FOUR-COLOR POLITICAL VISIONS: ORIGIN, AFFECT, AND ASSEMBLAGE IN AMERICAN SUPERHERO COMIC BOOKS

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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This project develops extant theories of political affect and relational identification and affinity formation by tracing how the visual images of an understudied archive—American superhero comic books—work to build multiple, alternative, fitful, inchoate, and sometimes radically creative spaces for visions of the political to take shape and develop over time. By analyzing and interpreting the generic superhero phenomenon of origin stories in comic books and by mapping the formal and narrative techniques used to construct origin stories, I show how received understandings of power, order, justice, violence, whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormativity often linger outside of language in an analytically untapped relational space between bodies—the space of political affect. Visual images of superheroes thus do more than take up space within political sign-systems; I argue them as material engines of affect, as engines of potential and usefully critical political identities and affinities. Superhero comic books, a cultural form often disregarded as childish or even ideologically dangerous, are thus recovered in this project as theoretically complex, offering speculative feminisms, anti-racism, and queer temporalities that link these popular objects of visual culture to ongoing traditions of utopianism and foundational revisionism within American political culture.

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The dissertation is an exercise in shambling curiosity, a fumbling, jangling, hurly-burly sort of project that, were it not for the better sense of one's betters, surely ought to dismiss one's sense altogether. But seeing as how I'm yet here, and not currently googling anything about cats, or curating "active interest" in Viking funereal practices, or indulging in the lesser lores of J.R.R. Tolkien, or poking around cutting-edge research on space volcanoes, some thanks are in order:

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For Emmet mostly, and Astrid sometimes.

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INTRODUCTION:

ON ORIGIN STORIES

AND OTHER FOUR-COLOR ASSEMBLAGES

"If language is political, politics is linguistic."

- Anne Norton[1]

"If you only have words, every problem looks discursive."

- Teju Cole[2]

In the beginning, there was a photograph (Fig. 1):

Figure 1: Then-Senator Barack Obama posing with Superman statue in Metropolis, Illinois, circa-May 2006.

[1] Norton, Anne. 2004. *95 Theses on Politics, Culture, and Method*. New Haven: Yale UP, p. 17.

[2] Cole, Teju (@TejuCole). 2014. Tweet from 5/25/14. Accessed 5/25/14 at https://twitter.com/tejucole/status/470735581236826114

Here we see then-Senator Barack Obama, from 2006, posed in front of the vivid-bright blue and red Superman statue occupying the downtown mall in Metropolis, Illinois. Obama is depicted mimicking the comic book hero's posture in a gesture celebrating the completion of his 50th town-hall meeting in Massac County, comporting his body into a kind of hero-pose—fists on hips, broad chest flared, eyes on the horizon: a generically classic visual-rhetorical statement of strength in the comics, to be sure, but something of a visually dubious act when one is clothed in the kinds of everyday political drag that Obama sports. No strength of pose can save a sleeves-rolled-up white oxford shirt and striped maroon tie from the tragically quotidian. Not when, rising behind him, stands a figure perhaps taller in the public-consciousness than any statue could ever possibly be able to physically reproduce, cape flapping boldly, spit-curl firmly set in place. Obama in hero-pose is cute photo-op, a predictably managed moment in political image messaging: "Obama is like that guy behind him, just a little smaller and, you know, a human United States senator. Not a super-powered alien at all."

But the beginning doesn't end there, not in 2006, and not least for a politician who, in 2004, gave one of the most electrifying and talked about speeches at the Democratic National Convention, the keynote: an address that was steeped in the rhetoric of immigrant dreams, the power of historical legacies, and the political promise of reconciliation and hope[3]—the kind of speech that connected with and inspired people, that drew a multiplicity of standpoints, identities and horizons together into communion. That speech, then, not unlike the hero-pose moment in Metropolis, Illinois, that speech bore political promise and immediately recognizable cultural-political weight. It was a

[3] Frank, David A., and Mark Lawrence McPhail. 2005. Barack Obama's address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention: Trauma, compromise, consilience, and the (im)possibility of racial reconciliation, *Rhetoric & Public Affairs 8*(4), pp. 571-594.

moment of present consequence and historical reference, a melding of electrified audience and future political preference. It affected people.

There would be other beginnings for Obama. The photograph from Metropolis is just one in a line of many that had come before, and many that would come again. And, perhaps curiously, the linkages to superhero comic books would come again, as well.

In 2008, comic book artist and painter Alex Ross composed a portrait-painting of then-candidate Obama at the height of campaign-season, just prior to the presidential election, in a work he titled "Time for a Change" (Fig. 2). The painting depicts Obama ripping open his shirt—again, visually relying on the generic secret-identity conventions

Figure 2. Alex Ross' 2008 painting of then-candidate Obama, titled "Time for a Change."

of superhero comics—and revealing beneath his mild-mannered exterior a bodysuit emblazoned with a giant red and white "O." Of course, as the 2006 photograph from Metropolis could attest, the "O" in this instance alludes to the great, stylized "S" planted on Superman's chest—a badge of sorts, a license of purpose to fight on behalf of the good, to protect the legacies of the past and the shining promises of the future from anyone who might threaten them and, by extension, us—"the people." So popular was Ross' portrait-painting of "Super Obama" that "within days, bootleg versions of the image began to appear on T-shirts in street vendor stalls across the country."[4] Later, riding the conflation of comic book iconography and presidential aspiration that had so taken the country's interest and further energized his political dreams, "On October 16, 2008, Obama joked at the 63rd Annual Alfred E. Smith Memorial Foundation Dinner: 'Contrary to the rumors that you've heard, I was not born in a manger. I was actually born on Krypton, and sent here by my father Jor-El to save the planet Earth."[5] It was valuable, it would seem, to connect his nearly-fulfilled pitch toward the highest political office in America to the powerful political-cultural legacies embedded in superhero comic books. Because, insofar as superhero histories and iconographies function as easily-understandable allusions to four-color visions of "truth, justice…and all that

[4] Weldon, Glen. 2013. *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography*. Hoboken: Wiley and Sons, np.

[5] Ibid. Of course, a significant dimension of his joke about being born on Krypton is him poking fun at conservative political pundits and activists who, in disconcerting earnestness, believed Obama to be ineligible for the Office of the Presidency by virtue of a fantasy-narrative in which Obama was not, in fact, an American citizen by birth. For my sake here, though, it seems fitting point out that Obama seems happy to participate in the linkages made between his public political self and various superhero iconographies and histories.

stuff,"[6] the visual-rhetorical force of images and associations is palpable—an organizing force that sets political identities and affinities in motion.

Theorizing Political Origins

Which is why, I suppose, we so often rely on solid beginnings to orient our politics: in order that the capacities and potentialities of political identity and affinity formation are imagined as grounded, anthropomorphized feet firmly planted, settled at least momentarily and at least insofar as it allows identity and affinity to be sorted and accounted for, taken stock of, "hailed" as, given direction—indeed, to be widely recognizable as *political* identity and affinity at all. The solid beginning entails an explicit account of power; grounded-ness, so figured, is imagined as the necessary origin for expressions of power, and of political action more generally. Any claims to legitimate expression of power (or counter-claims of resistance to illegitimate expressions of power) rely on the basic sense of firm beginnings. Political struggle must come from somewhere, even if where it comes from is itself a matter of contention. Indeed, much political conflict is sown in the creaking movement of originary moments from one to the next, as the political reality constructed through one beginning may circumscribe and limit the political potentialities of the next.

Such is the draw for what Umberto Eco describes as the "furious hyperreality" of American culture and its peculiar penchant for representation of originary moments. According to Eco, the origin, torn asunder and reconstructed in each creaking lurch forward, in each political contest won/lost, "assumes the aspect of a reincarnation" (1986,

[6] Saunders, Ben. 2011. *Do The Gods Wear Capes? Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes.* London: Continuum, p. 16.

7). At any given moment, Eco sees in representation of origins a rebirth—literally, an en-fleshment of animated spirit. Built to meet a desire for material authenticity—that is, having something to grasp and to hold and find meaning in—at the same time it postpones the inevitability of corporeal decay, the reincarnated originary moment is a practical relief from politics, itself a practice of politics, a beginning again that must always write over history and set out a new promise of tomorrow. In its representation, the solid beginning desired for in the next moment is the promise of politics—liberation and deliverance given through newly (and acutely post-hoc) ordained constructions of power.

Through this political promise of liberation and deliverance via foundational struggle it should be relatively uncontentious to note that solid beginnings, or origin stories, are useful as the "ground beneath our feet," the geological/spatial field through which the political is made possible, and the topographical surface on which new identifications, associations, and formations congeal and work toward durable political change. Beginnings set the stage and point the way forward. They orient us, align us along a pattern of palpable rhythms and set us on a coherent—if ambivalent and unfinished in the moment[7]—narrative arc, structuring shared rules of action and giving shape to the indeterminate potentials inherent in whatever may follow.

This orientating force of origin stories holds true even when, as Ernest Renan famously argues, modernity begs beginnings ultimately be forgotten if the newly ordained expression of political power is to sustain its own animating force through time. "Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the

[7] Babha, Homi K. 1994. Introduction: Narrating the nation. In *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Babha, pp. 1-7.

creation of a nation, which is why progress in historical studies often constitutes a danger for [the principles of] nationality" (Renan, 11).[8] The political ends of modernity—and for Renan, the forgetful nation is quintessentially modern—are to circumscribe the past in order that we may carefully defend and buttress the narrative we find ourselves *in media res*. The struggle for power in the present moment is a contest to define the scope and limit of historiographical context, of the proper limit and understanding of time as it is presently lived. Forgetting and error are thus politically expedient; employed through the exercise of power and its ability to augment the boundaries of collective memory, they become tools to structure present experience as providence, as here and well enough so. A formative contradiction, then, Renanian forgetting of origins is politically conservative; extant power is served through the loss of beginnings.

Benedict Anderson, revising and extending Renan's position in his conceptualization of "imagined communities," argues that in the United States, this struggle over origins has—at critical moments—presented itself synchronically, which is to say that "new" and "old" origin stories have been constructed as "co-existing within homogenous, empty time" (Anderson 187). As opposed to diachronic time, where past events are figured as predecessors to the present—each next moment bearing debt and witness to the structuring force of the prior—synchronic time for Anderson is an extended and extensive present where past events are collapsed into the elongated moment of present lived experience—each next moment caught up in what he calls "sibling competition" with "parallel" moments composed through technological innovation and industrial capitalism (187-8). For Anderson, this connection between synchronicity and parallelism is important: in order to imagine a coherent national

[8] Brackets in Thom's translation.

community, power's narrative must collapse time as well as space—it must overcome the organizational obstacle of hyphenated (spatio-temporal) remoteness in order to build the fiction of shared past and destiny.

Anderson illustrates this by pointing to the ostensible origins of the United States. He provides a useful example of the connections between synchronicity, parallelism, and forceful beginnings when he writes:

> It is difficult today to recreate in the imagination a condition of life in which the nation was felt to be something utterly new. But so it was in that epoch. The Declaration of Independence of 1776 makes absolutely no reference to Christopher Columbus, Roanoke, or the Pilgrim Fathers, nor are the grounds put forward to justify independence in any way 'historical,' in the sense of highlighting the antiquity of the American people. Indeed, marvelously, the American nation is not even mentioned. A profound feeling that a radical break with the past was occurring – a 'blasting open of the continuum of history' spread rapidly. (193)

The "utterly new" political project of the nation is argued here as a historical contingency, a product of the time that, today, seems so very basic as to be a "condition of life." Today, we might often imagine The Founding in diachronic time, merely but one point of many on the continuum of history's march into the present. During the Revolution of 1776, however, Anderson contends that history is imagined as

synchronic—an undoing of the continuum of time replaced instead by the extended and extensive synchronic moment, "a radical break."

For Renan's investigation of the nation as well as Anderson's imagined communities, we can see that the origin story is as much a conceptual tool as it is historical artifact. It is as much a method of approaching and thinking the past as it is itself an object of study. Such a distinction is consequential insofar as it gestures towards the ambivalent and contradictory ends of origin stories as political projects. As a conceptual tool, the origin story organizes and hierarchizes our thinking of origins at the very instant it excavates and exposes grounds once lost. It is, in a sense, archaeological in nature. Using Anderson's example above, we see the archaeological process of uncovering and revelation that undergirds the anti-historical Declaration of Independence of 1776. In its "radical break with the past" it is nonetheless bound up in the history it buries within a "profound feeling" of futurity. The Declaration spreads historical erasure and forgetting like a trawling net, necessarily catching in its claims to the "utterly new" a series of historical precedents—the multiplicity of North American Euro-foundings in Columbus, Roanoke, and the Pilgrims—that cannot help but be weaved into the construction of an alternative historical imaginary, even if only silently so. Whether we recognize the multiplicity of formative silences or not, the origin story built around the Declaration organizes and hierarchizes our understanding of history, preferring a singular constitutive moment—an historical imaginary that in its organization of narrative authority is at least also aesthetic alongside its formative political force and the potential futures entailed therein.

In considering the origin story as a conceptual tool, we see how it is also itself an historical artifact. Origin stories don't just tell us where we come from; origin stories also come from somewhere. They have a place and time, both of which can be uncovered/recovered through historical work, piecing together the story of the story. Renan refers to this as "progress in historical studies"—the ever-more nuanced revelation of historical truths as they actually happened, as they came together to construct the political narratives and institutional architectures of the here and now—the nation, the state, the people, and so on. But in this arti-factual revelation of origin stories Renan sees an element of political risk, of instability and disruption: historians may lay claim to the truths of the past—to re-presenting the actual historical events that composed the originary moment in question—but do so at the risk of disrupting the rhythms propelling forward the now self-ordaining order of expressed political power. "[P]rogress in historical studies" is disruptive insofar as it unsettles the taken-for-granted, the common sense qualities of political order.

To some, this disruption of political order would seem a welcome opportunity. Indeed, and explicitly so, at stake in historical revelation are the contours of potential political change. Recently, many scholars in the social sciences have re-examined the value of fetishizing questions of political structure and order—a powerful and itself politically-inflected approach to the study of politics—instead looking toward and attending to the everyday aspects of political change that seem to, in various and compelling ways, "unstructure" politics.[9] The notion that political change must be the

[9] As Gerald Berk, Dennis C. Galvan, and Victoria Hattam point out in the Introduction to their edited volume on "political creativity," the move to "unstructure" politics is itself dis-satisfying. I believe my argument here plays off of their dis-satisfaction in a slightly different manner, moving further away from institutions of governance and questions of political change more easily recognizable to scholars of

product of "mechanisms" and formal rules and procedures inherent within political order has, for that unstructured crowd, fallen away under its own weight. Order and change, structure and agency: concepts that, treated oppositionally, once benefitted social scientists insofar as they provided "elegant" explanations, have been yawning under the mass of their own proliferation. Hard and fast mechanisms of political change now abound;[10] entire schools of analysis have been built around identifying and tracking the true historical moment that formative political order was christened.[11]

But once useful notions that saw change as the episodic friction between titanic, conflicting political orders are being challenged by approaches to political change that see order and change as entangled. For the unstructured, this is the heart of a creative and recombinatory politics: "From a political creativity perspective, power is best understood relationally as social practices through which subjects and subjectivities, institutions and authority are established, challenged, and reconfigured."[12] Standardized rules and roles, the norms that seemingly entrench order, are peeled away through a style of historical analysis that seeks to show the contingency and disruption masked by the pretense of political stability. Instead of the headlong analytic rush to finally reveal again the high-functionaries of history, those points of singularity from which the present institutional

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institutionalism. If the politics of everyday change and creativity works broadly within our experience, I see my work as a friendly addendum to theirs—one that pushes scholars of politics to take seriously aspects of the everyday that are often disregarded or given less than thorough treatment. See the Introduction to their edited volume: Berk, Gerald, Dennis C. Galvan, and Victoria Hattam. 2013. *Political Creativity: Reconfiguring Institutional Order and Change.* Philadelphia: Penn UP, pp. 1-28.

[10] Here I gesture towards the proliferation of literature on so-called "qualitative methods" invested in research paradigms that purport to unlock so-called "black boxes" of politics—areas of analysis that are resistant to quantification and formal analysis.

[11] See: Skowronek, Steven, and Matthew Glassman, eds. 2008. *Formative Acts.* Philadelphia: Penn UP; and Karen Orren and Steven Skowronek, eds. 2004. *The Search for American Political Development.* Cambridge: UP.

[12] Berk, Galvan, and Hattam, *Political Creativity*, p. 4.

order ventured forth, political creativity sees in order a precarious mangle, an ad-hoc and pragmatic jumble of poached ideas and usefully ambivalent refigurations that open up ground for new articulations of recombinatory order to be made up as political agents maneuver their way through and around institutions.[13] Political creativity is thus positively disruptive, in several manners of speaking. The origins of order are traced out as manifold, piecemeal, and processual. Unstructured political creativity is the ongoing art of making do.

In addition to disruption as a positive, creative political project, there also looms a question of historical revelation—or reclamation—as a matter of political justice. As Renan suggests and Anderson illustrates, forgetting towards the sustained nation entails the erasure of political foundings, the actual moments of violent and destructive creation that serve to constitute the resulting nation. To erase these moments is to sanitize the violence of actual revolutionary political histories, to rid from the consciousness of extant political order a literal sense of the bodies drifting in the twinned wakes of political foundings and forgettings. The material tokens that serve as memorials to a particular founding, or a particular way of remembering foundings, can cover over the real violence and exploitation that gave energy to foundings in the first place. Whether these tokens are small, such as the miniature portraits of "founding fathers" analyzed by Eric Slauter;[14] popularly circulated, such as copperplate engravings and political cartoons studied by Jason Frank;[15] or made publically official, such as museum exhibitions and memorials

[13] Ibid., pp. 1-28.

[14] Slauter, Eric. 2012. *The State as a Work of Art: The Cultural Origins of the Constitution.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[15] Frank, Jason. 2010. *Constituent Moments*. Durham: Duke UP.

interpreted by Timothy Luke[16] and Kevin Bruyneel,[17]respectively, they ought to be understood as techniques of originizing and articulating a political order that at best reduces and at worst fully marginalizes the complex and violent histories that comprise political foundings. Reclamation of these histories—a political project distinct from revelation in the same way that indigenous histories are distinct from their "discovery"—is a matter of political justice. Reclamation can serve to destabilize and undercut hegemonic political narratives that continue to dominate and oppress through the maintenance of extant order. If forgetting of political foundings is a violence that absolves itself within a particular way of remembering the past, counter-origins and their bid to reclaim multiple points of departure into the current moment work as important, untidy political projects, creatively reconfiguring order as polymodal flux through concerted destabilization and tinkering with the past.[18]

Jacques Ranciere argues that "'origins' never stop repeating themselves."[19] The repetition and reiteration of origin stories, even as they are forgotten and delinked from conscious political action, remains a powerful force in the production and maintenance of order. Renan's "historical error," ostensibly willful (or perhaps merely ignorant) mis-representations of the past—these are the vocal means of elucidating political futures, of orienting politics through repetitious articulations of collectivity and shared purpose. Perhaps, then, it bears repeating: origins orient. They textualize and give texture to the

[16] Luke, Timothy. 1992. *Shows of Force: Power, Politics, and Ideology in Art Exhibitions.* Durham: Duke UP.

[17] Bruyneel, Kevin. 2014. The king's body: The Martin Luther King Jr. Memorial and the politics of collective memory, *History & Memory 26*(1), pp. 75-108.

[18] Berk, Galvan, and Hattam, *Political Creativity*, p. 1-28.

[19] Qtd. in Frank, *Constituent Moments*, front matter.

place from where the newly announced We announces itself, as well as where the We may go forth, continually announcing itself as there. The origin story is a "constituent moment,"[20] calling attention to both itself and, crucially, the recurrent truth that "the designation of origins is a political act."[21]

Origin stories are thus often considered the discursive compass and scale of our political maps, a "natural" (and discursively naturalize-able) guide through the seemingly incoherent flux and churn of lived experience. Though continuously repeated, each enunciation figures new boundaries in the same moment it erases the old, carving through flux with the addition of ever more points of origin and orientation. As Victoria Hattam and Joseph Lowndes write, "Beginnings…mark the frontiers of change; they are tremors indicating the potential power of broad-based discursive change" (Hattam and Lowndes, 205).

Under this discursive logic, borrowed here from the work of Ernesto Laclau on "chains of equivalence" and reformulated in the concept of "associative chains," Hattam and Lowndes argue that all innovative political formations will require what they call "linguistic recombinations," or creative word play that introduces new pathways of identification through the use of novel and/or reconfigured terms. The political force of new language offered in the "beginnings" articulated can be analyzed by looking at its subsequent dispersal: "Significant political change, as we understand it, is achieved through circulation and taken-for-grantedness of the discursive linkages that follow" (Hattam and Lowndes, 204). The scope of politics, and the possibilities of change available therein, is thus in part determined within what Hattam and Lowndes read as

[20] Ibid.

[21] Noron, Anne. 2004. *95 Theses on Politics, Culture, and Method*. New Haven: Yale UP, p. 133.

those tenuous, contingent early moments of linguistic association-building, where identifications and affinities are being crafted and directed to new sites of contestation, conservation, or political claims-making. These early moments, the origin stories of new linkages within the polity, come to act as though they were a kind of mutagenic DNA—a script laying out the foundation of what may follow (though need not necessarily follow) that offers the possibility of stable change to the fundamental properties of ensuing political life. Language is not just a site of politics, but the rule structure of it; by virtue of its potential capacity to authorize forceful beginnings, language is argued here as the medium through which our political landscape (and our analysis of it) forms over time. Durable change can happen, but only through the hard work of discursive reconstruction. And if we are to be alive to this change and the possibilities entailed therein, they argue, we ought to focus our analytic and interpretive energies on language. Indeed, as their own italicized words emphasize, "*Political formation is best discovered though an analysis of words in motion"* (Hattam and Lowndes, 205).

To argue that beginnings offer the discursive ground for potential change is an important step in any approach to politics, but it is, nonetheless, one that seems incomplete. Of course we can understand this argument as its own origin story, a beginning that marks out its own frontiers of change and horizons of potential within political analysis; Hattam and Lowndes self-consciously utilize a poststructuralist toolset in their work, carving space within political-institutional analysis of order and change for a nuanced understanding of the relationship between "micro speech practices" and "governing authority" (205). Such a move is undoubtedly valuable as a technique of extending the boundaries of historical-institutional analysis within the literature on

American Political Development, and the discipline of political science more broadly, to include the rich terrain of culture. Yet, insofar as it seeks to reshape the topography of political analysis, this move must also fall victim to a certain kind of epistemological circumscription that unfortunately limits the scope of the political's recognizability. If political formation is in language, "*best discovered through an analysis of words in motion*," then the epistemological circumscription of what is knowable as the political through Hattam and Lowndes' approach (here among many others with a commitment to The Discursive) bleeds into an ontological and experiential boundary drawing that marks as "out-side" any way of being, or being in relation to, that relies upon the sensorial capacities of the body as a vector for experiencing and participating in politics.[22] That is, the analytical move to show how the process of "naturalizing" language comes to not only clear the way, but to fill the ground of politics *actually* does the work of effectively blinding us to the complex, polymodal qualities of experience that are registered by our bodies as other-than-language forces acting on the sensorium.

When politics is constrained in language, bodies and their experiences tend to be obscured, rendered virtually unintelligible as political.[23] Signs, words, systems of signifiers and signified: these are the technical means through which identifications are formed, regulated, and recomposed under the strictures of various poststructuralist systems of thought; language is often figured as both tool and material for the construction of political identification, affinity, and consciousness. In this space bodies and their various capacities are lost. Problematically, the formation of political

[22] Jane Bennett. 2010. *Vibrant Matter.* Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

[23] That is, unless bodies are figured as "texts," such as in Anne Norton's work in *Republic of Signs* (1993) on Americans as "people of the text."

identifications is conceptualized as a psychological mechanism that leaves little room to account for "the bodily disciplines," or the complex corporeal sensorium that works to animate lived experience as such. As Jane Bennett argues, "the bodily disciplines through which ethical sensibilities and social relations are formed and reformed are *themselves* political and constitute a whole (underexplored) field of 'micropolitics' without which any principle or policy risks being just a bunch of words. There will be no greening of the economy, no redistribution of wealth, no enforcement or extension of rights without human dispositions, moods, and cultural ensembles hospitable to these effects" (Bennett 2010, xii). Actual political projects are circumscribed by forgotten senses—"the bodily disciplines"—by language and discourse figured as *the* field through which the political animates itself.

For Bennett, the mobilization of the Deleuzo-Guattarian concept "the micro" or "micropolitics" is not contingent upon a difference of scale, a micro/macro, molecular/molar split that seeks to investigate the smaller, "underexplored" dimensions of political experience that our received repertoires of analysis otherwise disregard.[24] Rather, Bennett's use of "micropolitics" is contingent upon a difference of quality, a difference that asserts the intensity of bodily sensuousness as itself political. This understanding of micropolitics is thus distinguishable from Hattam and Lowndes' approach insofar as the micro is not merely a *scalar* quality—a treatment of the innovative or recombinatory speech act as prior to and constitutive of a resulting durable

[24] Brian Massumi writes, "It is crucial for understanding Deleuze and Guattari that the *distinction between molecular and molar has nothing whatsoever to do with scale*" (1992, 54, emphasis in original). This is a strong reading of Deleuzoguattarian micropolitics, but his vehemence is instructive: the molecular (micro) is not subject of the molar (macro); tiny and otherwise seemingly insignificant qualities of experience do not suddenly become political when they merge together, congeal, naturalize, or circulate and disperse widely enough to become hegemonic within discourse. Indeed, they already are political, even if their apparent situation in the world is otherwise (if they are *apparent* at all).

political identification or association (e.g., something small producing something big)—but an *atmospheric* quality—a treatment of bodily sense and relationality as elements of imbricated and interpenetrating networks that can (but need not) coalesce into particular durable formations, yet nonetheless matter as distinctly political forces.

Such a shift in understanding the micro—from the merely scalar/spatial to the meteorological,[25] from the "ground beneath our feet" to a kind of inter-corporeal sensory swirl—dislodges the originary capacity of the political from implied fantasies of linguistic control and mastery, where the small and creative speech act can, with appropriate care and special application of skill, generate enough momentum to land within the register of political common sense.[26] Bennett's investment in the

[25] Arun Saldanha. 2010. "Politics and Difference." In *Taking Place: Non-Representational Theories and Geography.* Eds. Ben Anderson and Paul Harrison. London: Ashgate.

