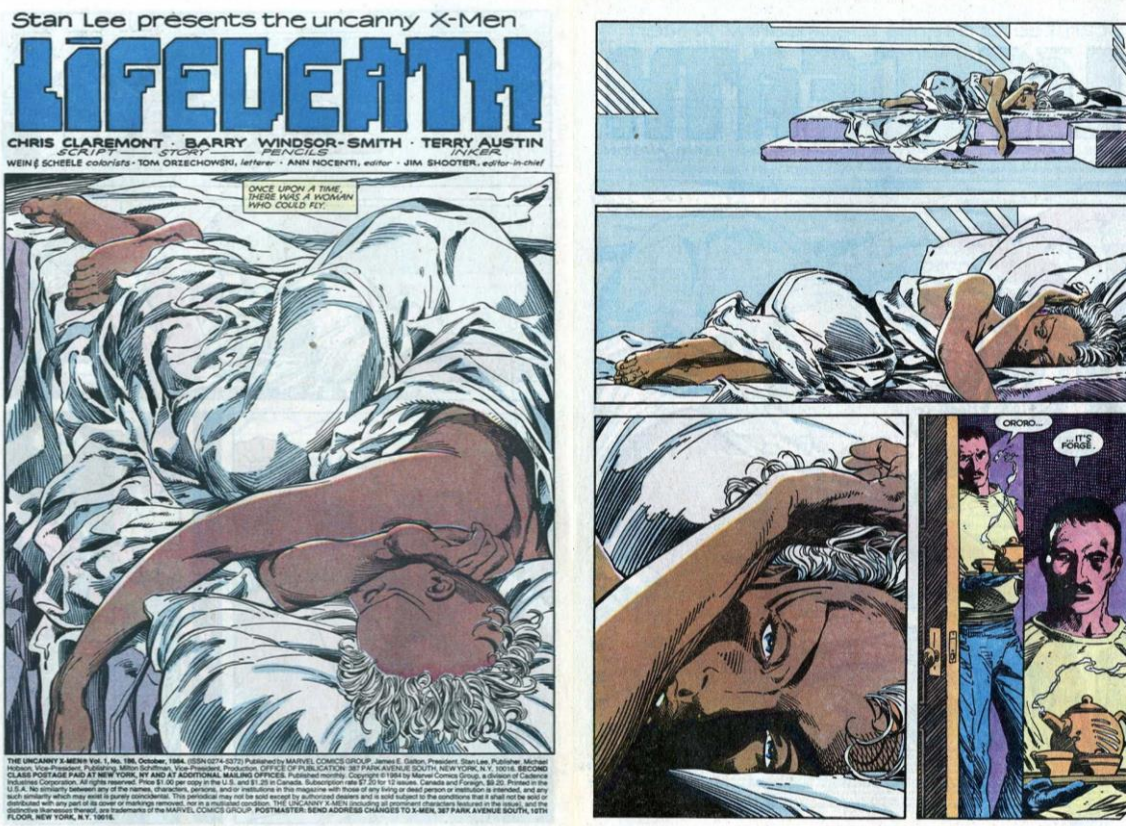
Image 53: Storm depowered, *Uncanny X-Men* #186 (1984)
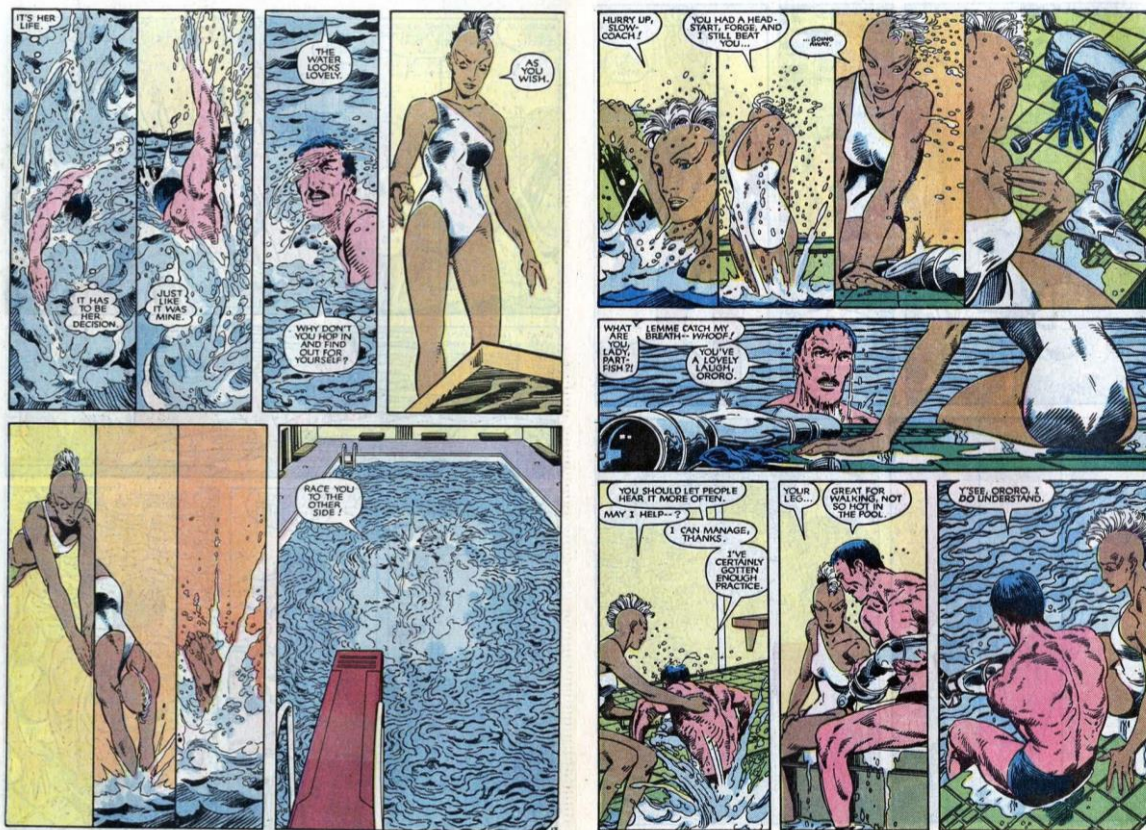
Image 54: An unexpected disability, *Uncanny X-Men* #186 (1984)