[26] I should be careful here to note that Hattam and Lowndes don't specifically advocate for an individualist understanding of the formative act—indeed, their reliance on the subsequent diffusion and dispersal of recombined language into the register of common sense would seem to argue against any notion that the liberal individual is political agent *par exellance*. At the core of their analysis, however, is a reliance on specific historical-political actors and their individual speech-efforts to reshape discourse in service of new political associations. Though the work of linguistic recombination spills out across myriad political actors, interests, associations, contexts, and temporalities—and is reshaped through that process ostensibly outside subjective intentional purpose—new "associative chains" have, in their analysis, individuated and identifiable points of origin: Charles Wallace Collins is figured as the "most influential intellectual and strategist" of the Dixiecrat movement (206); Horace Kallen is situated as "perhaps the premier theorist of American ethnicity" (212); and Condoleeza Rice, though not yet as successful in engineering significant change as her counterpart cases, is regarded as the locus of "new associative chains in which the relationship between civil rights and foreign policy are being realigned" (214). Thus, as Hattam and Lowndes' analysis works to show, it can be argued that this approach emphasizes what Adam Sheingate might call the "entrepreneurial" qualities of linguistic recombination, which is to say that it privileges the particular force of individual action within a complex and dynamic institutional setting. Implicitly and through examples, Hattam and Lowndes argue that individual actors can, under the right discursive, institutional, and historical parameters, work to effect significant change—that individual action can serve as the engine of recombinatory political associations. Insofar as this appears to be a smuggling of the liberal individual into the framework of political originizing, I believe this is a mistake. Such individuation of forceful beginnings weakens our understanding of movement, interaction, imbrication, and feedback, and by reducing our view of politics to the new enunciation stirring—creative speechifying, perhaps— we lose sight of how language is but one component of political experience in the world. Hattam and Lowndes are an integral part of the movement within political science working to expand institutional analysis beyond the cold and dreary boundaries of rigid order, but in utilizing language as the ground of political association-building they fall prey to a liberal individualism inherent in what Geoff Boucher, in a related context, refers to as "the ambiguous sociality" of the speaking "I." For that argument in full, see: Geoff

micropolitical here is thus a re-figuration of the scope of politics that eschews topographic metaphor, or at least upends its tendency toward fixity and stability.[27] In addition, it avoids the trappings of geomorphological timescales, wherein analysis of politics must always be historical excavation. Instead of broadly narrative historicity—a telling backwards of why and/or how—Bennett looks to the immediacy of embodied experience as resolutely political, as always providing new potential moments of origin and constitution—a telling forwards of what.

Critically, though, these moments should not be understood as causal "automatism or mechanism" (Bennett 2010, 3). They are, borrowing again from Deleuze and Guattari, "assemblages," or "a confederation of human and nonhuman elements" that are heterogeneous, disruptive, internally conflictual, unpredictable:

> Assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. Assemblages are living, throbbing confederations that are able to function despite the persistent presence of energies that confound them from within. They have uneven topographies, because some of the points at which the various affects and bodies cross paths are more heavily trafficked than others, and so power is not distributed equally across its surface. Assemblages are not governed by any central head: no one materiality or type of material has sufficient competence to

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Boucher. 2006. The politics of performativity: A critique of Judith Butler. In *Parrhesia: A Journal of Critical Philosophy 1*, pp. 112-141.

[27] Think here, for instance, of the tendencies embedded in the Foucauldian notion of "sedimented discourses." History is metaphorically figured as stratum, layers and layers of linguistic utterance stacked on top of one another—sacred speech corpses posed as monumentalized foundations in the catacombs beneath the modern metropolis of the taken-for-granted. Whether analyzed synchronically through archaeological methods or diachronically through genealogical methods, sedimented discourses are stiff stuff, the *mortis* necessarily paired with much (assumed) analytical *rigor.*

> determine consistently the trajectory or impact of the group. The effects generated by an assemblage are, rather, emergent properties, emergent in that their ability to make something happen (a newly inflected materialism, a blackout, a hurricane, a war on terror) is distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone. Each member and proto-member of the assemblage has a certain vital force, but there is also an effectivity proper to the grouping as such: an agency *of* the assemblage. And precisely because each member-actant maintains an energetic pulse slightly "off" from that of the assemblage, an assemblage is never a stolid block but an open-ended collective, a "non-totalizable sum." An assemblage thus not only has a distinctive history of formation but a finite life span. (Bennett 2010, 23-4)

Taking cues from Bennett's political-theoretic use of Deleuze and Guattari, this dissertation argues that origin stories, as/in assemblages, offer a rich set of interpenetrating signals suggesting "that this is a world bowling along, in which decisions have to be made for the moment, by the moment." (Thrift 2008, 114). Origin stories may indeed come from somewhere, but the moment in which decisions are made "by the moment" suggests that origin stories carry their force not as historical artifact, but as a compositional element of the present moment. It follows, then, as Nigel Thrift articulates, that "This is a momentary world… that this is a world which must be acted into… And as a world which is being acted into it produces effects that must then be accounted for in a never-ending chain of circumstances" (114). In other words, by attending to the force of origin stories in the present moment, I want to the space to argue that this is a recursively

vital world (not a discursively inert one). “Acting into” is a (literally?!) vital political technique that takes seriously the relational capacities of human and nonhuman bodies as they interact and (re-)instantiate their emergent trajectories in the moment, mutually enfolding and expressing what Bennett calls “thing-power” when she tries, “impossibly, to name the moment of independence (from subjectivity) possessed by things, a moment that must be there, since things do in fact affect other bodies, enhancing or weakening their power” (Bennett 2010, 3). Following Bennett, we can argue that origins derive their “thing-power” not from the moment prior—the layered archaeological moment that insists upon subjective constitution of the thing—but from the moment of interaction within the assemblage—the moment of members and proto-members spilling into one another and effecting an agency of “the grouping as such.”

In the emergent flux of assemblage origins still matter as political, just not as terra firma. Origin stories as assemblage entail “an unfolding in space and time, constantly creating new worlds—a pluriversal experiment rather than a universalist statement of fact” (Amin and Thrift 2013, 40). Put differently, origin stories matter as political not because they provide the solid basis of identification and association-building that follows, *but because they move*. They aren’t pinned down, stuck, plastered in strata, bound to waning politics; instead, origins careen and bounce, play, emerge, circle back, and re-announce us all in a stir. And in that movement, they transmit power across and between bodies, subtly altering trajectories and opening new “lines of flight,” or political potentialities that are not pre-scripted but are immanent to the emergence of assemblage. This “pluriversal experiment” is an open field, irreducible to any particular base of power. Ambition, will, intent (ever-human machinations): these are only partly

accountable for the roiling engine of assemblage, and only then obtusely. The assemblage isn't being pushed by the skilled application of language—an imbalanced, asymmetrical application of force; it is, in Michel de Certeau's parlance, "walking in the city," surrounded by asymmetries of power, constituted in these same dynamics of polar accretion, yet only ever incompletely so. Despite (and because of) asymmetrical power dynamics, the assemblage moves on its own accord, in response to the rhythms and impulses immanent to its being in relation to its environment, wandering, meandering, instantiating new lines of flight as it cuts across old, never impelled by teleological or cognized notions of progress yet active and alive all the same, creative in the moment of the world it inhabits.

This kind of agency—the agency of the assemblage—is the ever-moving engine of political creativity. It is the agency of origins that "never stop repeating themselves," never stop recreating the geographical space that, in the next moment, will allow for the assemblage to enfold new source material, enact and animate different bodies within the "grouping as such," never seeking the final ground from which the originary political project may emanate but living out the process of a non-totalizable, open-ended collective that, through its very movement, energizes its politics and lends force to the multiplicity of potential futures that congeal (or not) as the assemblage bowls along.

The agency of the assemblage is force of the origins it creates. As power is circulated and lines of flight are instantiated across bodies, the assemblage is, to poach from William Connolly, an affective "resonance machine" that foments and catalyzes its own sources of energy. Much like Bennett's making use of Deleuzo-guattarian micropolitics, Connolly's conceptualization of the resonance machine seeks to show how

tethers of affinity are often built outside of traditional theoretical models of political subjectivity, identification, and recognition. "[I]n politics," Connolly argues:

> diverse elements infiltrate into the others, metabolizing into a moving complex—Causation as resonance between elements that become fused together to a considerable degree. Here causality, as relations of dependence between separate factors, morphs into energized complexities of mutual imbrication and interinvolvement, in which heretofore unconnected or loosely associated elements fold, bend, blend, emulsify, and dissolve into each other, forging a qualitative assemblage resistant to classical models of explanation.[28]

Politics is thus not reducible to a singular aspect of experience, as any one element of the "moving complex" is not responsible for the resulting shape of the whole (or the potentialities alive therein). One aspect of experience cannot enact political change; one aspect of experience cannot be politically causal. To apply an analytic framework to the assemblage that portends to account for only one aspect of experience—such as language or sign-systems in discourse—is therefore ineluctably reductive, disinterested in the "relations of dependence" that animate the "complexities of mutual imbrication and interinvolvement." The agency of the assemblage is resonant force, amplifying, modulating, magnifying, attenuating, and transmitting across the spectrum of bodies caught up in tethered, tenuous relation.

[28] William Connolly. 2005. The evangelical-capitalist resonance machine. *Political Theory 33* (December), p. 870.

Connolly explains his conception of the resonance machine through an analysis of what he sees as the contemporary American political ethos, a situation where connections between Christian evangelicalism and "cowboy capitalism" work to construct a monstrous political alliance[29] capable of bridging otherwise serious existential and doctrinal differences in service of a congealing "abstract will to revenge." The ethos' pathology is—in Connolly's tongue-in-cheek diagnosis—"The O'Reilly Factor," or "The Bush Syndrome," tele-affective and inter-corporeal conditions that enable the will to revenge.[30] In order to give analytic shape to the assemblages immanent to this ethos (and very much also: pathos), resonance is employed as a critical means for understanding the heterogeneous and otherwise disparate qualities of the assemblage that works despite itself—despite the internal conditions that might, or indeed ought, tear the assemblage apart, throwing its members and proto-members into separate political trajectories. Because resonance is a binding-together of its members (or "fusing"), it is Connolly's way of coming to terms with the unexpected and surprising connections built between actors on the American political Right as the world lurches forward, bowling along in time. "[W]hy," for instance, "does one wing of the evangelical movement give such intense priority to its economic interest, instead of pressing the state and corporations to protect the weakest among us? Why not preach the Social Gospel, as innumerable Christian believers have in the past, giving the Jesus of *Luke* the priority over the Christ

[29] "Monstrous" here is used the generic sense (*a la* "Universal Monsters" and their genre film descendants). Connolly figures the tethering together of the evangelical-capitalist assemblage as Frankensteinian when he writes: "The right leg of the evangelical movement is joined at the hip to the left leg of the capitalist juggernaut." The prospective graverobber theory of political assemblage? Ibid., p. 874.

[30] Connolly's argument hinges, in part, on the resonance machine's ability to circulate the will to revenge throughout the assemblage effectively—at least insofar as it maintains what Baruch Spinoza famously refers to as *conatus*, or the thing's tendency to continue its own existence. The evangelical-capitalist resonance machine is then very much imbricated with televisual media.

of *Revelations*?" The answer Connolly provides is found in the resonance between liberal-capitalist economics and "Christo-terrorist" eschatology, a tethering of affinities that celebrate and loop back upon positions of vengefulness and suspicion and righteous retribution. Evocatively, he writes: "The existential bellicosity of those infused with economic greed reverberates with the transcendental resentment of those visualizing the righteous violence of Christ."[31]

For Connolly, resonance is evidenced by the "indirect tonalities" produced by complimentarily opposed registers, the "unsung melody" that "reverberates back and forth between leaders and followers, until it becomes uncertain who directs and who sings the chorus."[32] In other words, resonance is a means of originizing through the construction of immanent and dynamic connections within the assemblage. Taking shape as a tether between neoliberals and Christo-terrorists, resonance is at once interstitial and moving; it is at once an occupation and exploration of the space between bodies, a bouncing about that traces and links bodies in space and provides for a seeming rightness of connection outside of "sung" or otherwise explicitly cognizable, legible reasons. But as long as it is moving it is careful to cover its tracks. Connolly can describe the qualities of resonance tethering together the surprising assemblage of greed and righteousness in the political Right of the moment, yet he can neither reproduce the causal map that tends to their linkage nor comment towards the likely trajectory of the assemblage as it spills into the next moment, or the next. This is because resonance, despite its political force, is not politically expedient. Although it creates and modulates the origins of surprising connections, is not the result of some rational, intentional, or otherwise calculable

[31] Ibid., p. 876.

[32] Ibid., p. 879.

process. Resonance is not a tool to be made use of for pre-formed political ends. Affinities that take shape indirectly amidst the unsung melody of resonance are precisely and confoundingly emergent, which is to say that their arrival is consequential but not consequent of particular reducible circumstance.

Connolly's analysis is thus useful as a corrective of much political research that seeks to describe political phenomena like origin stories and beginnings without being attentive to the myriad complexities and "inter-involvements" that catalyze inherently future-oriented action. By gesturing towards the politics of affect, Connolly is able to bring a sensitivity to political analysis that treats the capacities of relations within ad-hoc assemblages as forceful and worthy of consideration outside of their situation within traditionally acknowledged political institutions. That sensitivity is key here. The politics of affect is a tricky question to unravel conceptually, and one that has proven fruitfully plural in the broader social sciences and humanities literature, with "affect" itself remaining as yet elusive of coherent research programs and frameworks, let alone universally accepted definitions.[33]

Connolly's treatment of affect as a tether of affinity between the bodies comprising the assemblage is attractive insofar as it avoids the tendencies of some affect theory—primarily issuing forth from scholars who follow the work of psychologist

[33] For the current best compilation of affect theoretical approaches that make use of disparate academic, philosophical, and methodological traditions, see: Gregg, Melissa and Gregory Seigworth. 2010. *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham: Duke UP. In their introduction to the edited volume, Gregg and Seigworth map the development of affect theory through disparate and sometimes conflicting traditions, not only offering readers a path through diverse framings and conceptualizations, but also of gesturing towards something we might consider as affective praxis. At the end of their introduction they provide readers with brief biographies of their personal comings-to-study of affect theory—a move that might now be read as traditional within certain wings of affect theory that seek to highlight the auto-ethnographic qualities of affect research and writing. There is a deeply political legacy to this style of writing—and it's valuable to note here that affect theory is yet another means of bridging the unhealthy dualism of personal and political.

Silvan Tomkins[34]—to prefer what can only be interpreted as a conflation of affect and emotions. In Tomkins' project, human affects can be diagrammed within nine basic biological feeling-states: interest-excitement, enjoyment-joy, surprise-startle, fear-terror, distress-anguish, anger-rage, dissmell-disgust, and shame-humiliation. These feeling-states slide within the hyphenate in terms of their intensity, with the first affect of the pair representing the lower register of intensity and the second representing the higher register of intensity. For instance, fear mechanically operates within the body on a lower register of intensity than terror, just as anger operates on a lower register than rage, and so on. Despite this intensity slide within each descriptive pair, these "affect programs" nonetheless represent bounded emotional possibilities of everyday lived experience. That is, the totality of everyday lived experience is presupposed to fit inside a descriptive pairing of feeling-states such that all bodily response to experience must light up the psychological mechanisms inherent in the discrete pairings. For Tomkins, there is no possibility of experience outside the cognized, post-hoc analytic framework of his "nine affects." Tomkins' approach is thus a rudimentary technique of encountering and puzzling through questions of assemblage and emergent affect, as it cannot account for any movement or inter-involvement that would augment the dynamics of relation and power immanent to the assemblage. Tomkins affords us a way of understanding power of a certain type, to be sure—for instance, any research on the qualities and dimensions of specific affect programs must necessarily contend with the historical and political forces that subtend and inflect their felt intensities at the point of time in question—but the

[34] For an introductory elucidation of Tomkins' research and a curated selection of passages from his voluminous writings, see: Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, and Adam Frank. 1995. *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*. Durham: Duke UP.

complexity of affect as it is lived in the moment needs a more attuned and sensitive analytic posture than what is available to us in Tomkins' account.

According to Connolly, it is more analytically valuable to situate affect outside of specific sites of cognized emotions if we aim to confront the political in its broadest sense. Although the particular treatment of affects, when tied to biological/autonomic *effects*, has taught us much—a large and vibrant body of research has been built out of the framework offered by attending to specific emotions[35]—such an approach falls precipitously short when it elides the centrality of the political to biological autonomia and conceptually concretized "affect programs." In any approach inspired by Tomkins' work, politics, in order to be understood as such, is suggested to exist in the cognitive emotional schemas that are themselves only ever inflected by affect, which is at most a consideration. The inherent connections between affect and the political are tilled under in the aestheticized analytic pitch for clean lines and schematized explanatory mechanisms. By moving affect outside of specific sites of cognized emotions, Connolly affords himself the opportunity to look at the political forces that act in concert with the body, but are not limited by it. The roiling assemblage, tethered in tenuous relation through resonant affect, is always more than the sum of its parts.

The capacities of the body's sensorium—its ability to feel through experience—are important for Connolly, and ultimately lay the ground for a new kind of political understanding. Crucially, the invocation of the sonic in Connolly's conceptualization of resonance works beyond the boundaries of metaphor—though it may be that, too. Resonance is deeply sensorial, a force acting onto, with, and in relation to the body. It is

[35] Trauma theory is indebted to a particularized understanding of affects, as are certain strands of contemporary feminist and queer theory. Tomkins, mobilized by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her work on shame, finds new use in theories of trauma that look to the momentary force of strong affect.

not simply (or merely) sound. Resonance is tonal, yes, a registration of auditory sense on the body, but also works in excess of the sonic. That is, it does things outside of particular corporeal sense-qualities, acting in concert with the listener on a register other than that which is available to a cognizable and schematized perception—unexpected and surprising things, resolutely, sometimes traumatically, and often perversely political things. Resonance opens the capacities of the body to political originizing and analysis, but doesn't reduce politics to the body. The bouncing remainder, guiding perception but itself imperceptible, is the catalyst of the assemblage. Resonance is thus itself political, and insofar as it has the political effect of creative tetherings, fusings-together of obdurate and ill-adjusted partners in whatever, it would seem that it is a useful means of traversing questions that ask after affinities and affective assemblages of various sorts.

The tonality of resonance, as well as its conceptual traction, is perhaps similar to the more familiar and now essentially pop-political analytic of "dog whistle politics" so often attached to the political Right in America post-Nixonian "Silent Majority" and Reaganite "Blue Dog Democrats." And as such it fits well within a narrative structure of ideology that prefers to center and concentrate political authority in elites, whose special access to the mechanisms of popular political manipulation are well-documented historically and yet ever-present in contemporary critiques of mass media from both the political right and political left in America. But this more familiar story, the one where ideological bad-guys suffuse the objects consumed by a none-the-wiser public with subtextual cues and supersonic suggestions, is utterly boring in as far as it is entirely absent of, and cannot account for, actual people in the world and what they get up to from time to time. Indeed, like Walter Lippmann and his followers before us, it carries at base

an assumption that people in their everyday worlds are in fact not people and may never be so absent some emancipatory thrust (or is it a push?) that will liberate them from the confines of ideological tricks shielding from them the real truth, whatever the current incarnation of truth may be.[36] Famously, Lippmann offers a spectacular reduction of actual people and their everyday worlds with a double-move: first in his broad conglomerate rhetorical construction of "the public" or "the masses," and second in his making-animal of the masses, figuring them as a "bewildered herd." For Lippman, the American People is a fantasy projected onto a limp and easily-startled mass of not-quite-citizens who, through no necessary fault of their own, cannot be trusted to sift through what he refers to as "the totality of experience." The masses are too dull and slow-witted to be trusted with such an awesome responsibility as that; the "totality of experience" is grand, a broad and stable view, while the splintered perspective of the herd is base and feral, too unruly for proper politics. A special class of propagandists—not "elites" in Lippman's phrasing, but effectively so despite his avoidance of the title—must rise up to augment and shape the will of the masses, harnessing the technical apparatuses of mass communication so that they might redirect the bewildered herd toward prescribed political ends.

The resonant dog whistle, calling the de-humanized herd to political arms, is a tool of beginnings, to be sure. But it is only one tool. Visual images—central elements of the modern, technical apparatus of mass communication—also constitute. Visual images have originary capacity and force. But because they do so ambivalently, through affective fields tethering assemblages together, and in so doing produce identities and affinities

[36] See: Lippmann, Walter. 1922. *Public Opinion*. New York: Harcourt Brace.

immanent to the ends of the assemblage, careful attention to visual experience and its capacities is needed to sort out political effect and meaning-in-the-moment.

Political Visions, Visual Politics

Students of politics have long been routinely suspicious of vision, questioning the relationship between the abled biological fact of sight and the recognition of the seen as real or true. Explicit in the disjunction between sight and seeing are theories, arrangements, and practices of power. Indeed, in order to highlight the political contest inherently at state, note a key assumption made here: vision is never neutral. It does not attest for itself; rather, vision, and what is seen, are "made."[37]

To manipulate vision (sight, seeing, or both) is to manipulate a primary means of bodily experience in the world. Main Consequently, to manipulate vision is to manipulate how people, having experienced sight and seeing, react to the objects within their gaze. Vision is not processed in a vacuum; like any other sense experience, vision is a complex, a polyvalent field. If the disjunction of sight and seeing is being manipulated (indeed, is believed to be manipulable at all), or simply operates mimetically (with the seen image theoretically constructed as a direct representation of the "real" or "true" object represented), the arrangement of power can be seen to benefit some while hindering, marginalizing, or subjugating others.

The suspicion of vision, then, is at its core a suspicion of power, whose effectors may through various methods attempt to confuse, obfuscate, or otherwise veil the "truth" of sight by constructing and substituting seen artifice. It is a reactionary fear with a long

[37] Norton, Anne. 2004. *95 Theses on Culture and Politics*. New Haven: Yale UP, p. 80.

history.[38] Loaded down in negative affect, the fear is that a particular sociopolitical entity—such as Lippman's elite propagandists—may be capable of controlling others through means overtly or covertly counterposed against what ought to be the autonomous interests of the controlled. Thus, insofar as vision is perceived to be manipulable, significant political risk is attached to the privileging of sight and seeing as a sense-experience with significant effect on our political landscape. If anything, the ongoing, historical legacies attached to the suspicion of vision would enable a politics seeking to limit the capacity of manipulability through sight.

But power can work beyond an ability to confuse and obfuscate visual sense experience. Take, for example, Michel Foucault's use of the panopticon as a model of the co-constitution of power and knowledge. In his discussion of panopticon as a technique of modern disciplinary authority, Foucault extends an explicit argument about vision's relationship to power. Stuart Hall summarizes this argument nicely when he writes:

> Knowledge linked to power, not only assumes the authority of 'the truth' but has the power to make itself true. All knowledge, once applied in the real world, has effects, and in that sense at least, "becomes true." Knowledge, once used to regulate the conduct of others, entails constraint, regulation, and the disciplining of practice. Thus, "There is no power relation without the correlative constitution

[38] Most scholars of visual culture trace the development of programmatic iconoclasm to the various prohibitions against "idolatry" in Abrahamic religious doctrine. Convincingly, it is argued that Abrahamic iconoclasm is a reaction against pre-Abrahamic, localized pagan religious practices, some of which were expressly animist in their beliefs concerning objects and their capacity for spiritual power. Moreover, original understandings of "image" in Hebrew (*tselem*), Greek (*eikon*), and Latin (*imago*) all, according to W.J.T. Mitchell, carry not the sense of "material picture" as representation, but "an abstract, general, spiritual 'likeness.'" For a historical run-through of this argument, see: W.J.T. Mitchell. 1986. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 31-37.

> of a field of knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time, power relations.[39]

In other words, knowledge of vision's power is itself a condition complicit in "constraint, regulation, and the disciplining of practice." Vision is "entailed" experientially in the processes of authoritative practice. Therefore, vision and its powerful exercise become intertwined such that, under this model, the power of vision need not be figured as hierarchical—the fear that animates yet today a deep suspicion of vision. Rather, Foucault conceives the power of vision as a shared "net-like organization" of authority to (more or less) form and re-form over time what he calls power/knowledge associations, or what Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari refer to as assemblages. Immanent to the ends of the assemblage as it develops over time, the practiced power of vision can be both positive and negative, generative and oppressive.

Although Foucault shows us that vision is a space of constitutional power, still others have expanded on the politics of visuality, engaging in projects that attempt to show how the historical legacies of suspicion regarding vision interact with modernity and the rise of what might be called ubiquitous visuality. Walter Benjamin, along with Theodor Adorno and others associated with the Frankfurt School of critical theory, has charged that we live "in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," where vision is not capable of the same kind of investment in the reality or truth of images as might have been possible in earlier eras. The mechanization of production--making art with machines and new technologies (lithography, photography, film) rather than with the hands of

[39] Hall, Stuart. 1997. *Representation*. London: Sage, p. 49.

artists--alienates the work of art from "its presence in time and space, its unique existence at a place where it happens to be" (Benjamin 1968, 220). For Benjamin, that "unique existence" is a historically significant situation of authenticity and authority, through which the work of art proclaims its "substantive duration" and "historical testimony" (221). Put differently, the uniqueness of the work of art imbues it with what Benjamin calls "aura" (221).

But, critically, aura is not deemed significant for its own sake. As Benjamin argues, "The uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being imbedded in the fabric of tradition," (223).[40] What is at stake in the age of mechanical reproduction, then, is the power of tradition--of "ritual"--and the "use value" of art. As works of art become more and more widely available to subjects as spectators in reproduced form, the authority of authentic, original art wanes, and the ritual "use value" of art is substituted by "exhibition value" (224-5). This is a pivotal historical transition, because "the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice--politics" (224).