APPENDIX D

Image 1: Art by Bill Sienkiewicz, *Marvel Graphic Novel* #24 (1986) and Frank Miller, *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986)
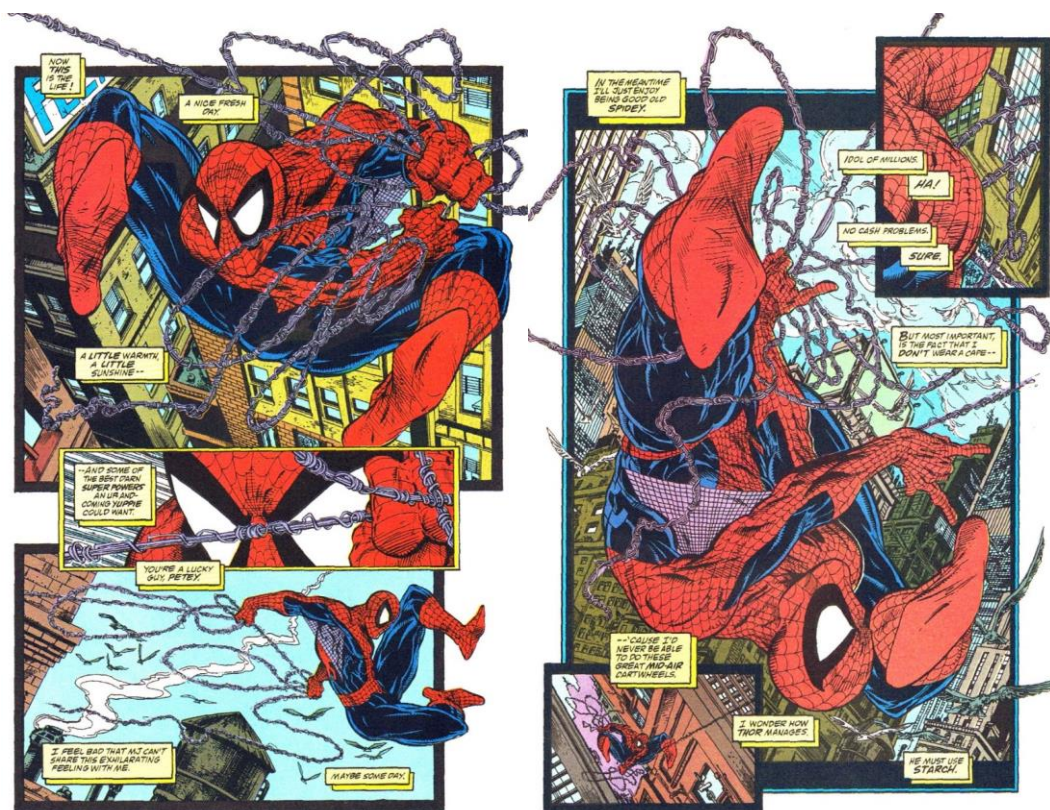
Image 2: McFarlane's Spider-Man, with "spaghetti webbing," *Spider-Man* #1 (1991)

Image 3: McFarlane's dense page layouts, *Spider-Man* #5 (1991)

Image 4: Lee's austere, robotic bodies, *X-Men* #1 (1992)

Image 5: Splash page by Lee, depicting 17 superpowered characters, *Uncanny X-Men* #275 (1991)

Image 6: Typical depictions of Cable by Liefeld, *X-Force* #1 (1992), *New Mutants* #97 (1991)
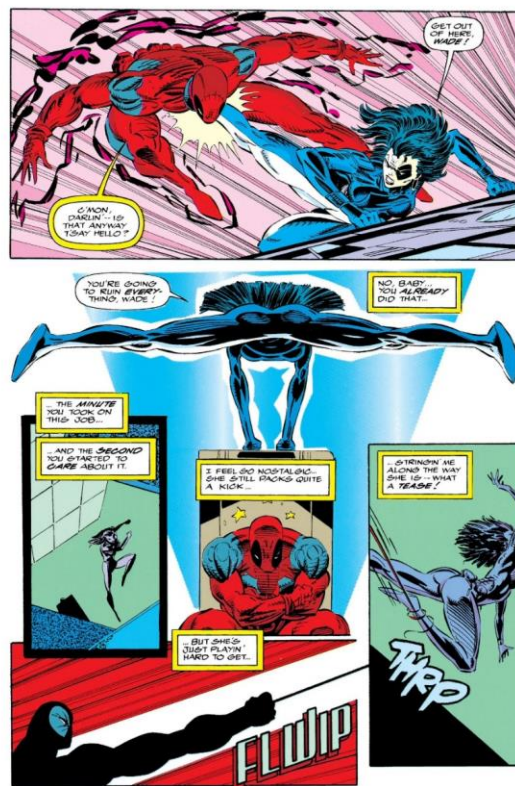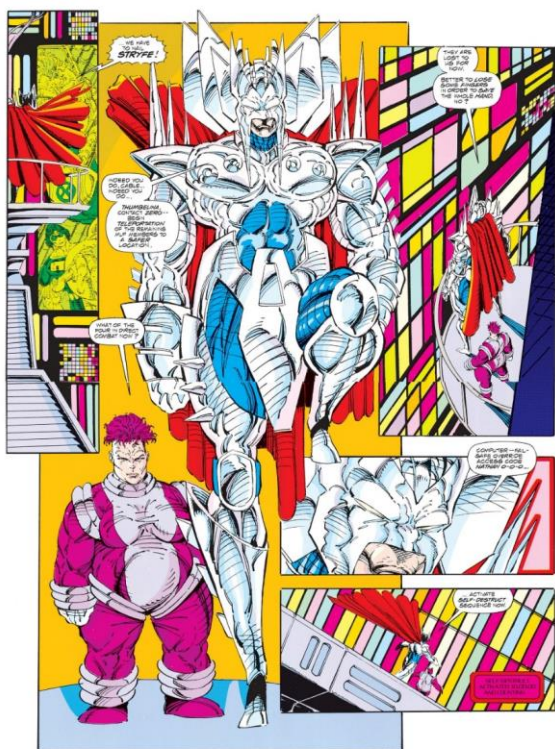
Image 7: Liefeld's experimental layouts, *X-Force* #1 (1991) and #11 (1992)

Image 8: Mary Jane by John Romita Jr., *Amazing Spider-Man Annual* #21 (1987)

Image 9: Mary Jane by McFarlane, *Spider-Man* #6 and *Spider-Man* #13 (1991)

Image 10: Size and pose differences between Lee's men and women, *X-Men* #11 (1992)

Image 11: Size and pose differences between Liefeld's men and women, *X-Force* #1 (1992)
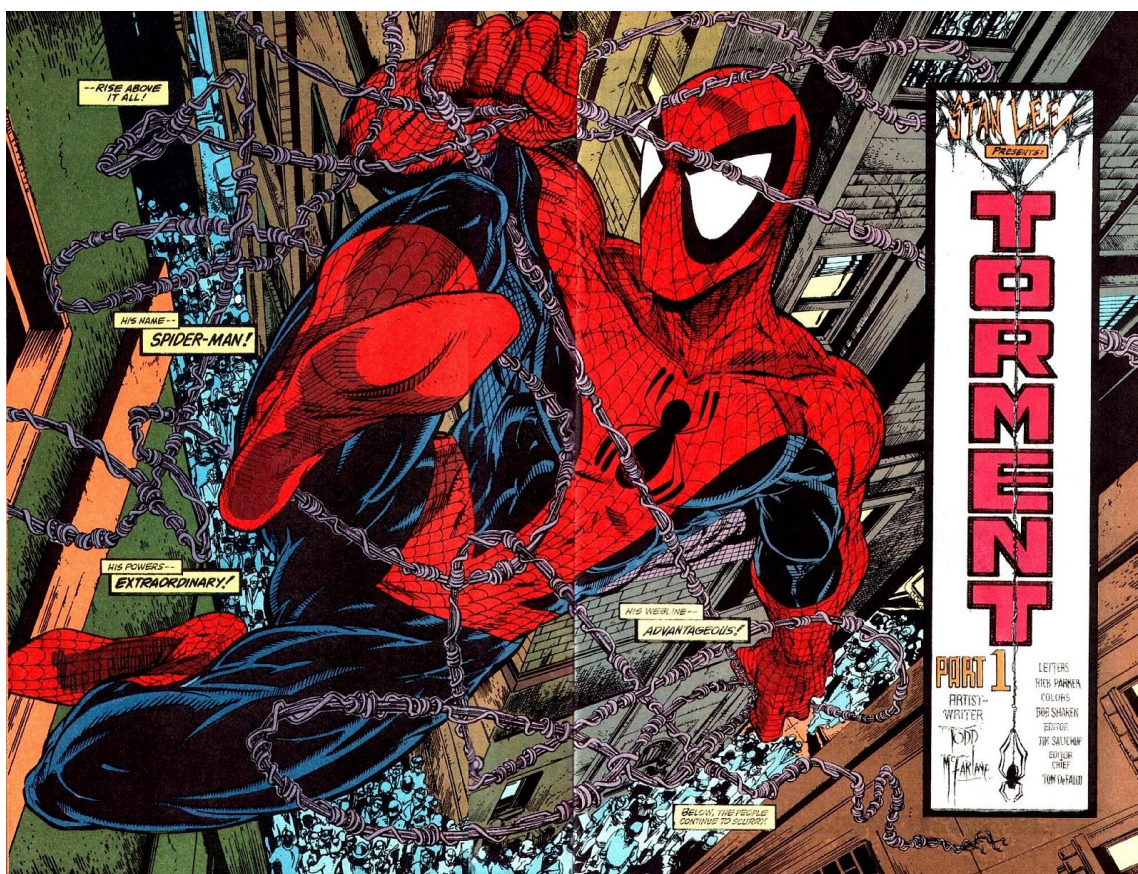
Image 12: McFarlane's Spider-Man, *Spider-Man* #1 (1991)