John Berger clarifies this point for Benjamin when he says of mechanically reproduced art, "It is not a question of reproduction failing to reproduce certain aspects of an image faithfully; it is a question of reproduction making it possible, even inevitable, that an image will be used for many different purposes and that the reproduced image, unlike an original work, can lend itself to them all" (Berger 1972, 24-5). Indeed, once the

[40] Philosopher John Dewey makes a similar argument in Art as Experience (1934). He writes, “As the developing growth of an individual from embryo to maturity is the result of interaction of organism with surroundings, so culture is the product not of efforts of men put forth in a void or just upon themselves, but of prolonged and cumulative interaction with the environment. The depth of the responses stirred by works of art shows their continuity with the operations of this enduring experience” (28).

authority of art is separated from "the particular authority of the preserve," which is to say the authority of the institutions that seek to isolate the experience of art to a particular place and time, art itself is changed (32). Art becomes images, which "surround us in the same way as a language surrounds us" (32). This language offers us the potential of "a new kind of power," a politics of self-determination through vision that was once available only to elites and experts in ritual. "Within [this power]," Berger writes:

> we could begin to define our experiences more precisely in areas where words are inadequate…Not only personal experience, but also the essential historical experience of our relation to the past: that is to say the experience of seeking meaning to our lives, of trying to understand the history of which we can become the active agents… A people or class which is cut off from its own past is far less free to choose and to act as a people or class than one that has been able to situate itself in history. This is why--and this is the only reason why—the entire art of the past has now become a political issue. (33)

All of this isn't to say that the politicization of the image in the age of mechanical reproducibility is necessarily a wholly welcome development for Benjamin and Berger, that reproducibility itself is somehow generative of positive historical progression. The language of images, at least for Benjamin, is at best a neutral political space. Just as was the case with art, the language of images is susceptible to manipulation. Benjamin's primary concern is that the language of images will be embraced by fascism, producing what he calls an “aestheticization” of images. "The logical result of fascism," he writes,

"is the introduction of aesthetics into political life" (Benjamin 1968, 241). In what is regarded as the fascist proclivity for aesthetic power, Benjamin fears that the only outcome that can satiate the drive of domination is war. Fascism "expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology" (242). The language of images is then, possibly, a continuing language of dominion. Authority as aesthetic beauty--and the concomitant striving for purity--can inhabit the vacuum of power broken open by technological change. Positioned as such, technological reproducibility might only enhance the power of those who seek to oppress, suppress, and subjugate.

Alongside Benjamin's questioning of the usefulness of images as a political project, Susan Sontag's famous clarion call to replace "hermeneutics" with an "erotics" of art signals the ongoing politicality of the image in an era where access to the truth of art is still very much contested (Sontag 1961, 23). Writing "against interpretation," Sontag seeks to dislodge the authority of the art object from the vestiges of power that glom onto its political usefulness. Instead of cult, ritual, and elite patrons, however, Sontag's targets are those who "impoverish" and "deplete the world--in order to set up a shadow world of 'meanings'"—professional critics and academics (17).

For Sontag, interpretation is many things. On the one hand, it is a "radical strategy for conserving an old text, which is thought too precious to repudiate, by revamping it" (1961, 16). On another, it is an aggressive act of excavation that "digs 'behind' the text, to find a sub-text which is the true one" (16). Interpretation is also both "the philistine refusal to leave the work of art alone" and "the revenge of the intellect upon art" (17). Through interpretation the critic is "plucking a set of elements (the X, the Y, the Z, and

so forth) from the whole work" such that "the task of interpretation [becomes] virtually one of translation" (15). Far from offering clarification and insight, interpretation is a thing that disrupts the thing-in-itself, re-crafts the object in service to a set of external ends, and snubs out the flaring luminosity of art in favor of focusing on the analytical drudgery of content.

Although her polemic rouses at times, the degree to which her target concept continually morphs throughout the argument threatens to elicit disappointment from the reader looking for a programmatic response to the problem of modern interpretation. Yet, despite the plasticity of interpretation itself, Sontag is offering an interesting and polysemic reading on the relationship between vision and political power in Benjamin's age of mechanical reproduction. For Sontag, unlike Benjamin, the ubiquity of visual images is not a problematic condition by itself. Though she argues the age of mechanical reproduction threatens to dull our sensory experiences through "excess" and "overproduction," the solution is not to rewind technology and reinstall old institutional hierarchies, returning to the age of "aura" and circumscribed boundaries of visual authority. Instead, Sontag values a shift in the way we interact with images. "What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more" (1961, 23).

Essentially, what Sontag is doing here is calling for a grammar of vision.[41] Her appeal for "more" sensory experience is directly linked to an appeal for a return to formal

[41] Put in terms recognizable to students of Barthes (1977) and Hall (1973), Sontag's argument can be said to favor more serious consideration of the "denotative" rather than "connotative" elements of the art object. Hall explains the distinction when he writes, "Connotative codes are the configurations of meaning which permit a sign to signify, in addition to its denotative reference, other, additional meanings. These configurations of meaning are forms of social knowledge, derived from the social practices, the knowledge of institutions, the beliefs and the legitimations that exist in a diffused form within a society, and which order the society's apprehension of the world in terms of dominant meaning-patterns" (1973, 176). It

criticism—that is, criticism that addresses the descriptive characteristics of the work of art. "If excessive stress on content provokes the arrogance of interpretation, more extended and more thorough descriptions of form would silence" (1961, 22). This formalism is necessary, she argues, to "reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it" (22). The political accomplishment of formalism is to reject ideologically inconsistent, divisive, hierarchically arranged interactions with the language of images. Under formalism, the power of the image is held in the rules through which images are experienced. Unlike the era prior to the age of mechanical reproduction, however, the rule structure is--at least in Sontag's formulation—fundamentally benign. If "the function of criticism should be to show how it is what it is, even that it is what it is, rather than to show what it means," the power of formal criticism is only politically useful insofar as it agrees with the basic grammar of shared experience (23).

Though ultimately mistaken in its exclusive formalism, the search for a grammar to attach to the language of images has important ramifications for politics beyond Sontag's anti-interpretation argument. Indeed, if the formalism/grammar sought by Sontag is thought of as a way to experience images better, it might also hold that formalism/grammar can point towards a way to identify and come to terms with images that hold greater, more durable power in the public mind than others.

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should be noted, however, that Sontag does not accept the circumscribed definition of denotation as "reference" offered here. For Sontag, the formal elements of the art object are evocative beyond mere description insofar as she is explicitly interested in identifying the terms under which we experience the "sensuous surface" of art as a shared experience. Her displeasure with the critical search for connotation is made into a process of maintaining a sort of respect for art, a self-conscious boundary-making of acceptable interaction. If we think of the search for connotation as a violation of the boundaries of the art object, even if the boundaries are artificially constrictive and work to bind the eye within a particularized way of seeing, Sontag would have us recognize those boundaries as having legitimacy on their own terms. To deny that legitimacy is, in certain respects, to deny that art object's existence as an art object.

Several popular public images, sometimes referred to as "iconic" images, seem to continually reinforce and reinvigorate identifications and socio-political subject positions in a way that marks them as durable. Images like Dorothea Lange's "Migrant Mother," for instance, or Alfred Eisenstadt's "Times Square Kiss" are generally considered iconic images—if only by the virtue that they are generally considered at all. But despite the fact that—perhaps like Justice Potter Stewart's well-known criterion for identifying pornography—we may know iconic images when we see them, icons remain difficult to define in precise terms. Doing so may give us some needed leverage for discerning the potentially vast organizing power of images.

Building off seminal work of Erwin Panofsky,[42] Robert Hariman and John Lucaites produce a captivating if labyrinthian definition of the iconic when they write: "The iconic photograph is an aesthetically familiar form of civic performance coordinating an array of semiotic transcriptions that project an emotional scenario to manage a basic contradiction or recurrent crisis" (2007, 29). At first quite daunting, when rendered into its component parts their definition is made more tangible. First, they argue that iconicity is accessible to images that don't stray too far from what they call "artistic conventionality"—essentially meaning an adherence to a loose set of formal standards and practices that appeal to the widest margin of potential viewers (30). Likewise, "they draw on stock images and ideas of war and peace, poverty and the distribution of wealth, civic duty and personal desire" (30). Common themes and familiar tropes help build into

[42] Panofsky's Studies in Iconology (1939) attempted to disaggregate "iconography," the study of symbolism in art, from "iconology," the study of content and meaning. Ostensibly more expansive in its approach to the "whole meaning" of art, the distinction has been regularly disputed by others, leaving the concept of "iconography" more recognizable to scholars interested in analysis of visual culture. W.J.T. Mitchell's (1986) titular use of "iconology" is thus intentionally confrontational. Although his work is not a reshuffling of conceptual hierarchies—it is, in fact, more fairly considered a melding of disparate art historical and theoretical concepts—Mitchell values Panofsky's work enough to invite ire for resurrecting a once-rejected critical tool.

the iconic image a set of predetermined rhetorical talking points that viewers can instantly recognize and process.

Iconic images must also enact a type of civic performance, meaning that the image must be repeated often enough and widely enough that viewers come to interact with the image in diverse situations. The viewing of the image in diverse settings, then, is like the viewing of a performance, wherein the image is given meaning and purpose through the context in which it is situated. Quite different from Benjamin's "aura," however, from context to context the viewer takes in the image reflexively—that is, she recognizes the image as a mimetic fabrication, a playful creation—rather than as directly representative of some innately true, real, or otherwise transcendentally spiritual experience. This is important because iconic images, according to Hariman and Lucaites, don't produce stable or even singular identifications in viewers; iconic images are replete with multiple valences in which any number of identifications and affinities can find a home.[43] Thereby echoing John Berger's multiple ways of seeing, the iconic image is not fixed to a particular historical period, and must move through time inspiring new identifications and affinities if it is to retain its status as such.

Locating iconicity within the realm of affect, iconic images require "powerful evocations of emotional experience" (2007, 35). Because these emotions are experienced publicly and collectively, Hariman and Lucaites argue that they become a "powerful

[43] This basic sense of multiple or intersectional standpoints is fundamental to many contemporary theorists conceptualizations of identity. For instance, Judith Butler (2006) treats the multiplicity of subject positions as fundamental to her notion of gender "performativity." From a more practical psychoanalytic perspective, Jane Flax (1993) writes: "theorists will have to keep in mind the multiple determinants of subjectivity - including innate temperament and orientations to the world; biological vulnerabilities and needs; capacities for abstract thought, work and language; aggression; creativity; fantasy; meaning creation; and objectivity. The intrasubjective and intersubjective relations among subjectivities are important as well. These multiple determinants mean that we cannot construct a unitary theory of subjectivity. (44)

basis for understanding and action" (35).[44] In fact, as such drivers of action, the emotions called up by iconic images will necessarily become what they call "political emotions." They argue: "Some images activate emotional responses such as civic pride or outrage that are overtly political, while others communicate feelings of pleasure or pain that become complexly political as they are folded into historical tableaus" (35). The iconic image is then doubly emotional—first as an "emotional experience," then as an "emotional response." The identifications built through the image are solidified through the emotional appeal, while the outcome of the identification's emotionality is a matter of direct political (collective, formative) consequence.[45] And while critics like Adorno or Habermas might argue that such emotional appeal is the very danger of the powerful iconic image, Hariman and Lucaites argue that "democratic publics need [the] emotional resources" provided them by the image, that the emotion can help bring clarity to the contradictions inherent within the multiplicity of the image (36). For them, emotions don't cloud the image, but provide constructive insight for the identification built through the image's public reception.[46]

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[44] Here we can build connections between Hariman and Lucaites and the work of anthropologist and cultural theorist Kathleen Stewart (2007), who suggests that such public experiences of emotion are resonant in her concept of "ordinary affect." She writes: Ordinary affects are public feelings that begin and end in broad circulation, but they've also the stuff that seemingly intimate lives are made of. They give circuits and flows the forms of a life. They can be experienced as a pleasure or shock, as an empty pause or a dragging undertow, as a sensibility that snaps into place or a profound disorientation…Akin to Raymond Williams' structures of feeling, they are 'social experiences in solution'; they 'do not have to await definition, classification, or rationalization before they exert palpable pressures.'(2-3)

[45] For more on the relationship between affect and political response, see Sarah Ahmed's (2004) argument concerning "affective economies."

[46] Useful here is Elena Oxman's (2010) study of Roland Barthes and his late-career turn towards affect and visuality. Though criticized by David Bordwell for his "belletristic musings," Oxman argues that Barthes' focus on "punctum" and "obtuse meaning" is productive of criticism that searches for "what lies beyond meaning"--an underdetermined if potentially emancipatory critical space. Oxman elaborates: Indeed, crucial to Barthes's conception of criticism is that it not simply seek the fissures of meaning, but that out of these fissures it produce new forms of discourse--that it imagine possibilities for sense beyond the given. In the images he loves, Barthes's [sic] discovers a visible realm that is charged with the force of the not-yet-

Hariman and Lucaites' final definitional argument about iconic images is their ability to reveal the "foundational contradictions" of a polity (2007, 36). Because images are "always 'broken,' that is, always incapable of reproducing the social totality," iconic images must go further by becoming "an aesthetic resource for performative mediation of conflicts" (37). As representations, images are necessarily failures. Images are not copies. In that failure to reproduce totality, though, they serve a useful purpose insofar as they can help make visible the gaps between ideal and practice. By revealing the hierarchies of socio-political relations inherent within systems of governance, the iconic image maintains the power to rhetorically challenge hierarchy by making it visible to the public.

Contradictions may be inherent both in- and outside the image, but iconic images are able to move into a critical territory un-traveled by the non-iconic through repetition and re-appropriation of the image. "Copying, imitating, satirizing, and other forms of appropriation," they argue, "are a crucial sign of inconicity" (Hariman and Lucaites 2007, 37). Such repetition enables a reformulation of the iconic image's patterns of identification, in turn revitalizing and reinvigorating the original image's significance through time. For example, Hariman and Lucaites point out that one iconic image, Joe Rosenthal's "Raising the Flag on Iwo Jima," has found copies and imitations in such diverse venues as US postage stamps and the animated television series *The Simpsons*. As the image becomes situated in these differing contexts, the original patterns of identification are distorted and we are faced with an image that provides new political possibilities and terrains of action.

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named. It is from this realm that he launches his language beyond what it knows in order to create values rather than finding them where they already exist. (87, all emphasis hers)

From aura to icon, visual images make and are remade by politics. The mimetic notion that visual images are unworthy based on their incapacity to successfully represent anything real or otherwise useful for political analysis cannot hold. As these theoretical arguments persuade us, visual images bear the capacity to tether publics in assemblage through affective resonance and force. Though approaches to visual images are contested, that very contestation ought to function as a signal light to students of politics, showing us that something important is happening, something that needs to be reached out toward and embraced as politically constitutive and powerfully originary.

An Affective Embrace of Visual Culture

To be clear, in a very basic sense my project here is to situate and defend an argument that looks to vision as a sense-experience that opens up a field of politics I believe to be under-theorized and all too often cast aside as outside the purview of political analysis. The routine of political science, as evidenced in both theoretical and empirical literatures, is to emphasize on end the role of linguistic discourse and textuality while downplaying or fully neglecting the myriad other experiential capacities of the body. I stake the claim that vision—and visual culture generally—is something of a gateway experience, a first move into broader fields of sense-experience that, if "taken seriously" as political, require those of us engaged in social scientific and humanistic study to approach our objects of analysis with a different posture, a different methodological program at hand—and a more humble style of claims-making. Sense-experience does not fold under the normative aesthetic demands of parsimony; it does not

see in simplicity a coherent and virtuous form. It can't be tested and measured, modeled, held constant. Sense-experience is not a variable.

Senses are fulsome. They explode and wilt, surge and wane, glom onto and dissolve. They are messy, fitful, irresolute, and sometimes downright stupid—"nonsense." But senses can also be curatorial, well-thought-out, honed and hone-able techniques, cultivated properties of thoughtful and knowing cultural engagement—"sensibilities." Her eye/nose/ear/knack for whatever we're talking about in any given moment is his discerning taste/developed palate—two impressions from the same little nugget, to be sure, but with one remaining naturalized in the viscera of the body, sometimes given an extra-corporeal inflection as a "sixth sense" about things, while the other jumps up the hierarchy of enlightened authority to a position of mindfulness, of trained, careful, thoroughly analytic judgment. (Lest the reader miss it, the gendered pronouns in that sentence mean.)

Although I cannot in good faith deny the overlapping counter-trajectories of senses—what we might think of as the wedding of knack and knowing—I endeavor to risk the consequences of bracketing one trajectory in order to better explore the politicality of the other. Even when it's nonsense, politics is alive in the senses. We need not bend our analysis to the calumny that seems to inhere within refined sensibility to get after some questions and speculate on some answers. As I've shown above in brief part, theorists and political thinkers of myriad commitments and at various historical junctures have routinely and rather forcefully remarked on the qualities of politics that seem chained to the passions of the body, passions that bear no logical reason for being at all and yet—even in (because of?) that lack of reason and cognizable purpose—shunt

political energies of all kinds through us at speeds only tenuously registered, if not altogether "missed" by the programs of thought we deign to treat them with. As I've shown, for some these senses are useful as pathways into understandings of materiality and aesthetics and beauty and expression. Senses are the body's exploratory tools, receptive of and explicitly sensitive to the world around us as it churns on. For others, we've seen how senses are figured as doubtable, malignant, traps to be cast aside as internecine entry to bread and circus, to false consciousness. Senses are, for these thinkers, a political risk that will coddle the intuition of the faithful while conserving the extant structures of order, power, and authority for vested interests.

My project both intercedes into and addends this debate concerning the interaction of the material objects and senses, of the visual qualities of those objects and the linguistic analytic programs academe uses to judge them. In some ways, my project is extension of an already "protracted struggle" between the visual and the linguistic. As WJT Mitchell has remarked, "The history of culture is in part the story of a protracted struggle for the dominance between pictorial and linguistic signs, each claiming for itself certain proprietary rights on a 'nature' to which only it has access."[47]

I make no claim to proprietary rights on a nature to which only I—or those like me— have access, although I am interested in teasing out the qualities of visual "nature" that seem to bob around in the cultural sea of material objects available to us. My teasing here in this dissertation, of course, is interested in a very specific form of material object: the American superhero comic book. However, I suggest that the reader refrain from considering that admission of interest in specificity as an admission of qualification and argumentative limit. As WJT Mitchell himself points out, and many theorists of the form

[47] W.J.T. Mitchell, *Iconology*, p. 43.

echo, most often it is true that comic books are a quintessential example of mixed media,[48] and insofar as comics most often perforate the border of pictorial and linguistic signification, they clear away theoretical detritus and gleefully create a contingent space within the protracted struggle apparently dogging the history of culture. In comics, visual and verbal smash against each other, rattling and jangling to an alive and sensuous "tension."[49]

Defining Comics, and the Project of Comics Studies

Scott McCloud, a comics artist and sometimes theorist often treated as a kind of founding father to formal comics studies, defines comics as "juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (1993, 9). Framed slightly differently, this definition suggests a basic multi-modality to comics—that comics are a plural form, relying on multiple techniques of signification to produce a single polysemic, potentially non-narrative but mostly always narrative product. It's complicated.

[48] I say "most often" here pointedly in order to signal that comics need not utilize language in order to develop narrative stories (or be considered comics at all), although all examples of comic books analyzed in this project can be safely categorized as "mixed media" in a conventional sense. Indeed, there are a number comics, proto-comics, and comics-adjacent media that do not utilize language as a story-telling element, and are sometimes expressed ostensibly without the intention of telling a story at all. For those that do not use language I gesture to the serialized woodcuts by 20th Century American artist Lynd Ward, the sometimes "silent" comics of current alt-comics juggernaut Chris Ware, or the routinely "silent" comics of Jim Woodring. For those that go further, sometimes abandoning narrative, I suggest several artists who have engaged in projects that push the boundaries of necessarily discrete visual units within comics—those artists collected in Andrei Molotiu's anthology *Abstract Comics* (2009) and, in a more experimental gesture, the "comics poetry" of Alexander Rothman, Bianca Stone, Gary Sullivan, Paul K. Tunis, and other contributors to independent anthologies such as *Ink Brick* (2014). Additionally, slightly more traditional poets working with language have been experimenting with the visual form of words and text for ages—most exemplary, perhaps, in the esoteric and mostly forgettable "glyph poems" made by writer Edward Sanders in venues such as *Glyphs* (The Brother in Elysium: 2011), and the cascading poetry of Chris Edwards in *A Fluke: A mistranslation of Stéphane Mallarmé's 'Un coup de dés...*' (Monogene: 2005).

[49] Hatfield, Charles. 2005. Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press.

Perhaps necessarily, since McCloud first offered it this definition of comics has come under fire from critics skeptical of its usefulness. Charles Hatfield argues that McCloud's emphasis on the pictorial eschews the "tensions" inherent between images and text, going so far as to stake his own claim that comics is, at root, an "art of tensions."[50] By refusing to rely on both the pictorial visual images and the linguistic dialog and narrative framing devices to construct the story on the page, McCloud's definition seems to lack the fundamental hybridity and boundary-crossing suggested to exist at the nexus of image and text.

But even the conception of comics as an art of tensions between text and image is problematically rendered. As Thierry Groensteen argues: "This much is certain: in print-based comics, the two components that come into play, the text and the image, enter into an intimate, almost fusional relationship. We know that the seasoned reader never asks the question posed by the adult newcomer: 'What should I look at first?' The experienced reader moves between the text and image fluidly and unconsciously, bouncing one off the other."[51] Rather than tense relations lending expressive energy to the comic book page, Groensteen suggests the "fusional" qualities of comic books can help us understand the underlying structures of comics as a unique artistic form.

These critiques from Hatfield and Groensteen are strong and quite useful as models of analysis that look to the complexity of comic book images and their manners of function. But this is not to mention at all the unfortunate boundary drawing of "sequentiality" done by McCloud that very directly puts outside the definitional purview

[50] Hatfield, Charles. 2009. An art of tensions, in *A Comics Studies Reader*, eds. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, pp. 132-148.

[51] Groensteen, Thierry. 2013. *Comics and Narration,* trans. Ann Miller. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, p. 71.

of comics any single-panel cartoons we might otherwise think of as "comics," such as political cartoons, single-panel visual gag cartoons, and long-running serial narratives told through single-panel newspaper strips like "Family Circus." Although they are themselves elements within the same protracted struggle, they also synthesize a kind unity of disparate elements that notions of hybridity and fusion are after.

But conceptualizations of hybridity make their own mistakes, as well. The emphasis on plurality of word and image so often mobilized by critics and analysts of the form often functions as reducing comic books to just another means of linguistic expression. That is, word and image both collapse into the over-broad category of "the literary," and deny the visual capacities of comics as they go about themselves on the page. Noting this conflation of formal-definitional struggle and the collapse into "the literary," Bart Beatty writes: "One of the significant consequences of the literary turn in the study of comics has been a tendency to drive attention away from comics as a form of visual culture" (2012, 18). That tendency will be worked against here in this project, as I specifically seek to work through questions of visuality in superhero comic books eclectically and dynamically, without recourse to extant, reified disciplinary attachments and argumentative norms.

In attending to comic books in this way, I hope to broaden the capacity of research on comics to account for visual and affective politics in a dynamic, intuitive, and ideally experimental manner. The specificity of comic books as an artistic form is a claim that I find intuitively accurate. And, as many critics have suggested, the links between comics as a distinct artistic form and comics' observable cultural effects are rich and provocative. Yet, when the scope of analysis is inevitably altered to suit the ends of

idiosyncratic argument and theorization, perhaps formal specificity is a claim that remains insurmountably difficult to substantiate without engaging in a descriptive and analytic project that destroys the liveliness and capacities of the kinds that I seek here—the inchoate and emergent energies that link the bodily experience of comic books to political and affective assemblages of various types. Don't mind if I wrangle a blunt analogy: you can lead a horse to vivisection, but you can't ride it home. Although I don't discount the value of the definitional project in art historical and literary critical venues, for my purposes in this dissertation it seems to fade in value, at least in those moments when it works to obscure the lines of flight and political potentialities that drew me to the study of comic books in the first place.

Superheroes and Four-Color Politics

Superhero comic books are evocative and political-culturally resonant. Insofar as they have obvious meaning and effect in the world, it would seem silly to "justify" our analysis of them. But in this contemporary boon of scholarly publishing on comic books of all types, including superhero comics, everyone seems to try their hardest to make sure readers know why their objects of analysis deserve it, why they should be included in the conversation. Here, by way of justification, I echo comic book writer and artist Frank Miller when he says "I think from now on we should stop arguing that we're valid. We just *are*. Let them react to it… We need to stop trying to convince people. We're right. They'll catch on."[52] So be it, then.

Four-color politics: a layered and processual motion, an adding of distinct materials to the resulting entangled image, mimics the four-color printing process

[52] Brownstein, Charles. 2005. *Eisner/Miller: A One-on-One Interview*. Milwaukie, OR: Dark Horse.

invented by Eastern Color Printing in the early 1930s. This invention, a cheap and economical way to mass-produce color advertising pamphlets, was directly responsible for the invention of the comic book at all. A revolutionary technology, four-color printing came to dominate the means of comic book production, spinning out the very first—and, eventually, some of the most popular—examples of the form. If four-color politics means anything then, let me hope it's this: a new and dynamic means of accounting for our shared political-cultural world, one that rests not on the stable machinery that produces our present, but in the affectively alive and vital promises that roll out the other side. Originary visions of the future, bright and fanciful, impossible and heavy at the same time: here in this project I look to superhero comic books to show how this came to be, what techniques were used in its development, and where it might go, the next next time.

Chapter Outline

In Chapter II, "The Birth of an American Superhero Imaginary," I argue that early American superhero comic books work to originate an architecture of racial identifications and affinities that serve white supremacist nationalism in the context of anxious and unstable Americanism. This architecture is inherently unstable, however, and functions less as a code or rulebook of racial affinity and identification within burgeoning state power than as a dynamic and synthetic response to ongoing fantasies of statelessness and frontier violence. Superheroes, only ever "apparently" on the side of law and order, exist in tense relation to what Michel de Certeau might call "strategies" of acceptable normative identification, favoring "tactician"-like boundary-crossing that

undercuts and traverses categorical standpoints like "white" and "male" during a period of increasing immigrant assimilation and international military adventuring.

Chapter III, "Public Heroes, Public Attachments: 1960s Marvel and the Scopic Drive," addresses the widely-recognized turn towards "identity politics" in 1960's Marvel comics and seeks to provide a novel account for their resonance during the era. Tracing the argument through a close reading of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, I argue that tensions between public and private identities evident in these works risk emphasizing a problematic model of fixed standpoints and identifications. Particularly as evidenced through Peter Parker's use of the camera to document his heroic exploits, we can see the politico-visual challenge present in any attempt to move beyond identities and affinities that are "frozen" in the photographic lens of a self-regarding liberal gaze.

In Chapter IV, "A Subversive Racial Order?: 1980s DC and Reactionary Grit," I look at an example of a critically "important" self-reflexive superhero comic book from the 1980s in order to develop an argument concerning ubiquitous white supremacy in superhero comic books and the potential for originary revision through the employment of blackness in so-called "metacomics." *Watchmen*, my primary analytic object, is often noted for its "realism" and attempts to transplant the "escapist fantasies" of superheroes into worlds where vast power and its violent exercise has matching consequences. Within the historical context of superhero comics' uses of blackness, however, here I argue that the combination of self-reflexivity and "realism" can allow us the space to see *Watchmen*'s use of racialized visual images—whiteness and blackness—as subversively critical of the superhero comic book history that *Watchmen* purports to comment on. That is, I argue that *Watchmen* highlights the critical-political capacity of superhero comic

books through the use of blackness as an element its complex production of narrative order; indeed, as I show through a close reading of *Watchmen*'s racial politics, it's the very material irrealism of the work's comic book images and narratives that harbors the potential of creative political reconstruction in origin stories.