Image 13: Lee's male superheroes are rigid in action and at rest, *Uncanny X-Men* #271 (1990) and *X-Men* #8 (1992)

Image 14: Liefeld's "G.W." Bridge as man-machine hybrid, *X-Force* #11 (1992)
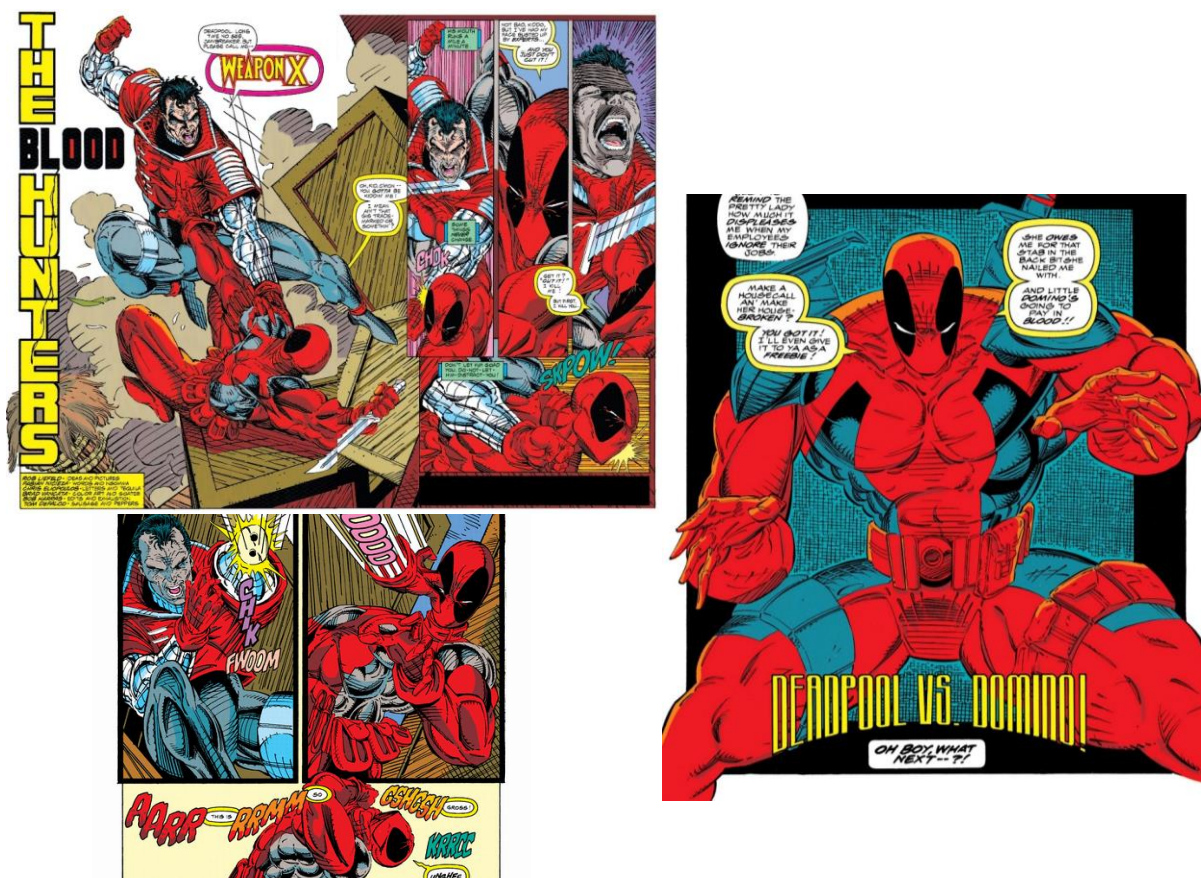
Image 15: Liefeld's extreme variations, *X-Force* #2 (left) and *X-Force* #10 (right) (1992)

Image 16: Lee's female superheroes, *Uncanny X-Men* #272 (1991), *X-Men* #1, and *X-Men* #6 (1992)

Image 17: Liefeld's female superheroes, *X-Force* #1 and #6 (1992)

Image 18: Lee's Psylocke is perfectly violent and perfectly desirable, *X-Men* #7 (1992)
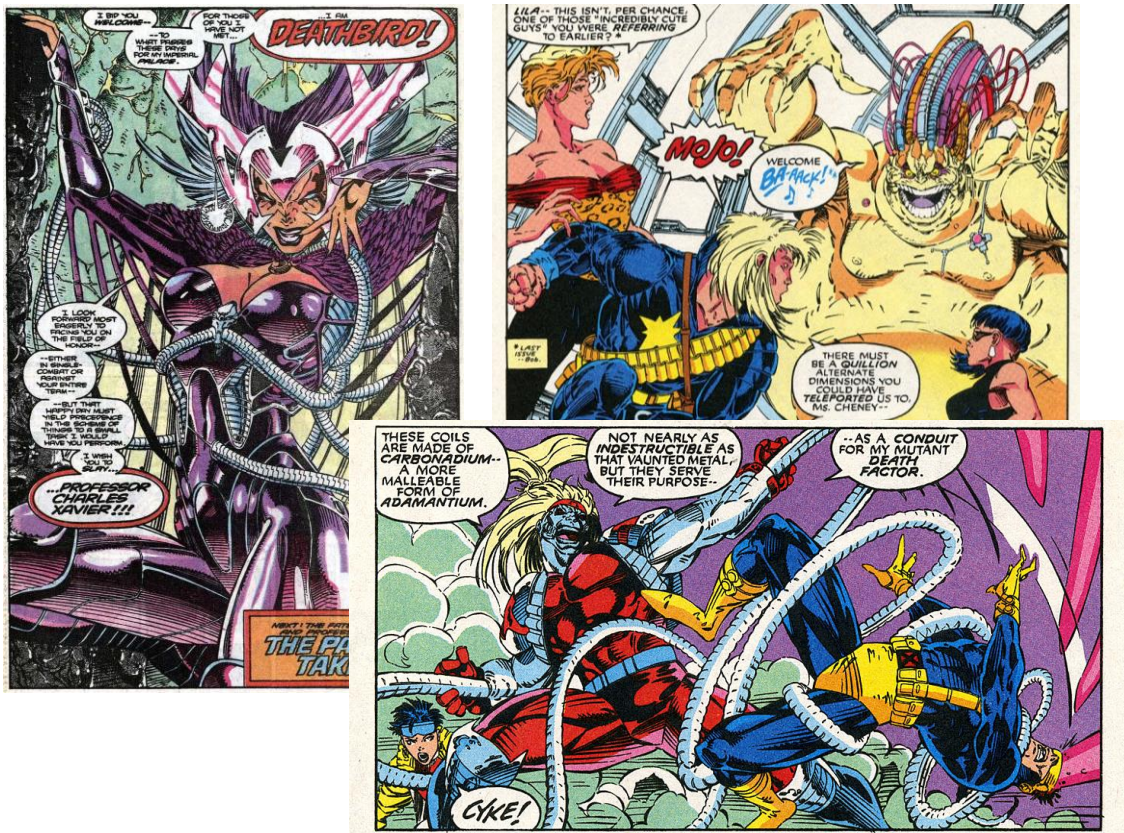
Image 19: X-Men villains by Lee: clockwise from left, Deathbird, Mojo, and Omega Red, *Uncanny X-Men* #273 (1991), *X-Men* #6 (1992)

Image 20: Supervillains by Liefeld, Thumbelina and Stryfe, *X-Force* #1 (1992)
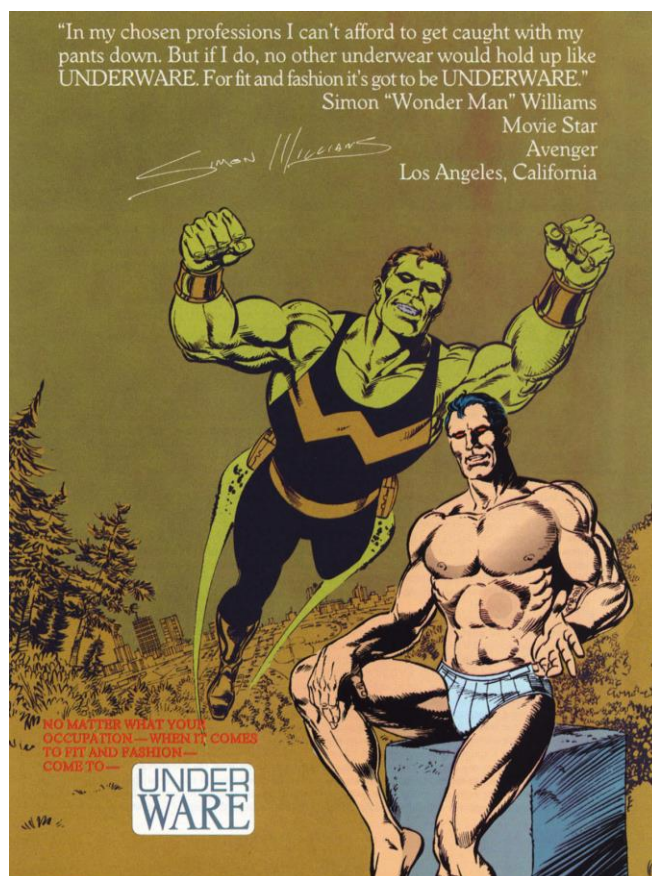
Image 21: Wonder Man advertises "Underware," *Marvel Illustrated* #1 (1991)

Image 22: Wolverine, the Thing, Beast, and the Hulk by Kevin Nowlan, *Marvel Illustrated* #1 (1991)

Image 23: Cloak and Dagger by Joe Madureira, Medusa and Black Bolt by George Perez, *Marvel Swimsuit Special* #2 (1993)

Image 24: The New Warriors by Darick Robertson, *Marvel Swimsuit Special* #4 (1995)

Image 25: Boom-Boom and X-Force by Rob Liefeld, *Marvel Illustrated* #1 (1991)