Chapter V, "Memory, Alienation, and the Death of Origins: Captain America and the Twilight of Empire," is designed as a broad historical explication of a single superhero character, Captain America, focusing particularly on the way his dislocation from time (mimicking the comic book's formal ambivalence as a temporal- and spacialized medium) charts a unique challenge to liberal individualist norms of identification and affinity. I argue that the trans-historical plasticity of the character, existing in multiple times with multiple origins and foundation myths competing for legitimacy, allows for fluid identification and affinity formation despite the rigid nationalism that remains seemingly fixed in his iconographically dramatized public performances of patriotism.

And finally, in my conclusion, "The Future Birth of Originary Fact," I summarize what I see as the deep and productive relationship between recurrent origin stories, political affect, and superhero comic books' attachment to visions of the future. I argue that superhero comics, while perhaps a "silly archive," are at least also a speculative archive, and therefore ought to be considered as an expression of utopian desire. Four-color political visions, then, means broadly—superhero comic books, as imagetexutal material objects, invite viewers into political assemblages through visual-sensory appeal, but they also harbor theoretical visions of the political that are complex and provocative in their futurity. Superhero comic books, and the "naïve knowledges" they inspire, are

figured as an entry-point into a radical political-academic project, one that takes seriously the not-so-serious, chases knowledges wherever they pop up, and poses creative and very basic challenges to extant disciplinary commitments within academe.

CHAPTER II

THE BIRTH OF AN AMERICAN SUPERHERO IMAGINARY

Introduction

Political origins are fraught things, events of historical magnitude and force that spill out into the future beyond contemporaneous horizons of possibility. We don't know where they go, the paths they'll take to get there, what wanderings they'll provide for others along similar trajectories, or how many pauses and breaths and reiterations of the course of actions taken up to this point will be necessary to keep our shit together, thank you very much. We just know where they begin. Or so it would seem.

Right?

On American Political Progeny/Mythology

Origins pervade American political discourse. Everyone and everything comes from somewhere, and the stories linked to political origins function as the everyday shorthand of a common sense national mythology. For instance, George Washington, the benevolent "Father of His Country," begets a long line of national political figureheads whose nicknames write into what Anne Norton calls our "textual body"[53] a kind of mechanical memory, a collective consciousness that isn't quite conscious but alive to itself nonetheless; "The Father of the Constitution," James Madison, competes in this

[53] Norton, Anne. 1993. *Republic of Signs: Liberal Theory and American Popular Culture.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press. See in particular the first chapter, where Norton writes that "The Constitution represents a collective, conscious, willful entry into the symbolic order. In it Americans become a people of the text" (9). This trading of "natural" corporeality for literary textuality is central to her thesis that the constitution of the American political "body" is inescapably "scriptural."

historicized game of progenitorial expertise with Washington, to be sure, but also comes to a head against "The Father of the Declaration of Independence," Thomas Jefferson, and the "Father of the American Revolution," Thomas Paine, all of whom fall in together under the historically exclusive and cheekily clubby banner of mythogenetic malcontents, America's "Founding Fathers." This is all to say nothing, of course, of those further down the political-historical lineage of nationhood—those like "Old Hickory" (Andrew Jackson), "Young Hickory" (James K. Polk), "The Man from Abilene" (Dwight D. Eisenhower), "The Peanut Farmer" (Jimmy Carter), and even "The Gipper" (Ronald Reagan) and "Dubya" (George W. Bush), all of whom traded or currently trade in the political power of origins as a technique of mythological association, a shorthand connection that relates them to a shared sense of place, of a recognizability and means of connection at all.

Origin stories are thus critically important to our political lives, both in the sense of offering up abstract mythologies to be recognized and recalled in contemplation as well as in the sense of pedestrian—though no less powerful—experiences that bear modulated force on our day-to-day lives. They structure, shape, allow order to form both in the chaos of The Founding[54] as well as in the churn of our everyday going about what we will. As Joanne H. Wright says, "[O]rigin myths serve an important function in helping societies organize their ideas about themselves and about the universe… [they are] a culture's means of making sense of itself."[55]

[54] Or whichever founding we're talking about right now.

[55] Wright, Joanne H. 2004. *Origin Stories in Political Thought: Discourses on Gender, Power, and Citizenship.* Toronto: UP, p. 7.

It is, in this sense, that political theorists and philosophers so often conceptualize political origins as constitutional moments.[56] Indeed, whether or not the origins in question produce a written body of laws that is meant to govern in its wake, the very structuring of founding moments out of the whirlpool of institutional and governmental upheaval is constitutive of so much more than laws and policies—architectures of governance ostensibly in service of justice and the good. Origins provide "natural and eternal justification"[57] for any subsequent change in common sense understandings of justice and the good, because the revelation of origins as a political lodestar is itself committed to the belief that "things are most precious and essential at the moment of birth."[58]

Superheroes, Origins, and Mythologies

By the summer of 1938, Gerard Jones argues that American popular culture had done much work to develop a streamlined system of visual signification in its pulp heroic narratives, relying largely on a mixture of male-body fantasy and the performance of worthy character norms such that heroic recognizability was concomitant with and constitutive of commercial popularity. Dispersed across multiple media forms, the visual distillation of heroic narratives sourced film, newspaper comic strips, pulp fiction magazines, and even radio in its effort to vividly show the audience its subject/object, the

[56] For only but several examples, see: Frank, Jason. 2010. *Constituent Moments*. Durham: Duke UP; Hannah Arendt. 1963. *On Revolution*. New York: Viking; Bonnie Honig. 1993. "Declarations of independence: Arendt and Derrida on the problem of founding a republic," in Frederick M. Dolan and Thomas L. Dumm, eds., *Rhetorical Republic: Governing Representations in American Politics.* Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press.

[57] Barthes, Roland. 1973. *Mythologies*. Toronto: Paladin, p. 143.

[58] Foucault, Michel. 1984. "Nietzsche, genealogy, history," in Paul Rainbow, ed., *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon. Quoted in Wright 2004, p. 16.

hero. These characters were figured variously as dual-identity crime fighters (Zorro, The Shadow, The Phantom), primitive adventurers (Tarzan), interplanetary swashbucklers (Buck Rogers, Flash Gordon) and world-traveling playboys (Doc Savage). Within this cultural space, Jones claims, as full and fantastic as these creations were, it took the introduction of a new character to remake the possibilities of what was conceivable in entertainment at the time—an introduction that would subsequently rocket the development of both a form and a genre to a new level of cultural importance and formative authority.[59]

Of course, it was in June of 1938, on the cover of *Action Comics* #1, that the comic book character Superman first appeared to a mass audience, introducing consumers to the superhero genre (in what would become one of its most iconic images) by marvelously smashing an automobile as terrified men flee the scene. [See Fig. 3] Inside the comic book we learn that this man, this super man, is an orphan, borne to Planet Earth in a swaddling rocket from a distant, dying planet, who carried with him an immense and radical strength: a physical strength, to be sure, "scientifically" explained (as we'll see) and feverishly documented as the character's myriad abilities developed over time; but also a psychological strength, a conviction to act through the tensions of

[59] About the possibilities of Superman's publication in this rich and developing cultural field, Jones writes: "By late 1937 Superman looked more salable than he would have just two years before, for kids' entertainment as a whole was being shaped by the same success stories that had excited Jerry [Siegel] and Joe [Shuster, Superman's creators]. The Shadow had inspired a flurry of dual-identity crime fighters on radio and funny pages. *Tarzan* had made the male body a popular comic strip subject; now Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon*, had become a sensation on the strength of its sweeping draftsmanship, romantic heroes, and beautifully rendered bodies in tights. In early 1936 the creator of *Mandrake the Magician*, Lee Falk, combined the two trends with a new strip called *The Phantom*. Its hero was a bored New York playboy who dons a mask to fight crime… and Falk dressed him in tights like a Douglas Fairbanks swashbuckler. Superman was still uniquely fantastical, but he no longer looked quite so peculiar." This notion of not looking "quite so peculiar" is critical and grounds the potential for identification and affinity formation through the character and the material objects on which he is presented. For the dynamic history of the early comic book publishing industry, see: Jones, Gerard. 2004. *Men of Tomorrow.* New York: Basic Books.

will-to-power and will-to-love in order that he may work to redress the complex socio-political maladies of modern urban America.[60]

Gary Engle argues that this admixture of the physical and the psychological, the confluence of brains and brawn, are what help us best understand Superman in context: that he is, above all else, the most American of heroes, the culmination (and surpassing) of the cultural tradition outlined by Jones within the turn-of-the-century immigrant melting pot that increasingly churned out (and consumed) modern mass culture:

> Throughout American popular culture between 1880 and the Second World War the story was the same. Oxlike Swedish farmers, German brewers, Jewish merchants, corrupt Irish ward heelers, Italian gangsters—there was a parade of images that reflected in terms often comic, sometimes tragic, the humiliation, pain, and cultural insecurity of people in a state of transition. Even in the comics, a medium intimately connected with immigrant culture, there simply was no image that presented a blending of identities in the assimilation process in a way that stressed pride, self-confidence, integrity, and psychological well-being. None, that is, until Superman.[61]

Superman—not of the planet, let alone American—wasn't merely American, but America in metonymic microcosm: his physical and psychological strengths were the stuff of The Founding Fathers and immigrant masses at once, "a blending of identities,"

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[60] For a fascinating and essential reading of the early Superman and his "will-to-love," look to: Ben Saunders. 2011. *Do The Gods Wear Capes?* London/New York: Continuum.

[61] Engle, Gary. "What Makes Superman So Darned American?" *Superman at Fifty*. Dennis Dooley and Gary Engle, eds. New York: Collier, 1987.

disparate and alien yet all the same familiar and, well, for lack of a better descriptor, right and good.[62] This, Ben Saunders argues, is the "moral beauty" of Superman, "more essential to his character—and perhaps in some sense more extraordinary—than his spectacular powers."[63] The animating tension between Superman's will-to-power and his will-to-love—so much more than a story of heroic adventure distilled out of the contemporaneous cultural milieu—is the stuff of moral certainty, mythic ordering force, and deep sentimental attachment. And insofar as that summer of 1938 may have proved fateful for any number of reasons, the birth of the superhero genre—set in motion by the origin of Superman as a physical and psychological marvel—marks a transition within the popular American zeitgeist from visions of heroism, bound to their humanness in manners basically recognizable and resonant if quotidian, to visions of heroism that relied on those same recognizably human traits but doubled, sped up, a fusion of promise and power, mind and body, virtue and strength that draws onlookers out into exciting new ways of interacting with the world around them.

[62] If also more than a bit self-righteous at times—a tendency that adds an interesting flaw or barb to the kinds of characteristic religiosity and "devotion" Saunders sees in Superman's development over time. About the later iterations of the character, he writes, "[M]any stories have appeared that portray his commitment to the good not in terms of politics or the law but as a kind of devotion—in both the religious and amorous senses of that word. Indeed, in his relationships with his supporting cast, Superman nowadays manifests selflessness that borders on the excessive. The excessive (and hence "religious") quality of this devotion emerges most clearly not in his interactions with lovers and friends like Lois [Lane] and Jimmy [Olsen], but in his relationship with his greatest foe, Lex Luthor" (2011, 32).

[63] *Do the Gods Wear Capes*, p. 32.

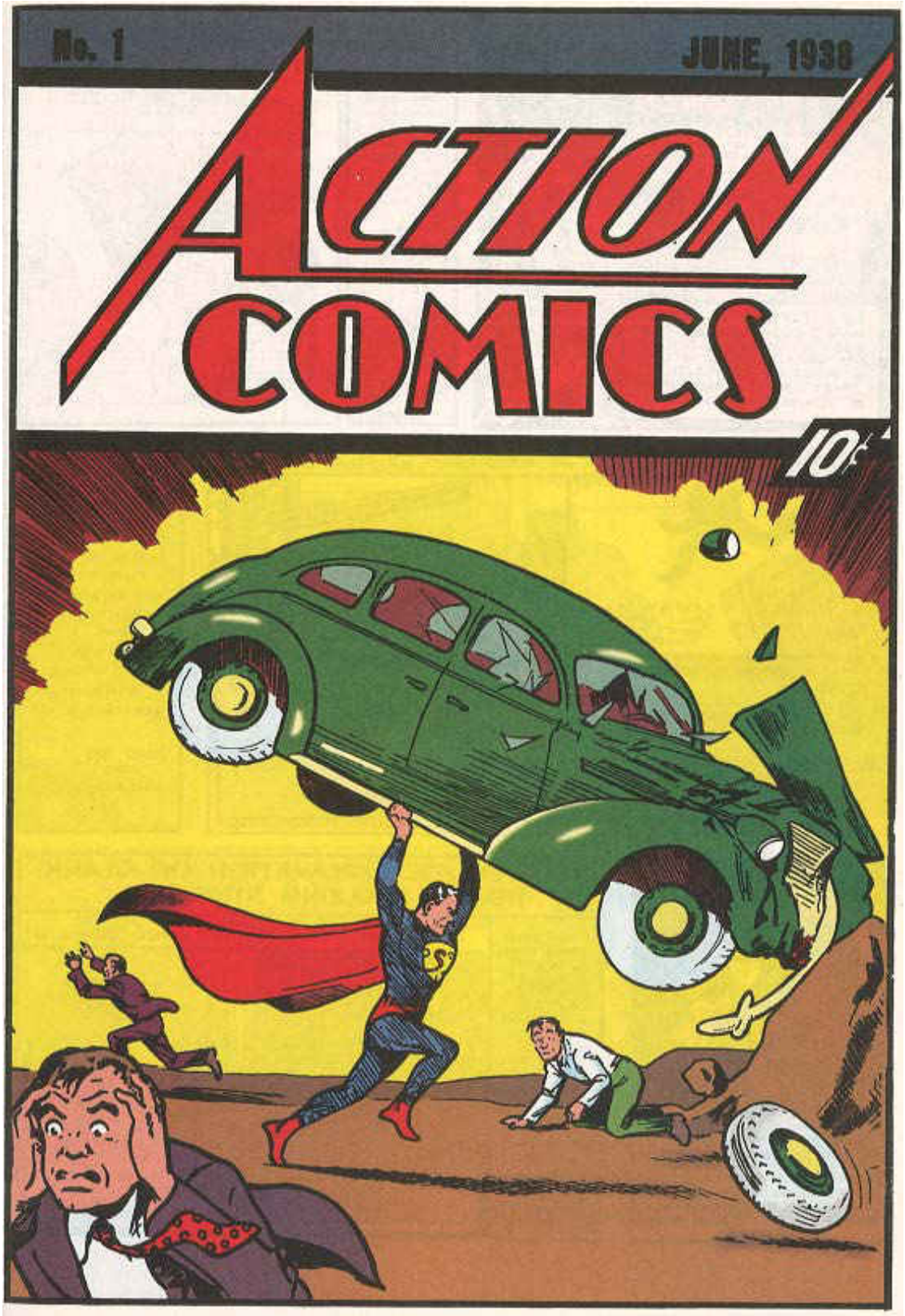

Figure 3. *Action Comics* #1 (1938). Cover.

In addition to these physical and psychological strengths, Superman carried with him the (perhaps endlessly more radical) strength to reach beyond his two-dimensionally limited context into the socio-political space that opened itself to the bright and crisp fantasy offered on the page and perform the cultural labor of reconstituting our relationships to our many negotiated selves, probing the edges of desire while at the same time curiously flattering the central myths that constitute onlookers' very Americanness. Which is one way of saying that he was more than, as has been argued, "a kind of spectacular immigrant…come from afar to participate in the American dream."[64] Because Superman does not merely participate. He was a creative force that visually, specularly, and affectively animated myriad American dreams and fantasies—some liberal and democratic, attached to measured identities and sensibilities of good-life progressivism and civic duty, some very much not.

Following from this general observation, this chapter makes argumentative and interpretive moves to compare how this one well-known early superhero, Superman, as well another much less well-known superhero, Fantomah, Mystery Woman of the Jungle, do compelling formative work to build the terrain on which various political identities and affinities originate, or are "founded." To approach this broad question, I center on the claim that despite their framing as upholders of the law, superheroes can only ever be "apparently" on the side of law and order—that the visual appearance and performance of justice is politically situated to affirm the order itself, while the superhero, whose corporeal authority settles all claims against it with an embodied capacity for frontier violence, always remains stateless, even if "affiliated" with law and order through

[64] Savage, William W., Jr. 1990. *Comic Books and America: 1945-1954.* Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, p. 5.

explicit performances of justice and nationalism. Put another way, the claim is that superheroic power is always violently stateless, and that this statelessness, as it is shown to us in these early examples of the genre, is racialized white, gendered masculine, and constitutive of the possibilities and limitations of both. Thus, although I show how the origination of the genre is complex and irresolute, there remain nestled deep within the crude and electric superhero stories analyzed a set of interlocking ties to overt, assymetrically powerful identities and affinities—identies rooted, sometimes biologically, sometimes metaphysically, in the capacity for violent maintenance of order. Identification, I show, constructs the originary order and justification of the law, but obscures the path that helps map our understanding of it.

More crucially, however, this chapter gestures toward the conceptual limits of stable identificatory terrain itself. Utilizing theoretical and hermeneutic tools of contemporary affect theory, I puzzle after how visuality frames the affective boundaries of political subjectivity. I argue that the micropolitics instantiated through the "feeling journeys" of identification destabilize ordinary conceptions of political identity and affinity,[65] offering up instead a compelling refiguration of origins not as sites of justification in perpetuity, but as deterritorialized, nomadic spaces that challenge the modern impulse towards progress and futurity at all. I argue that the fantastic visual construction of superheroes and viewers' specular encounters with them negotiate the fields of identification viewers are both affectively invited towards and refused.[66] Such a

[65] For the language of "feeling journeys" and their association with affective identification I am indebted to Victoria Hattam's 2011 unpublished manuscript entitled "Caught Looking." Hattam herself repurposes the language of "feeling journeys" or "voyages" from Daniel Stern's 2004 book *The Present Moment in Psychotherapy and Everyday Life*, New York: WW Norton & Company.

[66] Seigworth, Gregory J., and Melissa Gregg. 2010. An inventory of shimmers. In *The Affect Theory Reader*, Gregg and Seigworth, Eds. Durham/London: Duke UP, pp. 1-25.

conception of destabilized political origins, identifications, and affinities illustrates for us the challenge of how, if affect is to be taken seriously, we must be open to the fleeting surfaces of our politics, the wispy prod and tug of "in-between-ness" that demands above all else a careful sensitivity, an aliveness to the experience of politics as they happen.[67]

Superman and the Politics of Appearing

I suspect that many of Superman's hallmarks—as Ben Saunders would say, "Truth, Justice, and All That Stuff"—are well-known enough to leave un-introduced here.[68] The various cultural iterations of the character have built a complex if widely recognizable American mythology, some elements of which still remain central to the character, and some of which are best forgotten.[69] For the purposes of exploring the affective political draw of origins, here I'm particularly interested in the very earliest stories—stories that feature a Superman many casual pop-culture consumers would have difficulty recognizing as the god-like alien reporter from rural Kansas that exists in the collective cultural consciousness today. In the beginning, there was no "American Way," no obvious manifestation of the mid-century political anxieties and rose-tinted moral perfection we might generally believe ought be attached to the character. The early Superman stories are chaotic in narrative style, visual rendering, manifest content, and moral purpose—not to mention, of course, their politics, which have been identified elsewhere variously as "socialist-anarchist"[70] and those of a "butt-kicking New Dealer."[71]

[67] Ibid, p. 1.

[68] Saunders 2011, pp. 16-35.

[69] Ibid, p. 20 cites writer Denny O'Neil's genealogy of "super breath," an essential and silly and perfect reading of the power-bloat that plagued Superman stories of the 1960s and 1970s.

[70] Ibid, p. 23.

Through this din I seek to explore beginnings. Starting with the very first appearance of Superman (see Fig. 4), the specular and affective fields associated with superhero comic books are being constructed, which in turn I believe necessitates careful attention to how they navigate the tensions and ambivalences inherent in such an obviously political visual project.

Figure 4. *Action Comics* #1 (1938). Superman's first origin story and "scientific explanation."

In the pages of *Action Comics* #1, before the narrative begins, and in order to better ground what follows, viewers are offered a quick and simple origin story of

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[71] Tye, Larry. 2012. *Superman: The High-Flying History of America's Most Enduring Hero*. New York: Random House, p. 45.

Superman and his "titanic strength." Because he "had come from a planet whose inhabitants' physical structure was millions of years advanced of our own," Superman is able to jump, lift, and run in ways that mere human beings simply cannot. Just look at the pictures and see for yourself.

Interestingly (and deeply problematically) evocative of scientific racism, Superman's innate difference is "scientifically explained" in the language of biology. Is he incredible? "No!" claims the narrator of the text box, he's just the same as an anthropomorphic ant or grasshopper. Pre-empting the horror of that literal explanation's fruition, however, is the claim that he will use his abilities to "benefit mankind" as a "champion of the oppressed…helping those in need." With knees bent, shoulders forward, and bold red cape spread behind him, Superman pitches himself toward the heroic challenges his "nature" anticipates for him.[72]

Perhaps before one can fully digest the exegesis of Superman's origins, viewers are launched forward with the energy and purpose of our titular promise. Narratively, it might be too kind to say that *Action* #1 is frantic, even for a form sometimes analyzed for its proclivity towards "unnatural narrative" aesthetics.[73] In the story, Superman helps stay the execution of an innocent woman on death row, intervenes in a case of domestic abuse, saves Lois Lane from a kidnapping, and confronts a corrupt weapons manufacturer bribing a United States senator, all of which he does in the midst of establishing the dual-identity of lovelorn Clark Kent, newspaper reporter. Although poorly constructed and

[72] This pose, a simple forward lean, very quickly becomes a standard method of pictorialization in superhero comics; it is utilized especially effectively by Jack Kirby in his renderings of Captain America, seen in Chapter V, though with much more dynamism and artistic authority than Joe Shuster could ever muster.

[73] See, for example: Rudiger Heinze. 2013. The whirligig of time: Toward a poetics of unnatural temporality, in *A Poetics of Unnatural Narrative,* eds. Jan Alber, Henrik Svok Nielsen, and Brian Richardson. Columbus: The Ohio State UP, pp. 31-44.

exaggerated beyond a reasonable suspension of disbelief, this effervescent energy and excitement is definitively important to our understanding of the affective fields opened and invited towards in the early superhero project. As our eyes bounce from panel to panel, visually stitching the narrative together[74] just as it threatens to chase out of our grasp, we are compelled by the gestalt visual motion of the comic book page, its integral wholeness and rhythm. For example, the second to last page of the story shows Superman's confrontation with the corrupt arms manufacturer. The content of the page itself—Superman grabbing the man and gleefully running across telephone wires as the man begs for Superman to stop—is interesting at least in light of its disruption of our (at least potential) assumption that Superman probably doesn't psychologically torture his captives. He does. It's a point worth returning to, and I will in a moment, but here I'm more interested in something else: I'm more interested in the shape of the page, a sort of looking at the whole of it, to show how motion can work to harness the reader and build a heightened field of affective response. [See Fig. 5]

The first two panels at the top of the page set our eyes for the symphonic play of angles that follows. In the first, we see Superman and the arms manufacturer level with one another, Superman hunching slightly to meet the eyes of his criminal adversary. This, we might say, is the opening stasis of the page, the invitation in. Tension is minimized by the leveling of the characters, who each occupy roughly half of the space available in the

[74] This "stitching" is what comics scholars sometimes refer to as navigating "the gutter," or the physical space between individual panels of art on the page. Jared Gardner summarizes Scott McCloud's (1993) concept of "the gutter" nicely when he writes that comics are very basically constructed with "gaps and omissions" that contribute to "uneasy" meaning: "One visible space where this always-uneasy negotiation takes place is in the gap between panels, or the 'gutter'… the reader must at every panel work actively to bring 'closure' to the space between frames. Even in the most simplistic narratives, the reader imaginatively fills in this space with the 'missing' action" (2012, xi).

panel and whose words claim similar visual territory. As we look to the next panel, our eyes may become loaded—like

Figure 5. *Action Comics* #1 (1938). Minimized scale to accentuate formal movement.

the ratcheting down of a spring. Looked at left to right, Superman is the first figure we engage. He looms up over the arms manufacturer, staking the visual background as a superior position. The arms manufacturer leans backward towards us, weak in position visually and textually, as though he feels the same tension we feel building, anxious for its release. And release it does. The third panel, the dominant midsection of the page, is

perverse with angularity, Superman jumping up and to the right, dragging the man behind him, whose flailing arms point us down and to the left. The panel's construction fixes our eyes on a diagonal, while the perspective of the background city is unsure what to do, as though the lines themselves are looking askance at the incredulity of Superman's bodily performance. The final two panels, acting as the denouement of the page's action, point the eyes down and to the right, to the exit of the page, to the full release of remaining gestalt tension, with Superman clearly taking us there—alongside his captive.

Such is a quick look at the page, but one that points towards how the formal elements of imagetextual construction can work to build a heightened sense of affective tension and response. Even given the look's brevity, the method engenders very basic questions and concerns. Chief among these may be the admittedly reductive character of analysis—we're looking at line, space, shape, color, and direction in a set of imagetexts that are so much more than that. Yet, despite its reductiveness, formal analysis seems quite conversant with and sympathetic to some of the basic tenets of affect theorists—the happy space that Sara Ahmed calls "the messiness of the experiential, the unfolding of bodies into worlds, and the drama of contingency."[75] Formality is thus but one element of our messy experience of things, showing us some possibilities of how we may enter the space of the imagetext, but not foreclosing on the radical multiplicity held together within the boundaries of our "ways of seeing."[76] In Roland Barthes' language, there is not one "*punctum*," one piercing wound opened by the imagetext, but many.[77] Bringing affect

[75] Ahmed, Sara. 2010. Happy objects. In *The Affect Theory Reader*, Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, Eds. Durham/London: Duke UP, p. 30.

[76] Berger, John. 1977. *Ways of Seeing.* London: BBC and Penguin Books.
[77] Barthes, Roland. 1981. *Camera Lucida.* New York: Hill and Wang.

and formal criticism together can then direct us towards Susan Sontag's famous clarion call for an "erotics" of art, a so-called anti-interpretive strategy careful to "reveal the sensuous surface of art without mucking about in it."[78]

The danger to avoid here is chasing formalism down the rabbit hole, a move that threatens blunt ahistoricism and remedial interpretation. As I pointed out earlier, the content of the page should also come to bear on how we approach it, with content being deeply embedded within (and constitutive of) the context from which it arises. Formalism need not be so crass as to deny this, but it requires a carefully constructed historical mediation—form and meaning should not be opposed categorizations each trying to define the other (even conceptually) but should be dialectically self-aware enough to allow reflexivity and historical situation in the reader herself. So what do we do with the fact that Superman appears to torture his captive? [See Fig.6]

Figure 6. *Action Comics* #1 (1938). Superman on wire.

Such an imagetext suggests that Superman's justice is unlike the law and order we might expect from a self-declared "champion of the oppressed." He acts in ways that

[78] Sontag, Susan. 1961. *Against Interpretation.* New York: Dell Publishing, pp. 13-23.

might serve to ignite particular masculine social desires—he saves three different women, in different contexts, in this story alone—but also seems to revel in out-standing determination. That is, the character seems pro-social, yet outside of that same sociality. The governor character from early on in the story proves quite prescient, then, when about Superman he exclaims "Thank heaven he's apparently on the side of law and order!" [See Fig. 7] Because "apparently" is the condition of Superman's being.

Figure 7. *Action Comics* #1 "Apparently on the side of law and order!" (1938).

Superman exists within the realm of authority, yet transgresses the upper boundary of that authority by embodying a new standard thereof. The logic is one of both unstable boundaries and intrinsic superiority—codified in explicit terms of white

masculinity and biological racial dominion. But this transgression of the imagetext's own attachment to the white male body as a source of authority and power in relation to law and order cripples itself. The frontier violence of the superheroic performance melts distinctions of belonging within the imagetext and creates complex and ambivalent fields of affective and specular identification through it. Indeed, in light of these ambivalences, it begs us to reconsider Fredric Wertham, the star psychologist of the 1950s Kefauver congressional hearings that eventually led to the creation of an industry-wide self-censorship organization modeled on the Hays Code in film, when he warns against the later multi-media iterations of the Superman character:

> Superman (with the big S on his uniform—we should, I suppose, be thankful that it is not an S.S.) needs an endless stream of ever new submen, criminals and "foreign-looking" people not only to justify his existence but even to make it possible…Superman has long been recognized as a symbol of violent race superiority. The television Superman…does not only have "superhuman powers," but explicitly belongs to a "super-race."[79]

Fantomah, Gendered Fear, and the Looking of Order

Originating in the pages of Jungle Comics #2, published in February 1940 by Fiction House Magazines, "Fantomah, Mystery Woman of the Jungle" is contentiously

[79] Wertham, Fredric. 1954. *Seduction of the Innocent*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.

accepted by comics historians as the first female superhero to appear in mass-published comic book format.[80] [See Fig. 8] This firstness is an important point worth noting here because, like Superman, I seek to show that Fantomah does critical work to shape the specular and affective fields of identity and affinity formation in comics' earliest days—a shaping of identity and affinity formation that offers both potential and limit to future superhero publishing and iconography within the American zeitgeist.

Unlike Superman, however, a bit more context may be needed to fairly situate the character. It is only recently, under the careful historical recovery and editorial work of Paul Karasik and a small group of others[81], that Fantomah has seen broad critical reception.

[80] Note the nearly comedic gymnastics of the qualifications in this sentence. Such qualifications are perhaps unnecessary, although they usefully and clearly signal my preference to be safe when making any kind of strong historical claim about early American comic books. I state this preference because there are several factors working against certainty in regard to Fantomah's female superheroic "firstness." For instance, the comic book publishing industry of this era was notoriously loose in the practice of cover-dating, and purposefully so. Having the "newest" comics distributed and made available on newsstands was a shrewd means of inflating sales figures; consumers wanted the newest material, and were assumed to buy comic books with the most recent cover-dates—even to the point where cover dates were vastly preceding the present. This means that although it appears to be true that Fantomah is the earliest debuting female superhero by virtue of the official publication date listed on the comic book itself, because there were a number of other female characters published in close temporal proximity to her release it is difficult to determine with historical certainty which character *exactly* was first introduced within the marketplace. Fantomah is increasingly given credit as the first, and so my claim for her firstness here is merely an echo of recent historical scholarship around the character. The claim remains contentious, however, especially insofar as it undermines important and well-respected prior work done on the history of female characters in comics. I say more about this contention below.

[81] See: Karasik, Paul. 2007. *I Shall Destroy All The Civilized Planets!* Seattle: Fantagraphics; and Paul Karasik. 2009. *You Shall Die By Your Own Evil Creation!*

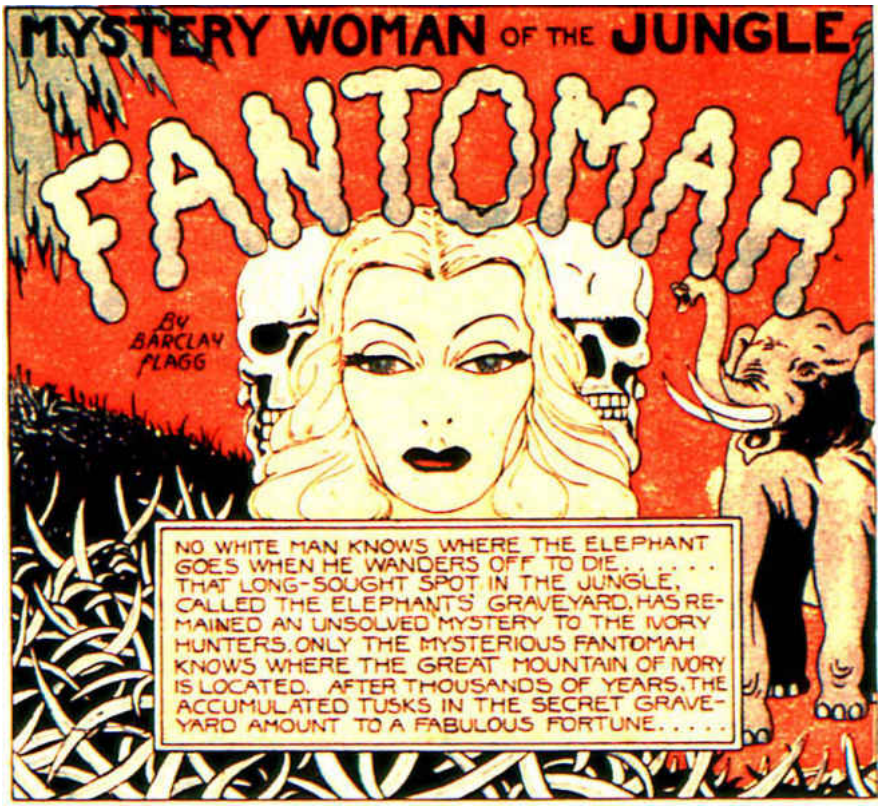

Figure 8. Jungle Comics #2 (1940). First image of Fantomah.

Although Fantomah was indeed published prior to several other early female superheroes, including the more popular syndicated comic strip character Invisible Scarlet O'Neil and Timely Comics' Black Widow, comics historian Trina Robbins has argued that a different character, the all-too-aptly named Woman in Red, who was first published a month after Fantomah in March 1940, is much more characteristically representative of female superheroic firstness.[82] Of course, Robbins asserts this argument on the loose and shifting definitions of superhero itself,[83] necessitating a convenient

[82] Robbins, Trina. 1997. *The Great Women Superheroes.* Northampton, MA: Kitchen Sink Press.

[83] "Although the term 'superhero' was used as early as 1917 to describe a public figure of great talents or accomplishments, the early comic book heroes of the 1940s were usually referred to by their creators as 'costumed characters' or as 'long-underwear' or 'union-suit' heroes.' The word 'superhero' was generally

exclusion of Fantomah, who, as I hope you'll see, certainly appears and acts much like the superheroic characters often recognized and discussed as such.[84] Firstness here, again, is not relevant insofar as it is owed reverence *qua* firstness, but only insofar as it works to shape the norms and conventions of superhero comics to follow, as well as the formative effect it may (or may not) have had on the fields of affective identification and affinity consumers of superhero comic books are invited into.

Much of the contention surrounding Fantomah's inclusion into the canon of early superhero characters might be explained by attending to the discomforting oddity of Fletcher Hanks' narrative and artistic style. Similar to another of Hanks' now-popular creations, Stardust the Super Wizard, Fantomah is rigidly powerful, essentially indomitable, exercising a vast and ever-changing set of curious—if not quite totally coherent—powers that enable her role as "supreme protector of jungleland" (Flagg [Hanks] 1940, Jungle Comics #6, pg 30). Alluded to throughout her early appearances, and finally settled after Hanks' run on the character had ended in Jungle Comics #27, Fantomah is an "Egyptian Goddess" given her powers by a shrouded character who is then promptly killed by an African tribal grotesque—a series of events that ultimately but still intriguingly offers little in the way of post-hoc explanation for Fantomah's original weirdness. Fantomah has the power of flight, can make objects—including herself—appear and disappear, and, like her compatriot in creative generation Stardust, has at her

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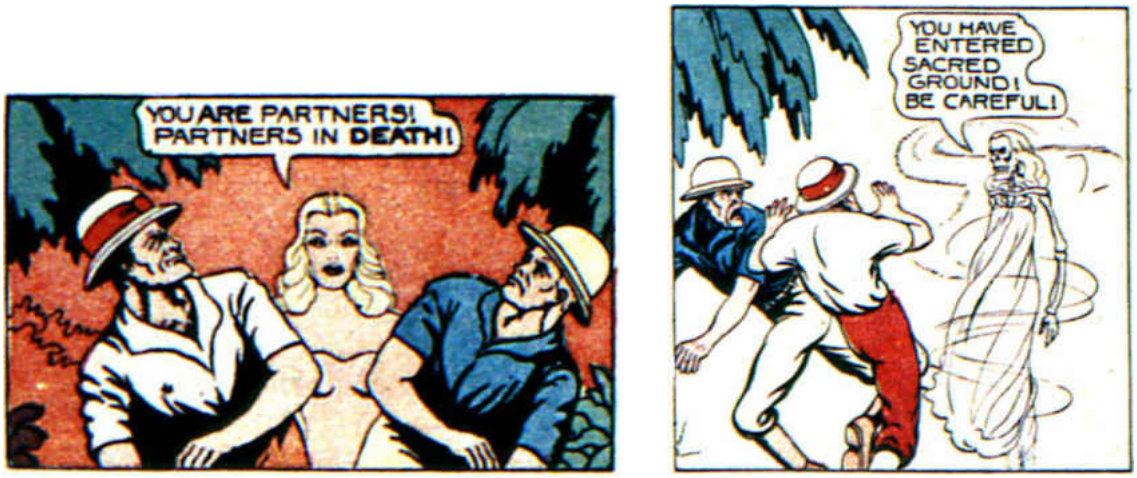
not used in comic books until after the mid-1940s, and then, only infrequently." From: Benton, Mike. 1992. *Superhero Comics of the Golden Age*. Dallas: Taylor Publishing Company, p. 5.

[84] Peter Coogan (2006) has attempted to develop a categorical tool to distinguish the superhero genre from other—potentially overlapping—genres. His emphasis on a definitional triumvirate of "mission, powers, and identity" falls flat, however, and seems to be more capable as a mechanism to police the boundaries of genre rather than study the internal dynamics that work to (re-)constitute and shape the possibilities of genre itself. Coogan rightly admits that genre is not static, but risks internalizing that critique without reflecting on how just how very fundamentally constraining it is for his project.

disposal a number of "rays" that physically and pyschologically manipulate her adversaries.

More unique than these somewhat rote elements of superheroic performance is Fantomah's ability to transform herself when the safe-keeping of her jungle is trespassed against. [See Figs. 9 and 10] Startlingly, when pushed to her apparent limits by criminal aggressors of various (and sometimes dubious) quality, Fantomah's face transfigures itself into the visage of a skull. She becomes-reaper, ghast-ily patrolling the jungle and playing her part in the dramatopolitical struggle over "sacred" jungle ground. A hallmark of Hanks' stylistic flair, in her transformed state Fantomah is often with her mouth open as she streaks toward her target. Besides its general creepiness, there is in this transformation an undeniably apparent evocation of fear as a primary tool of superheroic power and its exercise.



Figures 9 and 10. *Jungle Comics* #2. Fantomah's transformation.

Employing fear within the essentially juridical regulation project of catching criminals and doing moral good is reminiscent of at least two prior characters within the superhero genre, Batman and The Spectre. In both of those cases, an important element in creating the space for fear to be a particularly effective tool is the superhero's attire. Costumes, the "uniforms" of superheroism, also proclaim a sense of individuality.[85] This polar pull, Interestingly, however, whereas those male characters use full-body cloaks and the cover of night as instrumental elements in their fear-inducing dramas, the character of Fantomah generally maintains the visibility of her body. Through Hanks' aesthetic penchant for ethereal, diaphanous draping—if not simply luridly revealing costumeage— his depiction of Fantomah regularly and routinely puts her body on display in the comics as an object to be looked at—consumed as such by the characters within the stories as well as by those looking at the comic book page.

In this way, her body comes to function as a revelation of fear itself; her very femaleness, and the social trappings of femininity for which it figures to be a vehicle—stiff and awkward though they may be visibly rendered—become constitutive of the fear she seeks to employ. The female form is strong here, an enforcer; the feminine-gendered qualities of her costume, employed in service of her mission, are thus ethereal *and* rigid, cartoon gauze for the male gaze *and* a tool to strike desirous, queer fear in the souls she haunts on and through the page. Indeed, and I think importantly for the affective draw of the panel, her full shock of blonde hair remains intact while in this transfigured state, flowing behind her as she dispenses with the evils that threaten the sanctity of her protectorate. Fantomah the Demon is above all things a feminine woman, and a powerful

[85] See: Reynolds, Richard. 1992. *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology.* Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press. Reynolds writes: "Generally speaking, a heroes costume (the sign of super-powers) is linked in some (permanently visible) way with his origin."

terror at that. While in her unaltered visual state, Fantomah presents to us as a goddess who is simply if effectively constructed as such through Hanks' use of soft, full lines and bright color, all of which serve to encase the character in an aura that seems to precede her. But while transformed, Fantomah's skull face shows us queerly gendered fear, visually constructing Death not as an imitation of a black-robed, scythe-wielding Fate, but as a sheer-clothed, blonde-haired Fury. [See Fig. 11]

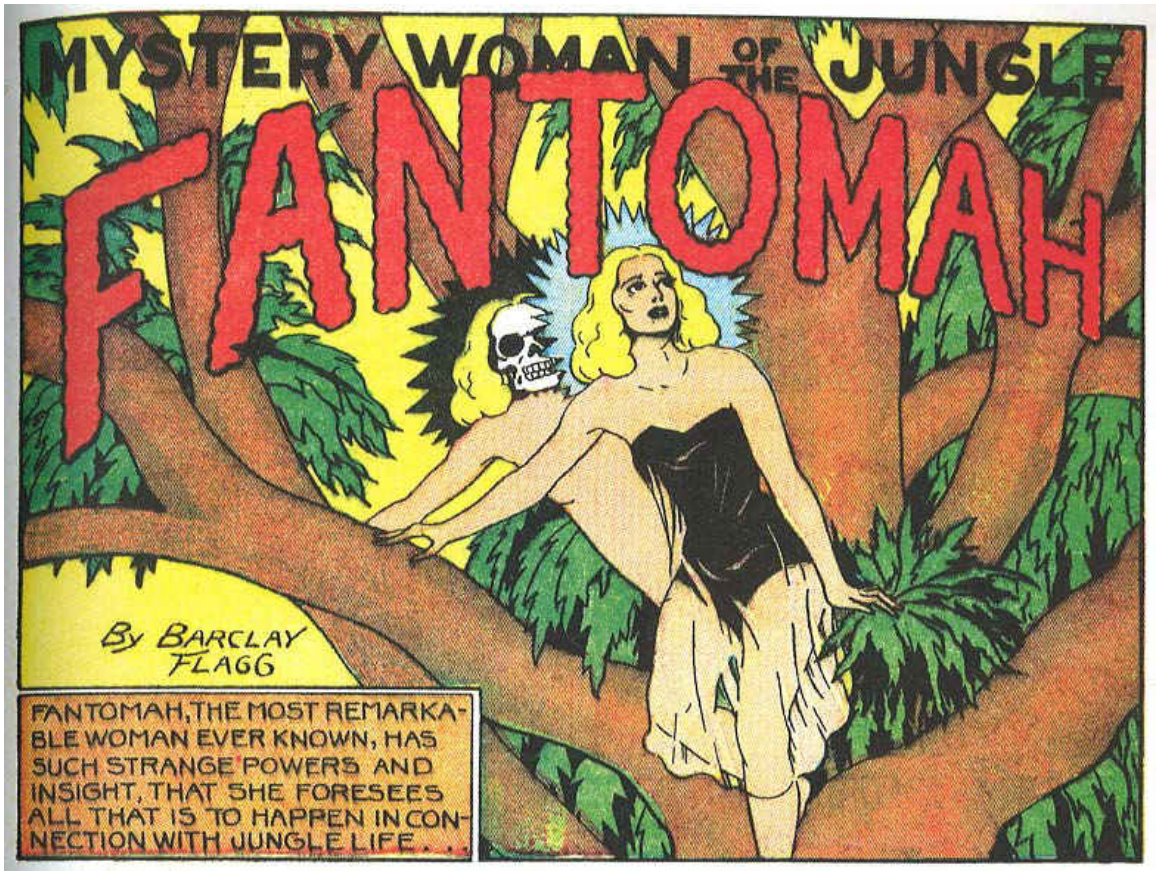


Figure 11. *Jungle Comics* #4 (1940).

In *Jungle Comics* #4, the third appearance of Fantomah, Hanks experiments with the transformation effect by explicitly and simultaneously showing us the duality of the

character. The title panel depicts two Fantomahs: what I will refer to here as Fantomah the Woman and Fantomah the Demon. An unusual representational move within superhero comic books of the era, I want to take a moment here to comment on the stakes of duality and the affective pull of early superhero visual culture. By representationally splitting the character of Fantomah on the page, Hanks introduces an interesting and puzzling challenge to the stability of origins in early superhero narratives.

Seen in Figure 11 above, Fantomah the Woman is perched in a tree, her head backlit by a stabbing electric-blue light that seems to accentuate the vibrancy of her blonde-colored hair; she is leaning softly on a limb, fingers outstretched, and looking skyward with large eyes while her clothing, a body-hugging black one-piece draped in gossamer fabric, animates the scene with subtle movement: the image is that of an almost silly saccharine innocence, a derivative-manufactured pictorial cliché that serves to situate the viewer's affective relation to the character quickly and not much else. But leaning out from behind Fantomah the Woman, enveloped in a menacing black, is Fantomah the Demon, her partially-obscured skull face gazing not skyward, but directly back towards the viewer. Without explanation, Fantomah the Demon appears to be unclothed, relying on the arm and body placement of her foregrounded doppelganger to cover her breasts from view—a courtesy that might be reasonably born out of publishing standards at the time, but one that I'm not convinced would be entirely welcomed by the character herself. Fantomah the Demon, though visually obscured, is unsettlingly confrontational. The black eye sockets of her skull face menace the viewer and produce an eerie chill in the space between the look and the page, an affective oddity and pregnant pause before the story itself even sets out.

Later in the same story, Hanks again visits the simultaneously dual Fantomah. Within the diagesis the split functions with no further visual or textual explanation of why it exists; rather, all that becomes clear is the strength of emphasis on which Hanks' depiction of Fantomah insists that the viewer experience her as split. In Figure 12, we see that in this panel Hanks has no time for anatomically consistent niceties—the viewer must see Fantomah the Woman and Fantomah the Demon as both one and the same, wrestling in the space of the panel not for recognition in the eyes of the adversaries whose fear we might ostensibly expect her to command, but for an encounter with *the viewer's* eyes, whose affective identificatory response is the prize of Hanks' compelling style. Note the distinction: in sorting through the affective draw of the image, it is not "recognition" at stake, but "encounter."

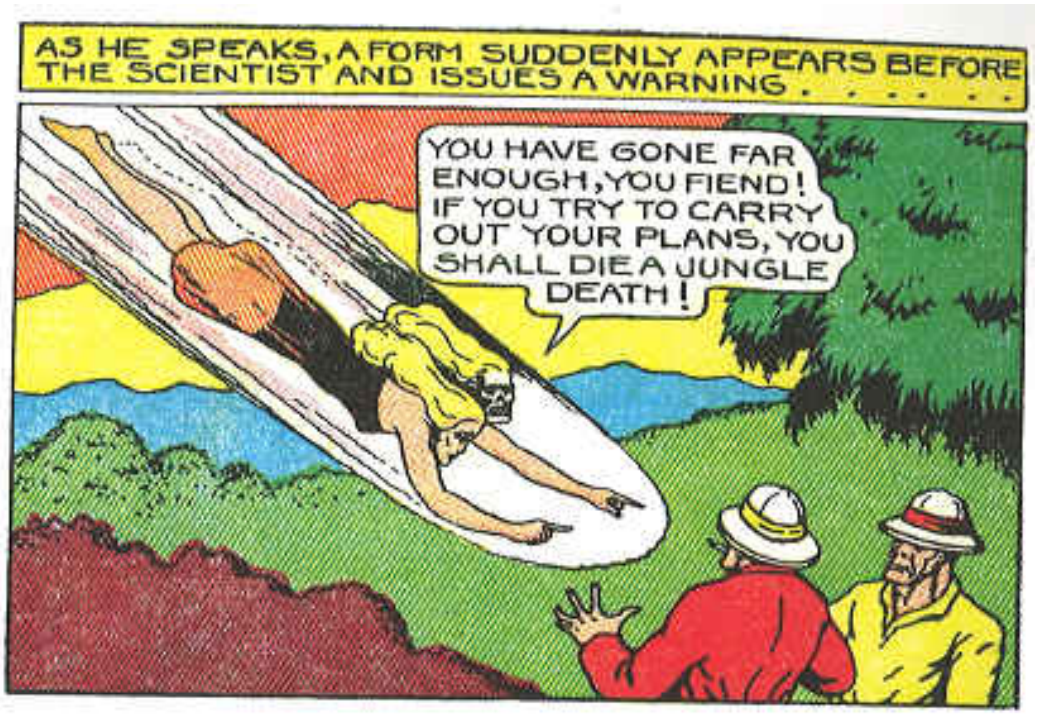


Figure 12. *Jungle Comics* #4 (1940). "Jungle Death."

About this distinction, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari write:

> "[S]omething in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental *encounter*…[it] can only be sensed [and] is opposed to recognition. In recognition, the sensible is not at all that which can only be sensed, but that which bears directly upon the senses in an object which can be recalled, imagined or conceived."[86]

To the point, the eyes of the evil scientists Fantomah bears down upon are obscured—they do not look. Or if they do, the viewer of this panel is not privy to the direction of their gaze. Rather, the eyes that look in this panel, that lock onto anything at all, seem to point outward off the page, along the z-axis of the panel frame, into some space other than that which is immediately available to the viewer but felt nonetheless, a meeting at the twixt of viewer and viewed, emanating out from the dark absences, the eyes of Fantomah the Demon.

This outward look and forceful encounter is what James Elkins describes as occurring when the "object stares back,"[87] a curious condition under which subject/object organization of looking creeps toward an arresting intersubjectivity. Much like the title panel, Fantomah the Woman is depicted here as engaged with her surroundings, resonating with a certainty of action as she bears down upon the narrative's evil scientists. She is visually constructed in perfect profile, eyes forward, intent upon the men

[86] Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1994. *What is Philosopy?* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia UP, p. 139.

[87] Elkins, James. 1996. *The Object Stares Back*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

who seek to corrupt and enslave the jungle's "Gorgon gorillas." Yet, just as resolutely, Fantomah the Demon is intent upon the eyes of the viewer; she is visually constructed in a blunted three-quarter profile, face just slightly turned aside—a disconcertingly unnatural position even if we take as given Hanks' experiment with bicephalic representation. Fantomah the Demon wants *us* to see her, wants *the reader* to feel what it means to be held in the gaze of a skull-faced Fury when she tells the viewer ("you") that she "shall die a jungle death!" Through the object staring back, the viewer is beckoned into a kind of affective relation/regulation as object herself, made mechanically live to the fear of consequences risked when Fantomah's order is threatened.

Perhaps more crucially, this split depiction of Fantomah forces a split in the field of psychological identifications open to the viewer. In a complicated manner, these panels' disembodiment of an embodied fault line makes visible the schism Jacques Lacan suggests lies in between the *imago* and the self, the fantasy of the ideal whole occupying the "Innenwelt" and the lived experience of the body in pieces occupying the "Umwelt."[88] This makes the title panel's introductory caption forcefully lucid, as the comma that breaks the description of Fantomah as "the most remarkable woman ever known" and the fact that she "has such strange powers" itself becomes the point of rupture—but rupture of what, exactly? Which Fantomah is the *imago*, and which is the self? Which is inside and which is outside? And, perhaps more fundamentally, is there usefulness in the distinction?

[88] The use of Lacan here functions as a means of illustrating the collapse of distinction between "inside" and "outside"—or Innenwelt and Umwelt—made possible in through the affective intensity of the panel. Lacan's language is useful to this point: the fantasies of control tethered to imagined fantasy ideals "inside" are not imagined here as strong enough to grapple with the body-in-pieces made conscious of itself in Fantomah's bizarrely rigid portrayal.

Hank's depiction of Fantomah's duality levels a very basic challenge to Lacan's famous psychological identificatory schema offered in the "mirror stage." Distinguishing the *imago* and the self in Hanks' art is made problematic through its breaking down the conventional model of superheroic identification. That is, generic convention will usually dictate that the superhero is the subject onto which our identification will be specularly and affectively grafted. In looking at the hero and experiencing their application of law and order—or in this case, a basic sense of other-than-legal justice—we are invited into an affectively-charged space of identificatory agreement with the law and order itself. Fantomah's specific pictorical duality, however, flaunts such a stable transition between subject and identification insofar as the reader becomes the object of her powerful gaze. To build an identification with Fantomah the Woman, who we might suspect is the Fantomah of Lacan's Symbolic order—the Fantomah of the "socially elaborated situation"[89]—is to risk the formative usefulness of identifying with the heroic and ostensibly just action perpetrated by Fantomah the Demon. But in identifying with Fantomah the Demon, who, to clarify further, we might suspect is the Fantomah existing somewhere between Lacan's orders of the Imaginary and the Real—the Fantomah that, applying Zizek's words here, "endeavors to stretch the imagination to the very border of the irrepresentable"[90]—we identify with the subject that damns us in the terror of her gaze. This means that to identify with the superheroic performance of Fantomah requires that we accept an invitation to a space of self-canceling identifications.

[89] Lacan, Jacques. 1977. The mirror stage as formative of the function of the I as revealed in psychoanalytic experience. In *Ecrits*, trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: WW Norton & Company, pg 5.