Image 26: Silver Sable and Sandman by Steven Butler, *Marvel Swimsuit Special* #2 (1993)

Image 27: She-Hulk and Wasp by George Perez, *Marvel Illustrated* #1 (1991)

Image 28: The Hulk by Jeff Johnson, *Marvel Swimsuit Special* #3 (1994)

Image 29: Captain America by Lou Harrison, *Marvel Swimsuit Special* #3 (1994)
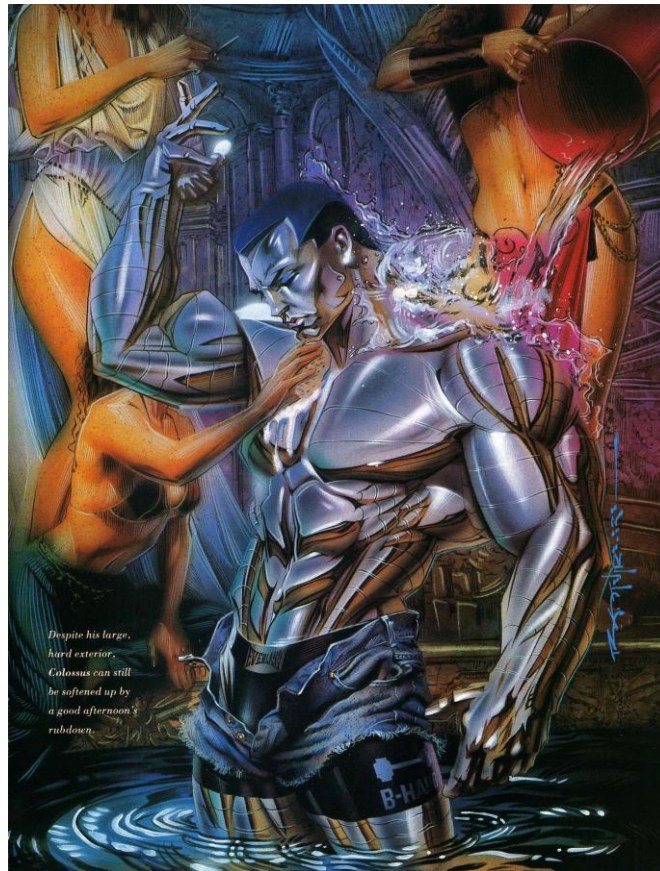
Image 30: Colossus by Brian Stelfreeze, *Marvel Swimsuit Special* #3 (1994)

Image 31: Wasp, Wonder Man, Captain America (and Colossus?) by Adam Hughes, *Marvel Swimsuit Special* #3 (1994)

Image 32: Northstar and Hector by Jan Duursema, *Marvel Swimsuit Special* #4 (1995)
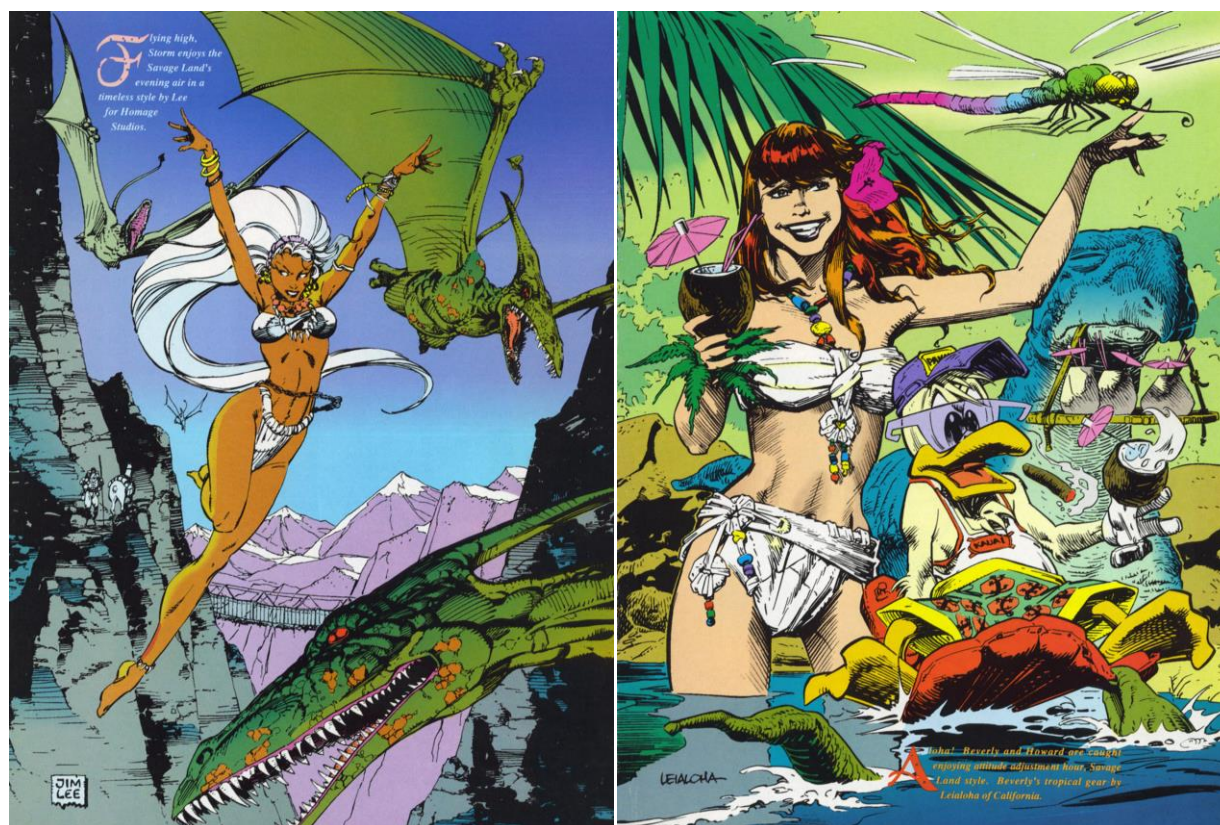
Image 33: Storm by Jim Lee, and Howard the Duck and Beverly by Steve Leialoha, *Marvel Illustrated* #1 (1991)

Image 34: The use of brown "savages" as backdrop, She-Hulk by Brian Stelfreeze, and Captain America and Diamondback by Michael Golden, *Marvel Illustrated* #1 (1991)

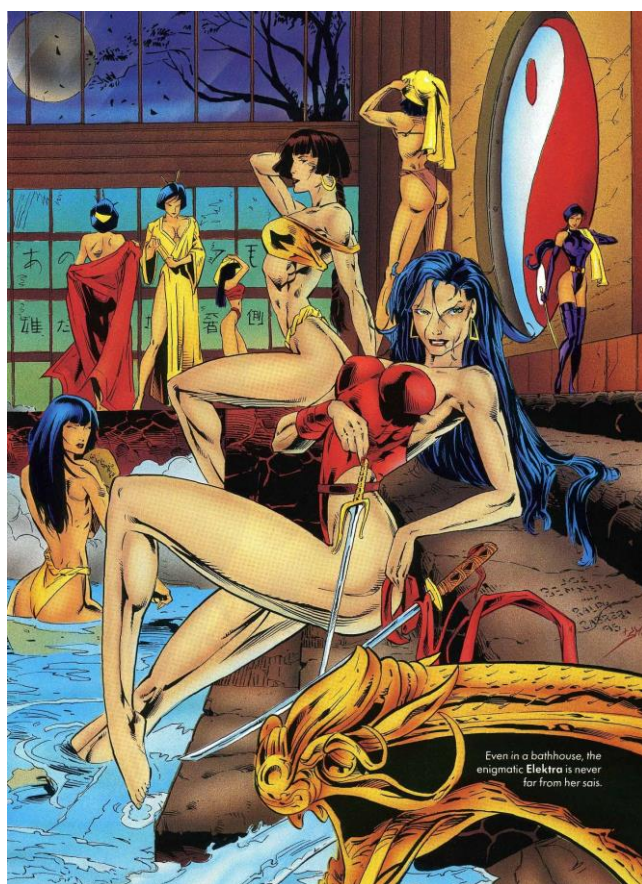Image 35: Bishop by Dwayne Turner and Namor by Joe Quesada, *Marvel Swimsuit* #3 (1994) and #4 (1995)

Image 36: Elektra by Joe Bennett, *Marvel Swimsuit* #4 (1995)

APPENDIX E

Image 1: "Fuck" is the first word on the first page of *Alias* #1 (2001)

Image 2: Client attacks, Jessica resists, *Alias* #1 (2001)

Image 3: Police officers move from admiration to dismissal to oppression, *Alias* #1 (2001)

Image 4: Police officers move from admiration to dismissal to oppression, cont'd, *Alias* #1 (2001)

Image 5: Gaydos' focus on faces, *Alias* #3 (2002)