[90] Zizek, Slavoj. 2006. *How to Read Lacan.* New York: WW Norton & Company, pg 64.

This, I believe, is the centrality of the character's affective weirdness, the sense of unsettled questioning felt in looking through her stories. Hanks' imagetextual construction of Fantomah opens up a deeply complex field of interlocking identifications, many of which actively discourage others that we are invited towards through the imagetext itself. Fantomah is explicitly styled as an object of the reader's desire, carrying forward the active generic tradition of so-called "jungle girl" comics, yet is only effective in her role as protector when she sheds the limitation of desirability. Her justice is clearly a white justice, a protectorate colonial justice, yet its objects are "white fiends" that threaten to corrupt the unspoiled naturality of her sphere of influence. [See Fig. 13] The acts of justice themselves, usually corporeal and mortal, are often then left to the jungle itself to execute, with Fantomah merely exercising the diligence of seeing it through. To that end, the ambivalences of affective and specular fields of identification make complex any notion of superheroic relation to justice and the maintenance of law and order.

Figure 13. *Jungle Comics* #4 (1940). "You shall die by your own evil creation!"

CHAPTER III

PUBLIC HEROES, PUBLIC ATTACHMENTS:

1960s MARVEL AND THE SCOPIC DRIVE

From Super-Cops to Social Outcasts

Comics scholars and cultural critics have long taken notice of the stylistic and tonal shifts crafted at Marvel Comics during the early 1960s. Under the guidance of, in particular, the creative teams of Jack Kirby and Stan Lee, and Steve Ditko and Stan Lee, the generally-accepted doxa is that Marvel Comics of this era were invested with a new social relevance, a willingness to engage the comic book consuming public on terms that reached beyond the ossified whimsy and decadence of superhero comic books from the late 1940s and 1950s[91] in order that they might resonate more deeply with the churning aspirations of newly politically0conscious members of the polity.[92] Coming to bear at a political moment where the supposed moral certainty of orthodox American consensual identity was waning, Marvel comics mobilized a new popular visual theatrics that served to further destabilize common sense Americanism. As Matthew Costello argues, "even while [at times] continuing to assert the orthodoxy of American consensual identity, the characters, stories, and art would begin to render that orthodoxy problematic."[93]

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[91] On the point of generic superhero ossification and the problems of perpetual stasis, see in particular: Eco, Umberto. 1979. The myth of Superman. In *The Role of the Reader.* Indiana: UP.

[92] Genter, Robert. 2007. "With great power comes great responsibility": Cold War culture and the birth of Marvel Comics. *The Journal of Popular Culture 40*(6), pp. 953-978.

[93] Costello, Matthew J. 2009. *Secret Identity Crisis: Comic Books and the Unmasking of Cold War America.* New York: Continuum, p. 61.

Marvel Comics of this era, in short, had energy—an it-factor verve that connected with people in the moment—and they capitalized on the burgeoning youth counterculture by making stories that people were inspired by and wanted to see.[94] As Arnold Blumberg writes, Marvel comics from this period were "born out of the optimistic glow of the Camelot/Kennedy years but laced with the strange mixture of hope and foreboding that characterized the atomic era."[95]

This "strange mixture" of optimism and anxiety was achieved by introducing recognizably human problems to what had previously been a static and inflexible superhero genre.[96] Following this move to emphasize the human relationships of their protagonists, as opposed to the enforcement of ethico-legal norms that was more commonly associated with the previous so-called "golden age" of superheroes,[97] Marvel was able to garner increasing influence within the comic book publishing market, as well as within the broader public zeitgeist. According to Richard Reynolds, "Marvel dominated the scene in the 1960s and early 1970s, its writers and artists creating a wealth

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[94] By 1965, Marvel's superhero comics stories in particular were making serious claims on influencing national popular culture. The September 1965 issue of *Esquire* magazine, for instance, featured a back-to-school countdown of the "28 People Who Count Most" for "college radicals," and coming in numbers 27 and 28, respectively, were The Hulk and Spider-Man. Others on the list include public figures such as Bob Dylan, Fidel Castro, Malcolm X, Francois Truffaut, and Stanley Kubrick. See: "Twenty-eight people who count." *Esquire 64*(3), (September 1965): 97.

[95] Blumberg, Arnold T. 2006. "The night Gwen Stacy died": The end of innocence and "The last gasp of the Silver Age." *The International Journal of Comic Art 8*(1), p. 197.

[96] Peter Coogan writes at significant length about the contours and conventions of the superhero genre, importing a structural theory of genre from film studies scholars, predominantly Thomas Schatz. Coogan's study is excellent as far as it travels, and identifies many of the narrative tropes, themes, and standards that have shaped the superhero genre throughout its roughly 75-year history. Because of its emphasis on the structural qualities of genre—as opposed to an audience-based study on the making use and re-definition of genre over time—today it reads more as an unfortunately ahistorical and self-defeating rulebook than a useful analytic tool for understanding superhero genre conventions at any given moment in time. To his credit, it probably takes guts to put oneself in the position of ready-made intellectual foil for anyone who cares about what actual people do with things in the world.

[97] I explore examples from this era in the previous chapter.

of exciting new titles that mixed protagonists more in tune with the mores of the period, and kept an eye for the visual and verbal ironies inherent in situating super-powered characters against a background that purported to represent the 'real' world."[98]

For example, *The Fantastic Four*, first published in 1961, connected public discourse on the "breakdown" of the traditional family to the literally heightened militarism of Cold War rocketry and the competitive symbolism of spaceflight. *The Incredible Hulk*, first published in the spring of 1962, was more explicit in its narrative utilization of Cold War existential anxiety, centralizing atomic "gamma radiation" as the progenitor of uncontrollable power, bodily horror, and human psychological trauma. Perhaps more famously, the fall of 1963 saw the publication of the first iteration of *The X-Men*, a series that explored the social dramas and conflicts born out of genetic difference—the "X-gene"—that marked its bearers with wild, uncanny transformations and powers. As "children of the atom," *The X-Men,* were exemplary of a new chapter in human history, a moment in time when the scientific progress of Cold War militarism let loose unpredictable global consequences. Whereas *The Fantastic Four*, *The Incredible Hulk*, and other popular titles of the era looked to tell stories about relatively individuated consequences of Cold War conflict through radiated bodies, *The X-Men* is notable for its broad focus on the social (albeit it radically differentiated) body.

Spider-Man

Across the company's production, Marvel was experimenting in stories that engaged the "emotions of their readers with far greater realism, in some cases serving as

[98] Reynolds, Richard. 1992. *Super heroes: A modern mythology.* Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, p. 9.

a surrogate family for fans."[99] The greatest commercial success of this experimentation, the superhero Spider-Man was born in the pages of *Amazing Fantasy #15* in the summer of 1962, and quickly developed into a marquee vehicle for this nascent embrace of what Lee, elsewhere in his autobiography *Excelsior!*, refers to as "realistic fantasy," the nearly real recognizable actual that would quickly come to exemplify the "house style" of Marvel superhero comic books.

Reading through the scholarship on Spider-Man comic books, one can't help but notice the tendency—sometimes the inevitability—of the writer's confession of preference for the wall-crawler, how the writer almost always "identifies" with Spider-Man, often commenting on the nerdy, alienated, and otherwise uncool qualities of the character so as to declare a kind of "I'm that guy" sameness, a declaration effectively magnetizing the writer with the character and imbuing that relationship with preternatural force. By the mechanized means of psychological identification, attraction and desire seem to animate the relation felt between the public on the one hand, and the object consumed on the other, between the reader and Spider-Man. As Douglas Wolk says, "Readers—at least adolescent readers who feel perpetually misunderstood—can *relate* to him, the argument goes."[100] Indeed, if we consider at all the author's direction, relate-ability is the intentional core of the character.

Originally conceived by writer and editor Stan Lee as "a teenager with all the problems, hang-ups, and angst of any teenager," Lee envisioned Peter Parker as an updated version of the everyman hero, a smart kid destined to make change of some kind

[99] Blumberg, "The night Gwen Stacy died," p. 197.

[100] Wolk, Douglas. 2007. Reading comics: How graphic novels work and what they mean. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, p. 93.

but fundamentally unsure of how to do so in the face of overwhelming systems of power seemingly designed to keep him at bay. As Lee says of Parker: "He'd be an orphan who lived with his aunt and uncle, a bit of a nerd, a loser in the romance department, and who constantly worried about the fact that his family had barely enough money to live on. Except for his superpower, he'd be the quintessential hard-luck kid." With a non-standard home life, bookish mentality, and being sexually dismissed and financially hard-up, the only "exception" to his state of luckless-ness is his (eventual) superherodom. A big exception, to be sure.

Animated in layered public view through that exception, the exception of superheroic mantle, the fantasy world of Peter Parker, Spider-Man, his adventures, and many foes, can be understood as a plane onto which the corporeal force of relation is vectored—"a teenager with all the problems," the character on the page, is at once both directionally aligned with and acting upon the world to which it is tethered in relation.[101] This magnetization, a flow of attraction across the tentative subject-object divide—the comic book consumer and the comic book consumed—is likely what makes Spider-Man comic books so effective as an early corporate flagship, to be sure, but it should also be distinguished as a signal of the political capacity of Spider-Man comics. That is, it seems that Spider-Man comic books seem to be *doing* something, and in that doing may be seen as forcefully reorienting the fields embodied relation that envelop and invigorate the visual images through which we experience these things at all.

Comic books—a quintessential example of what WJT Mitchell, most typically in a different context, refers to as "imagetexts"—are complex and imbricated visual-

[101] If intention has force at all, relate-ability—understood as the potential force of relation at all—may be its vehicle.

linguistic systems.[102] They can perhaps be, and very often are, interpreted variously subject the questions and tools we bring to them, but the fact that Spider-Man is generative of such lasting affect, evidenced in the way the character's stories are discussed, nudges me toward speculating on the political: how do we begin to understand the politically creative capacities of Spider-Man comic books? How can we start to sort through the constructed publics that reverberate out of the intensity of subjective/objective identification and permeate our critical and consumptive discourses? And what can these publics teach us about the political potentialities that seem to inhere in such publically-minded comics of this era?

Utilizing Lauren Berlant's work on the politics of affect,[103] I will suggest here that early Spider-Man comic books work to institute unstable, fitful, inchoate, and "cruel" trajectories of affective identification by linking the violent cancelation of subjectivities and affinities to what I call a process of scopic self-objectification.[104] Rather than reify several extant interpretations of Spider-Man's status as a quintessentially liberal hero, a powerfully atomized individual surpassing the tragically quotidian public,[105] I want to

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[102] See in particular: Mitchell, W.J.T. 1994. *Picture Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 91-94. Throughout his critical and theoretical work, however, Mitchell is concerned with extrapolating the consequences of visual mediation, and one is bound to find nuggets of insight no matter the object(s) of study or theoretical predisposition(s).

[103] Berlant, Lauren. 2011. *Cruel Optimism.* Duke: UP.

[104] Or, "Spider-Man makes a muck of it by taking a lot of selfies."

[105] This is a point of interpretation that I believe is over-determined by a poorly historicized understanding of Spider-Man's creation. Alongside fairly standard interpretations of superheroes as Nietzschean "over-men," there exists a small if quite powerful literature on Spider-Man co-creator Steve Ditko that attempts to link Ditko's personal politics to the politics of the characters he created. Ditko is famously rendered in a number of influential histories of comics as a disciple of mid-century American novelist Ayn Rand, whose ideology of "objectivism" attempts to argue for the individual as morally prior to the social whole. Critics and historians such as Blake Bell and Gerard Jones labor to emphasize Ditko's attachment to Randian ideology, suggesting it to be the logical outgrowth of his personality and creative style. Jones argues this point in his book *Men of Tomorrow*, where he writes: "Ditko boiled with emotion, but he didn't enjoy giving it free rein either in his work or his life; he was a fiercely private man who leashed himself with a

argue that the intensities of feeling that sometimes emerge out of the encounter with these comic books (and visually compose them as well) provide us evidence that critique the usefulness of any liberal interpretation of the character.[106] Indeed, Spider-Man's affective attachments—and the affective attachments that seem to emerge in his readers—provide a compelling example of the failures of political liberal orthodoxy. Such failure, so often remarked upon as the psychic drama/trauma embedded in the alienation and anxiety of Peter Parker/Spider-Man, works to shift our thinking about the character and his stories from individuation to collectivization; that is, it rips us from a situation of the personal psychic embedded within the narrative to the political psychic floating between us, a situation insisting upon the publicness of affect and the feeling-states it engenders.

So, how do Spider-Man comic books traverse the affective gap between the personal and the political? How do they show us the intensities and capacities and potentialities swirling in a four-color critique of political liberal orthodoxy? Well, to begin with, we need to talk about cameras.

Playing with Lenses (An Aside)

Photography can be understood as a practice of making seen, of representing the qualia of an event such that the freezing of its temporal motion allows it force beyond the

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steel rationalism, and who responded to the ethical relativism of the Sixties by devoting himself to the 'Objectivism' of Ayn Rand. When he took on Spider-Man, he imbued even the most extravagant superhero fights with tension and pain." I believe this interpretation is poor insofar as it does little to account for the visual images that work to do the politics of Spider-Man comic books; and it treats the comic book page as a transposition of artist ideology rather than as a vector of relation—that is, put differently, it treats visual art as a sturdy, predictable mechanism of meaning-making rather than looking at the generation of meaning as an emergent, social process.

[106] See here especially: Palumbo, Donald. 1983. The Marvel Comics Group's Spider-Man is an existentialist superhero; or, "Life has no meaning without my latest Marvels!" *The Journal of Popular Culture 17*(2), pp. 67-82.

boundaries of the captured event's transience. In so far as it is a taking of some place that has taken place, remaking the taking as a thing, photography is also a displacement, an act of creative destruction, or a making taking place. The technologies of photography enable the duration of bodies-in-motion, stilling and objectifying them, projecting them outwards as authoritative *things that were*. As Susan Sontag writes to begin her discussion *On Photography*: "Photographs furnish evidence… a photograph passes for incontrovertible proof that a given thing happened."[107] Simply, photography represents.

Through that basic claim to representation, photography teases viewers with documentarity—an elusive, mediated realness—by substituting and transposing the aperture into the experiencing subjective eye. This point is often theorized as the basis of photography's authority: that we take the mechanics of the aperture, the bladed eye of the camera that opens up to the world and sears its likeness onto the film stock behind it, and see in that technology something like ourselves, like our own visual experience and its capacity to sear images onto the psychic stock of memory.[108] As an example of this belief, we might recall Soviet documentarian Dziga Vertov's famous cinematic depiction of the eye/lens in his 1929 film *Man with a Movie Camera* (Figure 14). Throughout the film move scattered shots composed of a searching eye superimposed over the panning lens of a film camera. That image would seem to suggest that the lens is not only a useful analogue for the human eye, but that they are at once engaged in the same project, the same form of looking out onto the world and documenting its happening at all. For Vertov, in fact, the "cine-eye" was superior, a technological victory over frail and faulty

[107] Sontag, Susan. 1977. *On Photography.* New York: Picador, p. 5.

[108] Ibid., p. 9: "[P]hotographs give people an imaginary possession of a past that is unreal…"

human vision.[109] Eschewing the question of relative superiority, however, the point remains the same: the lens is figured, at base, as a tool of representing the event "seen," and subsequently constructing it as such.

Figure 14: Vertov's famous "cine-eye" from *Man with a Movie Camera*.[110]

For this reason photography ought to be understood, according to Bernard Stiegler, as a "mnemotechnological apparatus,"[111] a memory-making tool that points forwards in time, always bearing force upon those not-yet-experienced, or not-yet-experienced again moments where eyes meet image and confront the thing-that-was.

[109] For his argument on the technological superiority of the film camera and its role in building an inarguable historical record, see: Vertov. Dziga. 1994 [1922]. We. A version of a manifesto. In *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents, 1896-1939,* eds. Ian Christie and Richard Taylor. Routledge, 1994.

[110] Image retrieved from: http://www.cinema.ucla.edu/events/2012-02-11/kino-eye-revolutionary-cinema-dziga-vertov

[111] Steigler, Bernard. 2010. Memory. In *Critical Terms for Media Studies*, eds. W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark B. N. Hansen. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 64-87.

Similarly, Roland Barthes sees in the confrontation with the photography an uncanny moment where memory and present experience fuse together and bear upon the future—even if obliquely, or "obtusely." Barthes famously regards this confrontation between eye and photograph as violent, conceptualizing the encounter with the language of *punctum*, or "that accident which pricks me."[112] Put another way, *punctum* is the felt force of the photograph, the roil in the gut that our bodies sometimes bubble up in reaction to the violent encounter.

That the violence of the photograph is "accidental," should not dissuade us from considering the force of that encounter as politically charged. The "accident" lurks somewhere beyond the photograph, billowing out of the ether in unexpected and surprising ways, piercing viewers wildly. Yet it is, in no subtle way, utterly dependent in doing so—the encounter is a mutual participation, an enfolding of photograph and viewer such that at the moment of *punctum*'s felt force there elicits something tantalizing close to the unscripted potential of relation, a fleeting moment of attachment between bodies to nothing in particular but the radically new and different.[113]

This suggests that the photographic image can be understood as the condition for what Kathleen Stewart might call a wounded "worlding," a tangled mass of surging intensities and potential connections that "might snap into sense in some sharp or vague way."[114] Snapping into sense—a sense of scenes, both physical and psychic spaces far-

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[112] Barthes, Roland. 1981. *Camera Lucida.* New York: Hill and Lang, p. 26.

[113] This point emphasizes the radical, revolutionary potential of violence. Abstracting from the founding violence commented upon by Niccolo Machiavellli and Ernst Renan, Barthes' conception of punctum unfixes historical violence by emphasizing the role of something like ordinary violence in our everyday visual experience. Violence is both a condition and (sometimes) product of the visual encounter, but floats about without a telos of eventual forgetting.

[114] Stewart, Kathleen. 2007. *Ordinary Affects.* Durham: Duke UP, p. 4.

flung, disparate, and intimate all the same—is, for Stewart, a political movement. She writes:

> Politics starts in the animated inhabitation of things, not way downstream in the various dreamboats and horror shows that get moving. The first step in thinking about the force of things is the open question of what counts as an event, a movement, an impact, a reason to react. There's a politics to being/feeling connected (or not), to impacts that are shared (or not), to energies spent worrying or scheming (or not), to affective contagion, and to all the forms of attunement and attachment.[115]

Worlding is thus creative in a most basic sense, an "animated inhabitation" of the encounter that swings open the space to the potential ("or not") held in any given attachment to things.

Considering again the photograph, then, we see the political potential held in the felt force of *punctum*. Regardless of the photograph's denotative and connotative content—that is, both what the photographic image literally features and is ostensibly "about"—Barthes argues that photographic images can sometimes induce uncanny sensibilities, dissociated and incoherent flicker-tracings of what was, the effect of which is to produce dissociated and incoherent flicker-tracings of what is right now and what might be in the future. The "third meaning" of the photographic image is the uncanny, ghosted after-effects traced onto us.

[115] Ibid., pp. 15-16.

Because these uncanny sensibilities are felt corporeally, sometimes resonating intensely at registers beyond conscious perception, they elude explicit rationalization; about the *punctum* of a photograph, Barthes writes, "What I can name cannot really prick me. The incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance."[116] For Barthes, then, the photograph is a not only a violent remaking, but a disturbance outside the boundaries of cognizable sense; it is a wounded worlding that chases beyond our rational grasp of it, dancing outside thought and leaving in its wake the bodily consequences of its felt force. In its capacity to affectively augment and disorder, the photograph is seen to suffer the political jitters of its viewer. It is also, at least and irreducibly, a giant speculative arrow gesturing towards the instability, contingency, and precarity of visual identification and affinity.

The Hero Shoots Himself, and Other Methodological Questions

Peter Parker's use of the camera to document his exploits as Spider-Man is thus an entrance into the violently worlding capacities of self-making. It sets the scene for a confrontation between the desires of Parker-the-photographer, hinging his creative authority on the documentarity of the photograph, and the photographic object—in many cases in the comic books, his heroic alter-ego. Crucially, however, because the photographic object is a public figure—Spider-Man is an object subject to external dramatization—the political force of photographic documentation is routinely complicated in the narrative by conflicting desires—those of Parker, Spider-Man, other powerful public figures, as well as the comic book consumer confronted with these images.

[116] Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 51.

Given the dynamics within early stories approached here, it remains unclear to me what methodological technique is best suited to tease through visually political affect, if indeed there is one technique best suited to the question at all. I mostly use language to describe comic book images, and do so (at times and with purpose) poorly. Stumbling seems apt a tool as any. Anne Norton points out in her book *95 Theses on Politics, Culture, and Method,* "Theodore Lowi is said to have declared to a class in the declamatory tones of Texas oratory, 'Describe, describe, describe, and you have *explained* it!'"[117] But even description has its limits. As mentioned earlier here, comic books are rightly understood as imagetexts; they are neither purely pictorial nor purely linguistic.[118] Even with the mixological qualities of the objects in view, it seems to me there is serious risk taken in the rapturous use of descriptive language when working with images colloquially understood as pictorial/visual. The risk is in skating past and folding under the "sensuous surfaces" of visual experience,[119] submerging the felt force of the image beneath the rigidified, stultifying strata of linguistic discourse.[120] Here, I suppose my goal is to pose images, gesture towards them, and animate them to the resonant tune of the question at hand. If I fail at that and expose myself as undisciplined in the process, then perhaps all the better.[121]

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[117] Norton, Anne. 2004. *95 Theses on Politics, Culture, and Method.* New Haven: Yale UP, p. 90.

[118] WJT Mitchell attests that anything put in front of our eyes can claim neither pole, and that all experience is imagetextual in the leap to the mind's eye.

[119] See: Sontag, Susan. 1966. *Against Interpretation.* New York: Dell, pp. 13-23.

[120] I expand on this critique of linguistically-driven discourse analysis in Chapter I.

[121] For a wide-ranging, hilarious, and at times brutal romp through the politics of failure, see in particular the introduction to: Judith Halberstam. 2011. *The Queer Art of Failure.* Durham: Duke UP.

The Spider-Camera and Cruel Optimism

Beginning with his very first appearance in *Amazing Fantasy #15,* the superhero Spider-Man is consistently figured as the object of his own desire. [See Fig. 15] We see this first through his fascination in becoming a television star—"an overnight sensation" performing in front of rolling cameras "sensational" feats "without the help of trick photography."

Figure 15, panel from *Amazing Fantasy #15* (1962) featuring the televisual aspirations of a newly costumed hero

But as the narrative progresses, and Peter Parker/Spider-Man is catapulted through trauma and set on a trajectory of crime-fighting, there develops a reliance on photography in particular as the tool through which the public "reacts" to Spider-Man,

the costumed crime fighter. Crucially, photography is also the vehicle that sets into motion Parker's fraught relationship to his "secret identity" as well.

Beginning in *Amazing Spider-Man #2*, photography is introduced as the primary means of Spider-Man's visual construction as a public figure. J. Jonah Jameson, the "powerful" publisher of "NOW Magazine" and "The Daily Bugle," demands pictures of a new high-flying thief and costumed villain, "The Vulture," so that he can sell more copies of his publications. Because The Vulture strikes "without warning, without the slightest sound," the villain is, as an editor attempts to explain to publisher Jameson, "gone before any photographer can get to him." With Jameson irate and the public curious, Parker sees an opportunity to make "big money" by photographing his encounters with The Vulture. [See Fig. 16] With the help of his Aunt May, who offers to him his Uncle Ben's "miniature camera," Parker/Spider-Man is equipped to document his exploits as a freelance photographer née crime-fighter. [See Fig. 17]

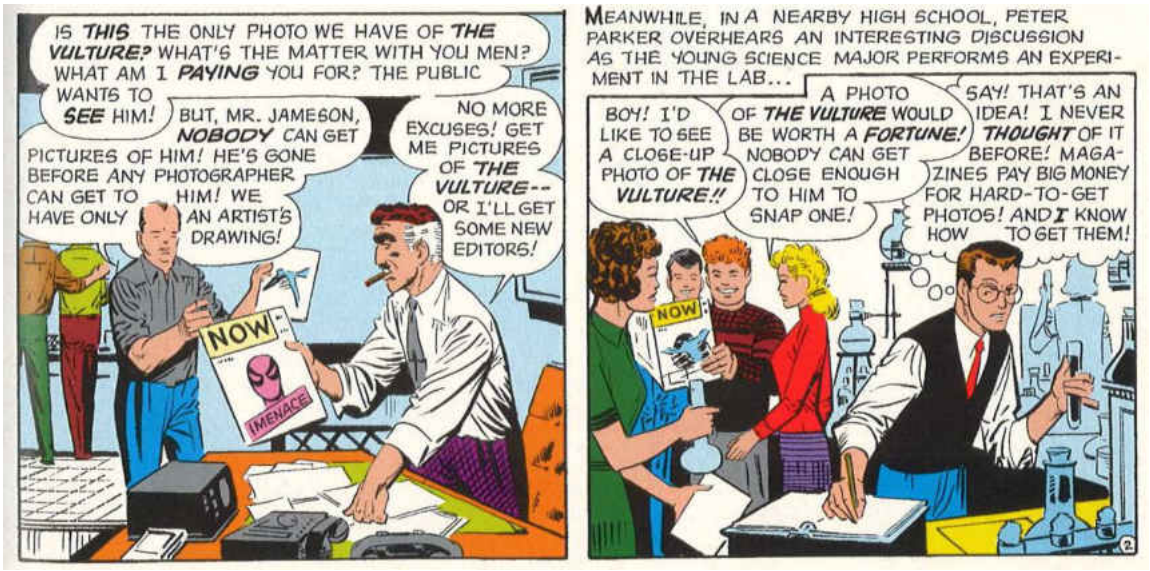

Figure 16, panel sequence from *Amazing Spider-Man #2*

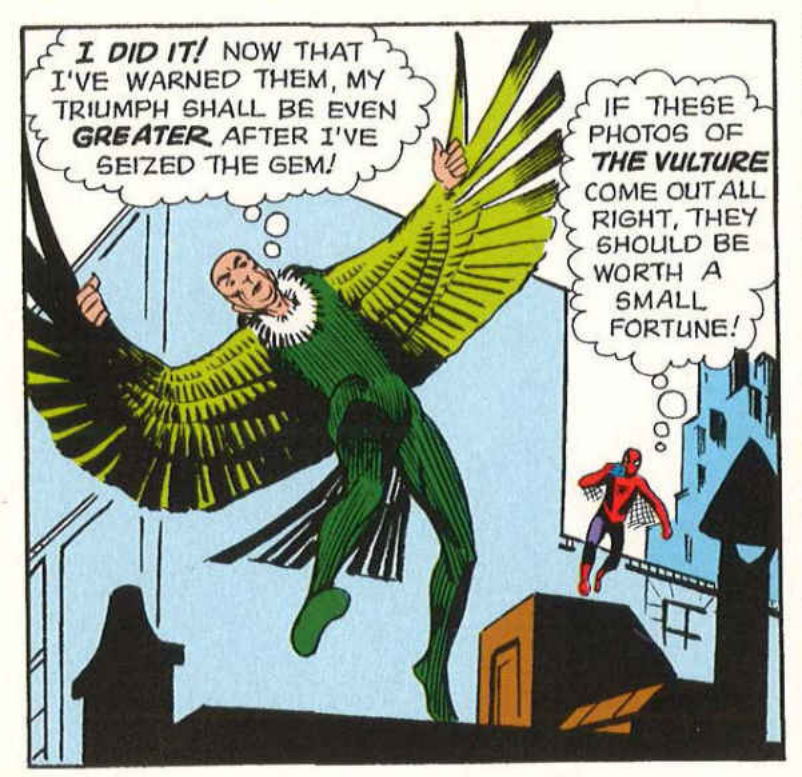

Figure 17, panel from *Amazing Spider-Man #2.* Note in particular Spider-Man holding a small blue camera.

When Parker sells the photographs he captured of The Vulture to Jameson, he earns a stunning amount of money; at the conclusion of the story we see Parker holding a "wad" of green cash in one hand, with his other holding Aunt May's shoulder, saying "This money means you're not gonna have to worry about anything again! I paid the rent for a full year, and tomorrow I'm buying you the newest kitchen appliances you ever drooled over!"[122]

The role of photography in these very early stories is fluid, moving in and out of view as an element of plot. *Amazing Spider-Man #2,* just briefly outlined, features Spider-Man's original use of the camera at all. Shortly thereafter, most prominently

[122] Lee, Stan, and Steve Ditko. 1963 [2009]. Amazing Spider-Man #2, in *The Amazing Spider-Man Vol. 1*, ed. Cory Sedlmeier. New York: Marvel Masterworks.

within the stories published in *Amazing Spider-Man #4* and *Amazing Spider-Man #9*, the camera is turned back on the user. In these instances we see Spider-Man begin to photograph himself. [See Figs. 18 and 19]

Figure 18, *Amazing Spider-Man #4*. Spider-Man has missed his chance to photograph his fight with The Sandman and, in a hilarious sequence, decides to do a "re-take."

Figure 19, *Amazing Spider-Man #9*. Moments before the hero meets villain Electro.

Even at this early moment in the character's historical development, less than two years after his first introduction, Spider-Man is consistently figured as the object of his own desire, carefully staging the situation by placing the camera in webbing so that he can appropriately frame the resulting image—ultimately for sale and public consumption. Photography, for Parker/Spider-Man, is thus figured on the page as a performative mechanism of self-creation; it is the scene-setting tool of being made possible at all, and is the means by which he announces and maintains a kind of self-regarding attachment to himself as an object. This is no simple narcissism, taking pleasure in the self-regarding gaze; scopic self-objectification is activity to narcissism's passivity. After all, it kind of takes a lot of work to make an object of oneself.

Despite a number of contemporary theoretical discourses that suppose objectification to be a negative construction at best and a technique of oppression at worst, in Spider-Man comic books it is figured as insistently optimistic. It is a hopeful act. This is true, I think, even when we recognize that Parker/Spider-Man is doubly

objectified: first under his own direction through a process of self-objectification, and second through a public making-use of the images he produces. Spider-Man's object-self is always an affirmative construct, an aspirational attachment that manifests as promise, an almost-there goal brimming over with desire. In this way, the scopic self-objectification exemplified in Parker's documentarily-inflected photography is a directionalization not of the structured ego itself but the promise entailed therein, a temporized forward pitching of the idealized object-self-that-was such that it might be recognized as such at some uncharted point in the future. This is what I mean to say when I invoke the language of performativity—scopic self-objectification is a creation of the always already there, a syncretic enfolding of action and experience. That enfolding is pressurized, though, complicated through the double-objectification occurring on the comic book page; in submitting his own photographs to public scrutiny through NOW Magazine and the Daily Bugle newspaper—and thus, submitting his object-self to a sort of public, external narration—Parker/Spider-Man appears to lose the creative authority we might be inclined to assume in the act of photographic image-making. He seems to lose control of his carefully constructed public image, for instance, in J. Jonah Jameson's linguistic affixation of "menace" to photographs of Spider-Man in action. Indeed, it's a common refrain in the comics to see Jameson vitriolically denouncing Spider-Man, wagging his finger while issuing character-assassinating speeches veiled as public-service announcements. [See Fig. 20]

Figure 20, *Amazing Spider-Man #1*. Spider-Man: "Menace."

Any assumption that public, external narration of his object-self represents a circumscription of Spider-Man's authority is complicated, however, by the insistent hope churning at the core of his photographic image-making. Although one could reasonably argue that Spider-Man's hope is composed of a hot, messy mixture of things—desires economic, sexual, psychic, physical, emotional, social, and so on—Spider-Man seems affectively attached to an affirmative fantasy of his object-self that exists outside any discrete and rationalized framing of it. That is, basically, so intense are his aspirational feelings toward that object-self that dramatized public critiques thereof are ill-equipped to disrupt the energies of attraction to it. The attachment is effusive, rebutting external critical framing with dogged incoherence and a commitment to a fundamental, very precise form of nonsensicality. Thus is affective attachment precisely nonsense and precisely optimistic at the same time. It tethers our subject to his object of desire no matter the consequence, no matter the challenge. And it transforms the authority of photographic self-making as a thing that was into a politically-inflected thing that will be,

an aspirational future-object that will finally, someday, be worthy of the hero's preferring it.

But this kind of optimism, effusive and aspirational as it may be, according to Lauren Berlant might also be conceptualized as cruel. A relation of cruel optimism exists for Berlant when "something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing… when the object that draws your attachment actively impedes the aim that brought you to it initially" (2011, 1). Whether embodied in unrequited romantic feelings or an insistent attachment to an American Dream that never was, cruel optimism is a relation of desire that can never be enacted. Essentially, Berlant sees cruelty in a relation that builds the conditions for its unattainability, its unfulfiliblility. It is cruel precisely because it denies the "cluster of promises" that attracted one to it in the first place.

Berlant is careful here to describe optimism in terms that, bluntly, might not seem terribly optimistic. "Because optimism is ambitious," she writes:

> at any moment it might feel like anything, including nothing: dread, anxiety, hunger, curiosity, the whole gamut from the sly neutrality of browsing the aisles to excitement at the prospect of 'the change that's gonna come.' Or the change that is *not* going to come: one of optimism's ordinary pleasures is to induce conventionality, that place where appetites find a shape in the predictable comforts of the good-life genres that a person or a world has seen fit to formulate.[123]

[123] Berlant. *Cruel Optimism*, p. 2.

In its ambition, cruel optimism is a projection and protection of the fantastic, an embrace of durable potentials and extended promise—even with (and through) the evanescence of the promise.

Following from this definition of cruel optimism, we can begin to see how the dimensions of Parker/Spider-Man's affective attachment to his object-self might be understood as cruel. The desirous capture of the object-self in photographic image-making sets the conditions for his subjective cancelation and annihilation at the same time that it functions as a guarantor of his heroic existence. He is, at once, the hero he wants to be and the inscrutable fugitive he will always be. In this sense, Parker/Spider-Man's use of the camera sets in motion an auto-eroticized precarity, a scenario wherein the libidinal negotiation between subject and object bypasses dialectical reciprocity and folds back onto itself, amplifying the affective intensity of desire while at the same time refusing the possibility of its safe release. Parker/Spider-Man requires a publically recognizable object-self in order that he might work to fulfill the promise of finally "adding up to something" and providing for Aunt May, and of living up to the standard of "responsibility" laid out before him in the death of his beloved Uncle Ben (that famous and adorably choppy line, "with great power there must also come—great responsibility!").

But as Ben Saunders argues in his work on the spirituality of Spider-Man,[124] this liberal-capitalist good-life fantasy of final mastery and completion reveals itself in the comic books as a "haunting," a compulsive revisitation of the trauma instantiated in his birth as a hero. That Uncle Ben was killed because of Peter's momentary moral

[124] Saunders, Ben. 2011. *Do The Gods Wear Capes? Spirituality, Fantasy, and Superheroes.* London: Continuum.

evacuation is too great a burden to bear, and Spider-Man's affective attachment to his object-self becomes cyclically central and utterly ordinary within the ever-unfolding serialized plot. To be sure, it is what makes an image like Figure 21—to faithful readers—so deeply powerful.

Figure 21, *Amazing Spider-Man #50.* Giving up the addiction of the costume.

The threat of leaving the costume behind is a threat of abandoned dreams, of abandoned futurity at all; precarious and untenable as it may be, the attachment to the heroic identity provided through the costume remains an intense attachment nonetheless. Further, Spider-Man's threat to erase his affective attachment to a publically consumable object-self threatens to erase the affective attachments readers feel to the potentialities of the character, in whatever capacity those are felt (or not) at any given moment. It is an abandonment of manifold relation, of promise.

Because of the cyclicality of the originary trauma—the repeatedly-lived moment that impels the hero of the story to action—we might follow Berlant again to an understanding of the cruelly-optimistic affective attachment outlined in Spider-Man's compulsive self-making as "ordinary." As Berlant argues, trauma itself struggles to account for the historical present as anything other than "the scene of an exception that has just shattered some ongoing, uneventful ordinary life that was supposed to just keep going on and with respect to which people felt solid and confident."[125] Instead of approaching the world as a "zone of convergence of many histories, where people manage the incoherence of lives that proceed in the face of threats to the good life they imagine," trauma theory is stuck in the remote particularity of the moment that was. It is, like photography, attempting to make a claim to the authority of the thing that was such as it might come to bear on the present, structuring the felt moment of encounter now within the parameters (limitation and boundedness) of the image of the past. But this orientation loses sense—or sensuality—of the ways in which the ordinary aspects of

[125] Berlant. *Cruel Optimism,* p. 10.

trauma are inflected in present experience, at the same moment the "crisis ordinary" folds out into the promise of the future.

And this is where we find ourselves at the crux of our questions asking after the political: in his recursive dynamic of self-regard and scopic self-objectification Spider-Man seems to be contained, a ticking trauma bomb waiting to explode on the page. But that reading disposes of the inchoate and emergent energies of affect that we also feel as readers—a passing of energies between bodies in what Sara Ahmed would call an "affective economy."[126] It disregards the political capacities of this exchange, the ability for the violent encounter of eye and image to be made usable as the stuff of worlding—of moving and dynamic, syncretic change.

Conclusion

Desire and its loose fantasies are the engine of politics, and in building effusive energy into visual practices of fantastic and consumable desire-made-public, Spider-Man comic books show us how we can think of the superhero as more than an atomized individual (or "over man," even, as the case may be); Spider-Man is relationally embedded in affective networks that put into tension abjection and annihilation, on the one hand, and a utopian futurity on the other. Both poles refuse the liberal subject, and to that end, I think, signal a bright and vibrant critique of extant political understandings of superhero comic books from the 1960s.

[126] Ahmed, Sara. 2004. Affective economies. *Social Text 22*(2), pp. 117-139.

CHAPTER IV

A SUBVERSIVE RACIAL ORDER?

1980s DC AND REACTIONARY GRIT

This chapter turns the analytic lens of political origins, affect and assemblage toward a well-recognized and much belabored shift in superhero comics production—a shift ostensibly beginning in the early 1970s with the publication of superhero comic book stories about other superhero comic book stories by both Marvel and DC, such as when "DC's Justice League of America met the Champions of Angor (a group of characters meant to be understood as Marvel's team the Avengers) in the same month as the Avengers met the Squadron Supreme (who were the Justice League in all but name)."[127] This shift in style of storytelling—toward what Douglas Wolk has called "metacomics"[128]—marks a distinct point in the history of mainstream superhero comic book production, if not for its solely original style of storytelling[129] then for its ushering in an era of so-called "mature" comics. Between the two major publishing houses of mainstream superhero comic books, DC Comics led the way on "mature" titles in 1986 with Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons' *Watchmen* and Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight*

[127] Wolk, Douglas. 2007. *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, p. 105.

[128] Ibid., 102-5.

[129] The "meta"-ness of these stories from the 1970s and 80s is debatable in their novelty. Even early Superman stories were well-versed in writing comic book stories about comic books stories. The narrative barriers between story art and commercial advertisement were semi-permeable, leading toward gimmicks of cross-promotion and self-aware character dialogue concerning the proliferation of kitsch superhero comic book memorabilia.

Returns, two titles that "proved to be powerful templates for a new breed of comic book antihero that was far darker than earlier incarnations."[130] As templates, these books lent their formative developmental authority to numerous contemporary comic book titles,[131] as well as left a lasting means of expropriating primary conventions and themes of the superhero genre to tell stories that had for so long been foreclosed upon by industry regulation.[132] That is, "mature" superhero comic books of this era are more than self-reflexive, meta-aware narratives. They are violent, sexual, politically transgressive—tough, no-nonsense, "realistic" revisionary narratives "tinged with pathos."[133] In short, they exhibit a tendency toward a more brutal aesthetic, a tendency cynically captured in the oft-used descriptor for comics of this era as being "grim and gritty."[134]

In order to place superhero comic books of this period in appropriate context, and further the goals of this project by highlighting the originary capacity and affective force of the "grim and gritty," this chapter is organized around a counter-intuitive central thematic question: How does race operate in self-reflexive American superhero comic books of the 1980s, and what is its relationship to the maintenance and/or disruption of narrative order? In particular, I'm interested in developing a close reading of one primary text, Moore and Gibbons' *Watchmen*, so that I can more capably trace the affective

[130] Versaci, Rocco. 2007. *This Book Contains Graphic Language: Comics as Literature.* New York: Continuum.

[131] One could easily list Howard Chaykin's *American Flagg!* alongside these works from Moore, Gibbons, and Miller.

[132] I say more about this industry regulation—the Comics Code Authority—later in this chapter.

[133] Bukatman, Scott. 2003. *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century.* Durham: Duke UP, p. 219.

[134] --------. 2011. Why I hate superhero movies. *Cinema Journal 50*(3), pp. 118-122.

tethers of "raced" visual images in this formally, narratively, and politically complex story.

Watchmen is typically lauded as a "masterful" example of the genre.[135] Insofar as we might share the assumption "that Moore and Gibbons knew exactly what they were doing"[136] as they developed *Watchmen*'s visual-racial schema, we could further assume that the racial politics of their schema are also clear and deliberate, so far as their intentionality takes any critical look through the narrative. However, the material use of color to signify characters' other-than-whiteness in the visual-narrative images of *Watchmen* means—at various points in the book—ambivalently and provocatively. This ambivalence, a mixture of self-reflexive critique and creative potential, bears on the capacity of *Watchmen* to invite those that look into alternative futurities—new or otherwise different affective assemblages that harness the energies of "important" superhero comic book art to build and sustain challenges to white supremacist racial order. By situating *Watchmen* within the history of comic books' making-use of blackness, the history of racialized-black superhero comic book characters, and by showing how the characters in *Watchmen*, navigate, utilize, and critique the subjugated political identifications and affinities attached to blackness, this chapter offers a novel argument: that *Watchmen*, in its bid toward self-reflexivity and meta-commentary on the history of superhero comic books, builds an affectively-charged, positive political vision of blackness as powerfully absent in superhero comics history, and tragically so.

[135] Iain Thomson. 2005. Deconstructing the hero, in *Comics as Philosophy*, ed. Jeff McLaughlin. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, p. 102.

[136] Ibid.

Ultimately, I see this political vision as hopeful, but not in the redemptive sense of providing release from the history of superhero comics publishing that anchors these pop-culture objects in abject white-supremacism. I don't read *Watchmen* as interested in proffering a visual politics of white racial innocence or "colorblindness."[137] Rather, the story here is much more complex, building a resonant and moving racial assemblage that, in its reflexivity and "*retroactive defamiliarization*,"[138] well represents the ambivalences and curious linkages of racial identifications and affinities as they work in all of our everyday lives.

Although seemingly operating at the margins or "in the gutters" of *Watchmen*, race plays a deceptively crucial role throughout the story. By focusing on the links made between identification, affinity, assemblage, and narrato-racial order, I aim to push the literature on race, racialization, and superhero comic books in a productive direction. Clearly there are deep assumptions about race and its ability to structure, stratify, and stabilize in superhero comic books, but extant critical discussions of race and superherodom, though fruitful in their own ways, have yet to fully embark on a theoretical thread that helps navigate the turbulent waters of racialist visual-narrative and the production, affirmation, delegitimation, unbinding, and vibrancy of assemblage.

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[137] For varied summaries and interpretations of the historical, social, and political development of racial innocence and "colorblindness," see: Brown, Michael K., et al. 2003. *White-Washing Race: The Myth of a Color-Blind Society*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press; Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. 2006. *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Equality in the United States*, 2d ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield; HoSang, Daniel, Oneka Labennett, and Laura Pulido, eds. 2012. *Racial Formation in the 21st Century*. Oakland: University of California Press.

[138] Thomson, Deconstructing the hero, p. 103. Emphasis in original.

A History (Not) About Race

Historically speaking, superhero comic books are afflicted by a dearth of characters of color, and those that have made appearances are often the victims of "the superhero genre's long history of excluding, trivializing, or 'tokenizing'…minority superheroes who are marked purely for their race: 'Black Lightning,' 'Black Panther,' and so forth."[139] This news is likely not shocking to anyone, as some of the most prominent examplars of the genre—including those previously mentioned superheroes, Superman and Spider-Man, are both figured as (and politically invested in their identificatory performance as) white, male, heterosexual, and pro-socially heroic. But the genre's historical inability to produce and centralize minority characters cannot be easily dismissed as racist exclusion. Commentaries on, not to mention actual depictions of, race and difference in comics have a longer history tied to them than superhero criticism alone can support. I believe that students of politics can, in this sort of pre-history to *Watchmen*'s historiographic musings, see the development of an ambivalent, uncomfortable, and at times precarious relationship between race and superheroism.

Take, for example, perhaps the most famous instance of public comics criticism of the 20th century, Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*.[140] Wertham's most lasting work, the book is a psychological treatise aimed criticizing and ultimately regulating the purportedly ill-effects of comic book reading on the minds of suggestible youths. Amy Kiste Nyberg describes this history usefully when she writes:

[139] Singer, Marc. 2002. "Black skins" and white masks: Comic books and the secret of race. *African American Review 36*(1), pp. 107.

[140] Wertham, Fredric. 1954. *Seduction of the Innocent*. New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc.

> Throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, Wertham had written articles for both the popular press and professional journals and served as an expert witness for various governmental bodies investigating comic books as he worked to halt the sale of comic books to children under sixteen. His campaign had resulted in little legislative activity. With his book, Wertham clearly hoped to rekindle interest in state and federal legislation against comic books. *Seduction of the Innocent* was written primarily to alert parents and others that crime and horror comics existed and were read by children. With public sentiment behind him, Wertham felt legislators would have to heed his calls for regulation of the comic book industry.[141]

Wertham's public political campaign was ultimately successful, at least insofar as it garnered national attention during the public hearings of the 1954 Senate Subcommittee to Investigate Juvenile Delinquency and led to the formation of an industry-wide (and industry-led) censorship board known as the Comics Code Authority.[142] Although by no means an advocate for censorship itself,[143] Wertham ably directed moral panic in service of his cause—what he understood as the psychological and moral health of youth comic book consumers.

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[141] Nyberg, Amy Kiste. 2009. William Gaines and the battle over EC Comics. In *A Comics Studies Reader*, eds. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, p. 59.

[142] Ibid.

[143] Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester make this point in their introductory remarks to the "Historical Considerations" section of their edited volume: Heer, Jeet, and Kent Worcester. 2009. *A Comics Studies Reader*. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, p. 15.

Although mostly focused on the supposedly detrimental aspects of explicitly-depicted violence and sexuality in comic books, Wertham's criticism of comic books is also—among many other things and at least in part—one of the earliest examples of anti-racist criticism directed at comic books.[144] Centering the formative role of race in the psychological development of children, in *Seduction* Wertham derides comic books as texts that "expose children's minds to an endless stream of prejudice-producing images" where "blond Nordic supermen" continually oppose—physically and morally—stereotypically racialized depictions of minorities.[145] For Wertham, however, the danger of such imagery isn't directly tied to a rigid standard of fairness or equality in heroic outcome; rather, he believes that the danger lies in the fact that explicit depictions of racial hierarchy are fed to young children who cannot de-link fictional experience and real-world social expectation, thereby skewing the actual practices of people in their everyday lives to mirror the kinds of social cleavages and violences visually represented on the comic book page. With arresting force, he argues that comic books are "probably one of the most sinister methods of suggesting that races are fundamentally different with regard to moral values, and that one is inferior to the other."[146]

In an attempt to distill this critique of stereotypically racialized comics and broaden the scope of its implications, Marc Singer writes, "Wertham believes these representations not only motivate individual readers toward prejudice, but affect society

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[144] *Seduction of the Innocent*, lest the title of the work not completely blow its cover, is also a howlingly anti-queer analysis, famously arguing that Batman and his side-kick Robin the Boy Wonder are barely-concealed gay partners. As Wertham claims, "Only someone ignorant of the fundamentals of psychiatry and of the psychopathology of sex can fail to realize a subtle atmosphere of homoeroticism which pervades the adventures of the mature 'Batman' and his young friend Robin." See: Ibid., p. 189-90.

[145] Ibid., p. 100; p. 32.

[146] Ibid., p. 105.

as a whole by normalizing racist standards through repetition."[147] Put differently, at stake is not the originary force visual images to produce individualized prejudice, but the originary force of visual images to create the cultural and affective space for fields of "racist standards," political systems of hierarchized difference and oppression.

Of key importance here, of course, is the idea of repetition—that "racist standards" are repeatable (and very much repeated) throughout comic books of all kinds, and thus threaten the minds of those that look with a kind of moral pollution. Indeed, repetition seems to undergird the anxieties of the project. After all, during the so-called "golden age of comics," the era of comics history and production Wertham is reacting against, comics were competitive with many other forms of media for consumer dollars and general attention. In that milieu, it seems can safe to assume that most consumers would rarely pick up one comic, peruse it well enough to become entranced by its stereotypically-coded (if not indeed explicitly) racist rhetoric, and walk away from the form forever, happily vomiting forth whatever racist assumptions were implanted during that short if consequential relationship with the visual images of the comic book. Though the example may be theoretically possible, Wertham assumes that there is at least the potential for an ongoing, unimpeded interaction between children and comic books—reasonable enough given the serialized qualities of comic book storytelling. Thus, it is through this repeated interaction with stereotypical visual images that racial stereotypes and significance of racial difference both produce and maintain in the minds of young readers, the "innocents" seduced, racial orders of domination and hierarchy. So, the critique goes, stereotypically racialized defamation, in all its various forms, is formatively

[147] Singer, "Black skins," p. 108.

dangerous and constitutive of social hate and bigotry—unacceptable consequences of so-called "children's entertainment."

As mentioned above, Wertham's critique was so powerful and culturally resonant that in 1954 the Comics Magazine Association of America adopted a series of industry-governing guidelines called the "comics code," vastly reorganizing (and near-fatally damaging) the comics publishing industry. This "code [was] a set of regulatory guidelines primarily concerned with sex, violence, and language drawn up by publishers and enforced by the 'code authority,' a euphemism for the censor employed by the publishers."[148] In practice, the code effectively gutted the industry, restricting what had been the most profitable titles—crime and horror books—and effectively banishing many others altogether.[149]

And while the Comics Code Authority (CCA) was explicitly directed towards the policing of "sex, violence, and language," the original code also contained a short provision that attempted to regulate depictions of race and other difference as well, seemingly mirroring Wertham's concerns about racism and children's moral health. Part C of the Code, under the heading of "Religion," states: "Ridicule or attack on any religious or racial group is never permissible."[150] At least in theory, then, after 1954 characters-of-color and visually-marked religious difference had a chance of being included in comic books in ways that may not have been available to them prior to the CCA.

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[148] Nyberg, Amy Kiste. 1998. *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, p. vii.

[149] Ibid., p. 112.

[150] Quoted in Ibid., p. 167.

Perhaps expectedly—and especially given that race and religion are conflated in an inappropriate manner, as well as the fact that so little else is mentioned about their role as a point of content regulation—stereotypically racialized depictions of characters continued to inhabit the borders and liminal fictive spaces of American comic books even after the implementation of the CCA. As the industry recovered and the superhero comic book boom of the so-called "Silver Age" reinvigorated comic book culture in the 1960s, representations of characters-of-color remained static and frustratingly superficial. Often serving as stereotypical synechdoches, Anna Beatrice Scott writes,"the first black 'supers' were not super at all, rather they were ordinary old niggahs, who happened to have the good fortune to be tied to a superhero master."[151] Superherodom and the racialized black body were effectively treated as mutually exclusive, and representations of blackness were by norm secondary and at best tangential to plot and narrative development in stories featuring heroic white bodies. Put another way, black characters really weren't characters at all but visual fodder and sometimes-decoration on the pages of superhero comics dedicated to stories that structurally excluded them.

A Turn to Visual Representations of Blackness and the Cultural Politics of Race

Both Jeffrey Brown and Adilifu Nama argue that it isn't until the 1970s and the American film industry's cultural production of "Blaxploitation" that black superheroes are introduced with any real or lasting effect in American superhero comic books.[152]

[151] Scott, Anna Beatrice. 2006. Superpower vs supernatural: Black superheroes and the quest for a mutant reality. *Journal of Visual Culture 5*(3), p. 296.

[152] Brown, Jeffrey A. 2001. *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans*. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, p. 19; Adilifu Nama. 2011. *Super Black: American Pop Culture and Black Superheroes*. Austin: University of Texas Press, p. 37.

Brown points out that Marvel are the first American publisher to capitalize on the sub-genre and its attendant cultural political potential, reinvigorating the "Black Panther," a character "who emerged briefly in 1966" in *Fantastic Four #52*, as well as giving a larger role to the Falcon, a Captain America sidekick introduced in 1969's *Captain America #117*.[153] These characters were of formative cultural and political importance for a number of reasons, laying the originary groundwork for subsequent representations of blackness in superhero comics to follow. Additionally, as Nama articulates, Marvel's Black Panther character has a unique cultural resonance in American politics:

> In 1966 the Lowndes County Freedom Organization first used an image of a black panther to symbolize their black political independence and self-determination in opposition to the Alabama Democratic Party's white rooster. In October of the same year the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense was created and adopted the black panther emblem as the namesake and symbol of their militant political organization. Fascinatingly, only a few months earlier, a superhero called the Black Panther appeared in Marvel's *Fantastic Four* series… If ever there was a textbook example of Carl Gustav Jung's notion of synchronicity, whereby coincidental events speak to broader underlying dynamics, the arrival of the Black Panther is it.[154]

Because the general cultural zeitgeist of the mid-1960s wasn't open to the kinds of mass-consumption of blackness that followed in the wake of cinema's popularization of

[153] Brown, *Black Superheroes*, pp. 19-20.