Image 6: Jessica watches Steve Rogers become Captain America, *Alias* #1 (2001)
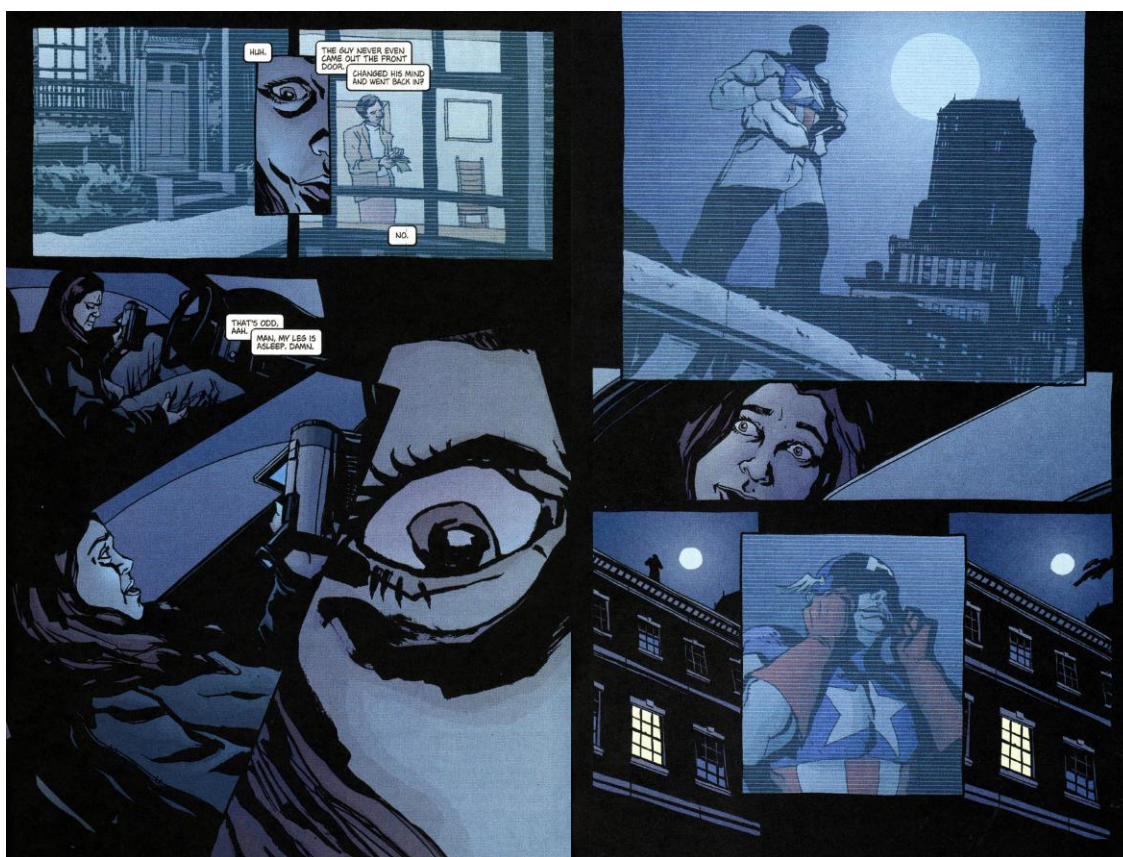
Image 7: Jessica watches Steve Rogers become Captain America, cont'd, *Alias* #1 (2001)

Image 8: Jessica is strong in defeat, *Alias* #4 (2002)

Image 9: Marko chokes Jessica, *Alias* #4 (2002)

Image 10: Jessica has (anal?) sex with Luke Cage, *Alias* #1 (2001)

Image 11: Jessica attempts to replicate with Scott her sexual experience with Luke, *Alias* #17 (2003)

Image 12: Flashback to Killgrave's abuse, *Alias* #25 (2003)

Image 13: Flashback to Thor attacking Jessica, *Alias* #26 (2003)

Image 14: Flashback to the Avengers attacking, Ms. Marvel rescuing, Jessica, *Alias* #26 (2003)

Image 15: Jessica wakes from her second coma, *Alias* #26 (2003)

Image 16: A ridiculous apology, *Alias* #26 (2003)

Image 17: Flashback referencing 1960s-70s era, *Alias* #25 (2003)

Image 18: Gaydos' "after Steve Ditko" flashback, *Alias* #22 (2003)

Image 19: Rick Mays' Manga-influenced flashback, *Alias* #26 (2003)

Image 20: Jessica smiles as she decides to become a superhero, *Alias* #23 (2003)

Image 21: Superhero memorabilia in Rebecca's room, *Alias* #11 (2002)

Image 22: Rebecca's "collage book," *Alias* #13 (2002)

Image 23: Bagley's Gaydos-esque emphasis on Jessica's face, *The Pulse* #1 (2004)
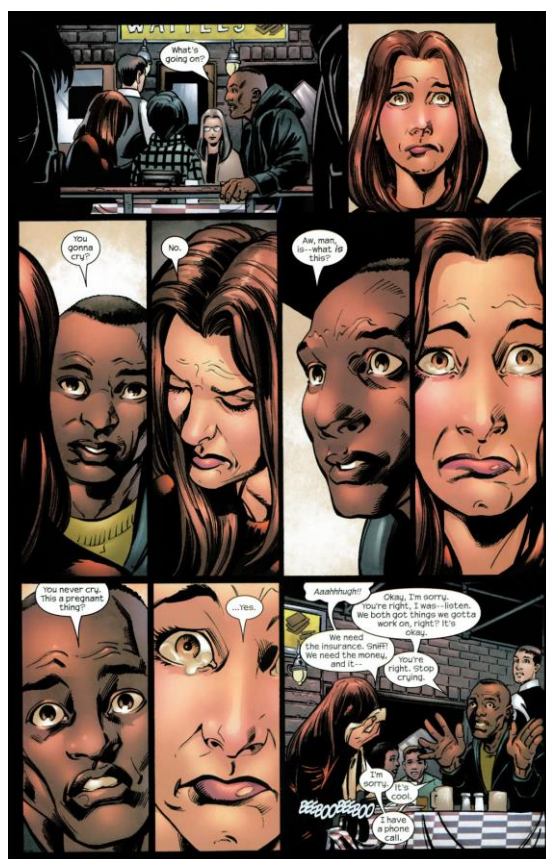
Image 24: Pregnant Jessica as comically hyperemotional, *The Pulse* #3 (2004)

Image 25: Pregnant Jessica as hysterical, *The Pulse* #5 (2004)

Image 26: Pregnant Jessica faints, *The Pulse* #8 (2005)

Image 27: Repetitive pregnancy-related drama, *The Pulse* #7 and #8 (2005)

Image 28: Jessica as pencilled by Mike Deodato, *The New Avengers* Volume 2 #9 and #11 (2011)

Image 29: Killgrave warns Jessica not to "contradict the continuity," *Alias* #28 (2004)