[154] Nama, *Super Black*, pp. 41-42.

Blaxploitation, however, Black Panther—despite this cultural political resonance—was not immediately impactful, at least in the sense of developing strong ongoing presence in the comics most sought by consumers.

With these prior examples bracketed, Brown utilizes a focused developmental argument connecting Blaxploitation and superhero comic books when he says that "the most widely recognized blaxploitation character in the comics was Marvel's Luke Cage, who first appeared in 1972."[155] This "angry young black man" was resonant then and remains so today in part because of the over-the-top nature of the costume and dialogue used in the series,[156] but perhaps more importantly because he was the first black superhero to capture a strong, sustained readership. "Given Cage's origin narrative as a black man wrongly convicted of a crime he did not commit he clearly symbolizes the triumphant transformation of a black underclass convict to a politicized black antihero on an epic scale."[157] Thus it is with Luke Cage that blackness and superherodom are no longer necessarily at odds, and unblinking depictions of race—though clearly unthoughtful by today's standards, and potentially harmful in their reification of stereotypes perpetuated through Blaxploitation—are possible in a world of explicitly political superhero comic books.

From a critical and theoretical perspective, however, large problems certainly still persist. Despite the handful of inroads characters-of-color have made into superhero comic books, the genre is overwhelmingly dominated by whiteness and an upper-class

[155] Brown, *Black Superheroes*, p. 29.

[156] Nama, *Super Black*, p. 53.

[157] Ibid., p. 55.

socio-political standpoint.[158] Even well-read fans of the genre may struggle to name ten or more black superheroes, and most of those referenced are likely to be "B-list" characters that are rarely featured in ongoing, serialized storylines. Although superhero comics aren't explicitly exclusionary of characters-of-color, implicit segregation and stratification create difficult terrain for critics interested in understanding what race is up to in superhero comic books, and what kind of identities and affinities are invited towards in their processual development over time.

In recent criticism, race has been analyzed as both an instrument and an ideological impasse. About racialized depictions of characters-of-color, Martin Barker writes, "It makes no difference whether it is a stereotype of a plumber, a tax inspector, a policeman, a black person, a demented pig, or a coward. For the purposes of the strip, all are equalized."[159] Similarly, as Nama points out, certain styles of cultural criticism can flatten our critical understanding of race, culture, and politics in superhero comic books—particularly those that attend to comics through strands of reader-response theory that seek "meanings that were easily perceived by audiences, clearly intended by producers, or suggestive of broad historical developments and cultural assumptions."[160]

And while these types of reductive and flattening approaches are unlikely to gain traction among critical race theorists, or really anyone who believes that visual images in all their forms are inherently constituted by (at least implied) ideology, to argue that there is something about the comic book form that reduces identity and affinity—or even

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[158] Even Luke Cage's "Heroes for Hire" partner is billionaire corporate heir Danny Rand, or Iron Fist. Thus, the potentially interesting class politics of Cage's background are muted by the ongoing and very powerful generic norms surrounding the character.

[159] Barker, Martin. 1989. *Comics: Ideology, Power, and the Critics.* Manchester: UP, p. 116.

[160] Wright, Bradford W. 2001. *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP. Qtd. in Nama, *Super Black.*

myriad potential identities and affinities roiling along in assemblage—to a set of simplified signs is not easily dismissible. Marc Singer explains further: "Comics rely upon visually codified representations in which characters are continually reduced to their appearances, and this reductionism is especially prevalent in superhero comics, whose characters are wholly externalized into their heroic costumes and aliases."[161] Case in point: such "codified" reduction is rhetorically as well as visually mirrored in *Watchmen,* where superheroes are generically and synecdochically referred to as "masks."[162]

As a critique of the form the claims of reductionism hold some water, though when distilled to its core values it becomes too tempting, and ultimately unfulfilling, to essentially claim "comics equal reductionism equal racism." Again, this is not a point most critics of comics are likely to hold dear; the story of race and superhero comics must be more complicated than an equation.

Marc Singer expresses these same sentiments, though in a way that manages eloquence and deftness where the above spins its wheels in place:

> The potential for superficiality and stereotyping here is dangerously high. Yet in recent years, some comics creators have demonstrated that the superhero genre's own conventions can invite a more nuanced depiction of minority identity. Race in contemporary comics proves to be anything but simplistic. If some titles reveal

[161] Singer, "Black Skins," p. 107

[162] Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity*, p. 212.

deceptively soothing stereotypes lurking behind their veneers of diversity, then others show complex considerations of identity.[163]

It is on this set of histories, assumptions, and theoretical proclivities that my argument concerning *Watchmen* aims to build from as it moves through the political identities and affinities potential in self-reflexive superhero comics. Race is powerful and complex, and racialized superhero comics are fraught with interesting puzzles and quandaries. While "analyzing race" is so broad as to be banal and basically inconsequential, this chapter will sharpen the focus on race and examine its relationship to the maintenance and production of identities, affinities, and narrative order in *Watchmen*—a veritable textbook of self-reflexivity in "metacomics." By definition, self-reflexive comics begin with a heightened tension between narrative order and the form itself;[164] it will be the goal of this chapter to parse out the effects race has in developing this tension. In *Watchmen*, race works in a particularly unique and highly consequential manner despite the fact that so few characters-of-color appear within its pages. I argue that visually marked blackness in the Watchmen produces narrative order at the same moment it works to critically undermine the historical attachments of superhero comic books to white supremacist ideologies, identities, and affinities.

Race and *Watchmen*: Bounded Inclusion

Although there are very few characters within the comic book that aren't ostensibly Anglo-white, Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons paint race and its complex

[163] Singer, "Black Masks," p. 107.
[164] Which is to say that self-reflexivity assumes a nominal awareness of the rule-structure of norms and social expectations otherwise governing the object, and works to expose and undermine them.

cultural and sociopolitical meanings in broad strokes throughout *Watchmen*, often in ways that are incredibly critical and subversive of extant cultural political order. Put plainly, *Watchmen* is a highly racialized visual-narrative text, and is one that challenges preconceived notions about race and its relationship to the formation of identities, affinities and narrative development.

One potential critique of this reading must be dealt with quickly if we are to move forward: Does reading *Watchmen* as a racialized text unfairly de-link it from its more broadly recognized sociopolitical critique of unqualified moralism and the dangers of a detached and robustly powerful political class? Of course, for the sake of the argument in this chapter, I believe that the answer is a resounding "No." In order to explain this answer, however, I must first comment upon the broad ways in which Moore and Gibbons use race as a visual-narrative device. Once this argument is understood I can then move on and examine the nuanced ways race is deployed within the text, where we will see that aesthetic racialization-as-social-critique is not always a smooth process.

As previously mentioned here, *Watchmen* is dominantly white in nearly all respects. All of the main characters are visually depicted as white, nearly all of the secondary characters are visually depicted as white, and of the hundreds of unnamed, unspeaking faces drawn by Gibbons throughout the text, a close panel-by-panel examination of the story has left me with a total count of characters-of-color somewhere between seven and ten, depending on an uncomfortably essentializing interpretation of some "extras" in large crowd scenes. This pervasive homogeneity is unsettling at times, especially in large crowd scenes; there is an extremely minimal amount of visually-recognizable diversity to speak of, and what exists in the comic book has no basis to

claim identities and affinities for itself, as those characters—if we can label faces in a crowd so roundly—are visual decoration rather than substantively engaging engines of narrative development.

Watchmen's exercise in hyper racial homogeneity begins in the first issue with Rorschach searching for clues about the Comedian's murder. Although nearly the entire issue is comprised of white figures and characters, the reader may not realize the purposive nature of this homogeneity until several pages into the text. Panel six of page fourteen gives us the first crowd scene in the text, a seedy bar that makes another appearance further on in Rorschach's storyline, and while many of the figures are small and set against the borders of the panel, everyone in the frame is visually depicted as white—which is to say that images rely on the generic norms and expectations of superhero comic book culture and production prior to the 1970s, norms that dictated a bland and all-pervasive whiteness. In fact, it isn't until page sixteen, panel seven of the same issue that we see any representations of blackness at all (Figure 22)—striking for a story ostensibly set in a familiar metropolitan New York City.

If *Watchmen* is purportedly "more real" than any previous attempts at telling a superhero story, is it wrong to expect that racial diversity would be a part of that "more real" story? It may not be wrong to expect that, if indeed *Watchmen* is "more real," but here in the first issue readers see that the text is already beginning to play with our perceptions of its own "realism" and what

Figure 22. Visually Representing Blackness in *Watchmen #1*, page 16, panel 7 (far left)

we expect from the genre. Such large, overwhelmingly white crowd scenes persist throughout the text with similar ratios of blackness and whiteness in their visual representations. When Nite Owl and Silk Spectre save residents of the high-rise fire at the end of issue seven, all of those saved are depicted as white. More gruesome, the first several pages of issue twelve show bodies strewn throughout the streets of New York, and only two—the watch salesman and the Black Freighter reader—are visually rendered black, on pages three and six, respectively. Even then, racial identification is only possible through familiarity; the reader has seen and interacted with these characters before, making the quick visual identification of racialized representation easier. Despite the fact that we can find representations of blackness in large crowd scenes, however, the larger story or racial homogeneity remains relatively intact. Representations of whiteness are clearly dominant throughout the text, while representations of blackness are, at least superficially, left aside as background noise and fill.

While the history of the genre might tell us that the story's overwhelming whiteness should be expected—that such whiteness is the norm of superherodom—*Watchmen* is so universally regarded as a meticulous explication of superhero conventions that it would be cavalier to assume Moore and Gibbons don't, through their narrative and aesthetic choices present on the pages, understand their particular crafting of racial meaning within the story as at least aware of itself, reflexively, and potentially critical, politically. Framed another way, we might consider that *Watchmen* isn't white because of convention; *Watchmen* uses whiteness to spite convention. In broad terms, then, the story is *consciously* white to point out that superhero stories are too often *unconsciously* white. This self-reflexive whiteness has the interesting effect of invoking an affective uncomfortableness—a sense that that things are wrong, and potentially intended to be noticed as wrong. And, tethered to the affective unease of lucid whiteness, the narrative fact of *Watchmen* that whiteness and power are ultimately conflated with death, moral vacuity, and destruction works well beyond coincidence.

The Fact of Blackness in *Watchmen*

But if the story is confronting the genre's problematic whiteness, how are depictions of blackness used to bolster the visual narrative's argument? Here I look to the ways that secondary and tertiary characters' blackness augment and nuance the comic book in ways that are sometimes helpful and sometimes unsatisfying. What I find is an ambivalent cultural political argument on race, racialization, and superhero comic books, but one that can be read as an interesting attempt at social criticism and, more

importantly, a uniquely resonant revisionary technique of laying bare the originary commitments of narrative order in superhero comic books.

Of the ten or so characters that with visually-depicted blackness in *Watchmen*, only about half as many have any dialogue whatsoever. Because of this, there are a limited number of explicit examples available in the comic concerning blackness and its relationship to the development of the storyline, but several key characters and scenes can help us begin to theorize the relationship between blackness and an argument about originary commitments to whiteness and narrative order in superhero comic books. For example, of the characters depicted as black that don't have any (or very little) dialogue attributed to them, a significant majority of them are depicted as operating on fringes of the story, maintaining the status quo of sociopolitical life, and, by consequence, the stability of superhero comics originary commitments to whiteness and narrative order. In several panels in the early pages of issue two, a well-dressed and stern looking black man holds an umbrella over the head of Adrian Veidt, or Ozymandias. In issue eight, page twenty-four, panel three, a black man dressed in a bulletproof vest holds an assault rifle, ostensibly to aid the police in their attempt to recapture Rorschach after Nite Owl helps him escape from prison. In issue ten, page twenty-three, panel five, a black mailman who passes by the newsstand vendor seen throughout the comic says, in response to the vendor's talk about war, "Uh, just a gazette, please. No offense, man… but I'm kind of in a rush."

Despite the fact that these characters are disparate and unconnected within the narrative, their collective link through blackness in the story portrays a subtle interconnectedness between visual depictions of race, blackness, and the maintenance of

order. These tertiary characters all act in service to the narrative in ways that the many hundreds of unnamed, unspeaking white characters cannot. When taken together, they display a sense of tentative, ad-hoc assemblage within a city (and story) that teems with isolation and disorder. Here, blackness can be read as connoting a tethered political strength and moral fortitude not found elsewhere in the narrative.

Of course, a counter-reading would say that these characters are clearly positioned in a way that organizes them as hierarchically inferior and absent agency within an overtly white supremacist society, thereby propagates racist stereotypes of service and submission to authority figures that permeate American culture generally, and ring resonant especially within the racial history of superhero comic books. My argument here is pitched to be much more nuanced than a binary situation of power as oppressor/oppressed can allow for. Although I see the contention that it can't really be argued these nameless characters *aren't* situated lacking the kinds of dynamic and alive agency exhibited by other characters in the story, I want to be clear that the explication of the visual representations of blackness provided above allows for a much more satisfying degree of agency available to the characters than a typical "racist propagation" reading is capable of. I see blackness in *Watchmen* through these silent witnesses as powerful examples of originary ordering force. Participating in the assemblage as such, blackness is thus a crucial element of *Watchmen*'s self-reflexive political critique of extant superhero comic book norms and expectations. Additionally, insofar as the "racist propagation" argument seems to steal "agency in the assemblage" from visual representations of blackness by shoe-horning ready-made ideology criticism into the analysis of comic books, it seems overly rigid and ill-advised.

The argument for a positive relationship between blackness and maintenance of order is complicated by Rorschach's psychiatrist, Dr. Malcolm Long, seen in Figure 23 below. As the only black character within the comic book that has extensive dialogue, his status as "special" or "different" is noted without saying. But as the most complex, traditionally "full" black character, understanding his relationship to the maintenance of order is fundamentally important to understanding the broader relationship between race, order, and originary critique.

Figure 23. Walter Kovacs, or Rorschach, and Dr. Malcolm Long in *Watchmen #6, page 9, panel 1*

There is, I believe, a clear and direct argument to be made for Long's role as an ordering force in the narrative given that his primary function is to rehabilitate someone readers already know is mentally unstable and, indeed, potentially beyond rehabilitation: the vigilante antihero Rorschach. The story constructs Long as drawn to social outcasts, the maligned, the criminally insane. After all, he works in a prison. But as his relationship

with Rorschach progresses, and he begins to more fully understand the totality of Rorschach's insanity, Long is shaken to his core. Here, in the ultraviolent vigilante antihero—a character in the story that comes closest to being something of a hero—is the un-save-able, physical embodiment of Friedrich Nietzsche's cribbed-in-the-comic-book dictum that "the abyss gazes also."[165] Long throws his professional self at Rorschach, seeking to restore some semblance of humanity in him, but Long's expertise and passion meet their match in Rorschach's steely-flat affect and uncompromising commitment to helter-skelter morality. Broken in by Rorschach, in *Watchmen* #6, pages twenty-seven and twenty-eight, we see panel-sequences of Long's marriage disintegrating, interspersed with self-reflective segments of narration in which there arrives a crescendo of disheartening realization: "We are alone. There is nothing else."

However, in the end, the story of Dr. Long reifies the relationship between blackness and order in much the same way we've seen in other characters already, though in a way that carries an appropriately heavier narrative weight. Dr. Long's life had been dedicated to the attainment of control, and even though Rorschach's pure insanity drove him to question his moral obligation to community, issue eleven, page twenty, panels seven through nine find him reaching out to help those in need despite his wife's ultimatum against it:

DR. MALCOLM LONG:	I mean, it's all we can do, try to help each other. It's all that means anything… Please. Please understand.
GLORIA LONG:	Malcolm, I'm warning you! You let yourself get drawn towards another heap of somebody else's grief, I don't want to see you again.

[165] Nietzsche's quote works as the title of Chapter 6 in *Watchmen*.

DR. MALCOLM LONG: Gloria… I'm sorry. It's the world… I can't run from it.

Much like the unnamed and voiceless characters looked at earlier, Long is placed in a role of service to his community, but here we clearly see that Long is driven to reach out and help humanity despite the personal consequences of his actions. He actively pursues, constructs, and maintains order in ways that are pro-socially beneficial and altruistic. As a secondary character in the narrative he remains quite complex and unresolved, but his blackness serves as compelling evidence of *Watchmen*'s penchant for meaningful self-reflexivity on the history race and revisionary originary capacity in superhero comic books.

Finally, perhaps the most centrally important black character within the narrative is one that has far fewer lines than Dr. Long, but appears in nearly every issue of the series: a character known only provisionally as the Black Freighter reader. If one is careful while looking through *Watchmen*, she will be able to find the Black Freighter reader in nearly every panel where scenes are at or near the newsstand—a centrally organizing motif in the story that serves as a window into the political news headlines that bear on many of the Watchmen characters—and is probably only bested in number of panel appearances by the members of the Watchmen themselves. I argue here that the presence is not superfluous or inconsequential, and it's possible that his placement within the story is the linchpin of drawing out the text's argument on race, originary revision, and narrative order.

Although also a sedentary street-kid cracking wise comments on conversations and other matters that float through the orbit of the street corner newsstand, the Black

Freighter reader is essentially a conduit through whom those looking at *Watchmen* are told a separate allegorical tale—a "pirate comic" story, titled "Marooned," that features an increasingly desperate man, a stranded mariner, as he struggles to return to his home before a band of pirates ransacks the town and harms his family. As a formal device, this story-within-a-story—or comic-within-a-comic, as it were—is not by itself particularly inventive or unique. Despite this lack of novelty, however, Richard Reynolds praises the device's use when he says, "This is an example of sequential art at its very best,

> but it also sheds light on Moore and Gibbons's deepest intentions. *Watchmen* is at bottom about the inventions and fictions employed by everybody either to achieve power and control or simply get through their daily lives. The youth reading the *Black Freighter* comic fails to grasp the significance of the story before he is obliterated in Adrian Veidt's attack on New York – an event which, for the alert reader of *Watchmen*, is echoed by the story of the marooned mariner. There are no privileged cases: superheroes, presidents, psychiatrists, news-vendors, journalists, admen; all are presented as consumers of their own self-serving fictions. And, presumably, readers of superhero comics as well – burying their heads in a story they don't understand while the world falls around their ears.[166]

But, as interesting as Reynolds' commentary is here, especially in his noting the Black Freighter reader's failure to "grasp the significance of the story" before Veidt's ultimate attack on New York, he himself misses a crucial point. Significant about this

[166] Reynolds, Richard. 1992. *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, p. 114.

particular usage of the comic-within-a-comic device is the commentary it provides about race and the maintenance of order in a self-reflexively complex narrative. Through the Black Freighter reader, *Watchmen* readers are effectively/affectively invited to *embody a young black man* reading comics on the streets of New York City. Every time the narrative shifts from primary storylines of *Watchmen* to the narrative of *The Black Freighter*, we do so through the eyes of the Black Freighter reader. In a real sense, the device forces an assumption of a kind of mediated blackness through the comic book in a way that is difficult to formalize in other artistic mediums. By inhabiting the inability to parse through the complexities of the story—the not getting it of the Black Freighter reader—*Watchmen*'s audience deflects the responsibility of coherently interpreting the self-reflexive comic book in the very same moment it absorbs the resonant force of its affective appeal. The moment of not getting it is the moment of narrative annihilation (see Fig. 24).

Of course we know that *Watchmen* is as much commentary on the medium as it is on the superhero genre itself, but this formal transition from safely-distanced consumer to intratextual embodiment is one that is highly provocative and insightful. As a method of arguing about the importance of race in the critically revisionary maintenance of order, then, we can see that the Black Freighter reader is potentially the most powerful character in the entirety of *Watchmen*: if he stops reading *The Black Freighter*, the story of *Watchmen* is over, because if the reader stops reading, the story of *Watchmen* is over. The shared eyes passed between bodies and comic book pages connect the fates of the Black Freighter reader and the consumer *Watchmen*, tethering the two in an assemblage that builds power through mutually imbricated agency. The irony of this tethering, of course,

Figure 24.The last embrace before midnight, *Watchmen #11*, page 28.

is that when the character does stop reading *The Black Freighter*, the story is over—New York is left in ruins. On the fringe of the story, the Black Freighter reader was *deus* all along, incorporating the *machina* of consumers' eyes in a nihilistic revisionary superheroic gambit.

When compared to the previous characters discussed, the differences of importance to the maintenance of order in *Watchmen* are difficult to overstate, but there continue to be strong similarities between the importance of blackness and its relationship to narrative order. Where the other nameless characters and Dr. Long are placed in roles of service to the community, the Black Freighter reader is placed in service of the narrative itself—or, if we extrapolate out his importance beyond the page and into a field of relation, the Black Freighter reader is tethered in assemblage with *Watchmen*'s reader. As a formal device through which the narrative is transmitted and received, there is no more conceivably "important" character within the comic book, and clearly, as is being argued throughout this chapter, the Black Freighter reader's blackness is constitutive of his relative narrative importance as compared to other—even traditionally central—characters. Where the whiteness of the narrative's central characters is constitutive of self-interest, chaos, and disorder, blackness of the narrative's actually important characters is constitutive of agency in assemblage, ad-hoc structure, and self-reflexive order.

Conclusion: Reflexivity as Racial Revision?

Watchmen, as an example of self-reflexive "metacomics" published most effectively by DC Comics in the 1980s, produces interesting and provocative

commentary on the relationship between race, originary revision, and narrative order in superhero comic books. Blackness—with its marginalized and troubled history in the comics—is given a calculated, powerful role as a producer and maintainer of order. Rather than existing as a burden on the narrative, an obstacle to be circumvented or otherwise controlled through reactionary making-use of harmfully racialized stereotypes, blackness in *Watchmen* challenges the history of superhero comic books in the 1980s to live up to the calls of anti-racist forebears, as well as the examples set by early black superhero characters published in the 1960s and 70s. It invites consumers into tentative affective assemblage with blackness, offering a unique and unexpected anti-racist outlet amongst its "grim and gritty" contemporaries.

CHAPTER V

MEMORY, ALIENATION, AND THE DEATH OF ORIGIN: CAPTAIN AMERICA AND THE TWILIGHT OF EMPIRE

Grounding

This chapter is an experiment in close reading and plot summary designed as a broad historical explication of a single superhero character, Captain America, focusing particularly on the ways his dislocation from time (mimicking the comic book's formal ambivalence as a temporal- and spacialized visual narrative) chart a unique political unstructuring of identification and affinity formation over time. Here, and by speculative example, I argue that the trans-historical plasticity of the character—existing in multiple times with multiple origins and foundation myths competing with others for legitimacy—allows for fluid identification and affinity formation despite the rigid nationalism that remains seemingly fixed in Captain America's iconographically dramatized public performances of patriotism.

Rough-Out

Captain America, the star-spangled Adolf-socking golly-miss boy-soldier, the Aryan-looking Nazi-hunting fifth-column-disrupting super-serum-stoked squared-off jaw of a spandexed chest, the jack-kirbyest, vibranium-hurlingest, propagandic nationalistest: well, he's out of time. Captain America is out of time.

But the powerfully heroic violence of his birth (*affectus*) still lingers (*affectio*).[167] Always already present (and always already made present in our critical/narratological/journalistic retelling of his origin "on the cover of *Captain America Comics #1*" [See Fig. 25]), in this iconic violence a perverse acknowledgement is made between this man out of time and the memories we construct of his past—though we prattle forwards, distilling ourselves of history in the linguistically charged waters of the ever-processual flow, we are haunted by the material traces of visual images past, memories of memories, memories as memories, memories in memoriam (made official). This Captain America, out of time, is not Captain America at all; he is a ghost out of time, and a ghost we like out of time. He's Captain America, I suppose. But he's definitely out of time.

Figure 25. *Captain America Comics #1*

[167] For this distinction drawn between Spinoza's concepts of *affectus* and *affectio,* I'm indebted to Megan Watkins' (2010) work on the "accumulation" of affect and its ability to reform "bodily capacities." There she suggests that the political work of affect can be extended into the "traces" of experience imprinted on the body. Such a formulation of affect, insofar as it works to dissuade us of any belief that the ephemeral is without *mattering* force, can be useful in its ability to extend theories of politics that concern themselves with a "layering" of history. My own inclination, as is made evident throughout this paper, is that this distinction may not be necessary. However, I signal it early on in order to show the reader a friendly bridge to the study of affect from social constructionism of various kinds.

Elizabeth Freeman: "Appearing in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the market put an ever greater premium on novelty,

> the Freudian unconscious refused to make an experience obsolete or relegate it to the past. Within the Freudian paradigm of *Nachtraglichkeit,* memory recorded the signs of an event when the subject could not consciously process its meaning and preserved these signs for future uses. Freud also reconfigured sexology's perverts, formerly understood as evolutionary throwbacks, as slaves to this unconscious. Psychologizing what had once been biological paradigms, Freud identified "perverse" sexual practices as a kind of stuck of frozen normal behavior: orality, anality, fetishism, and so on are, in the Freudian itinerary, places to vist on the way to reproductive, genital heterosexuality, but not places to stay for long.[168]

The above acknowledgement—that Captain America is not Captain America at all, but a re-inaugurated apparition—is perverse in its relation to the traumatic violence instantiated in the originary claims made through the character's ongoing presence. It seems to fly in the face, for example, of such a basic assumption as "He's here now, so then *must have been*," and so on. Such an acknowledgement is also perverse in its relation to the traumatic violence instantiated in our present bodily experience of his materiality. It seems to undercut, for example, the assumption that "*He's here now*, so then must have been," and so on. This acknowledgement is perverse precisely because it reorders things, dissembles our experience, puts into flux our ontological,

[168] Freeman, Elizabeth. 2013 (2008). Turn the beat around: Sadomasichism, temporality, history, in *The Routledge Queer Studies Reader*, eds. Donald E. Hall, et al. London: Routledge, p. 236.

epistemological, normative developmental commitments concerning what is and known and forces us to look at the things in front of us with our eyes and ask what they are doing. It is both radical presentism and historiographical reflection; it is a destruction, denial, and forgetting of unconscious history built into of the stories we tell of it and our multimodal/experiential making use of it. Captain America isn't Captain America at all. But he's out of time and really fucking perverse. Captain America is dead (Fig. 26)—long live Captain America!

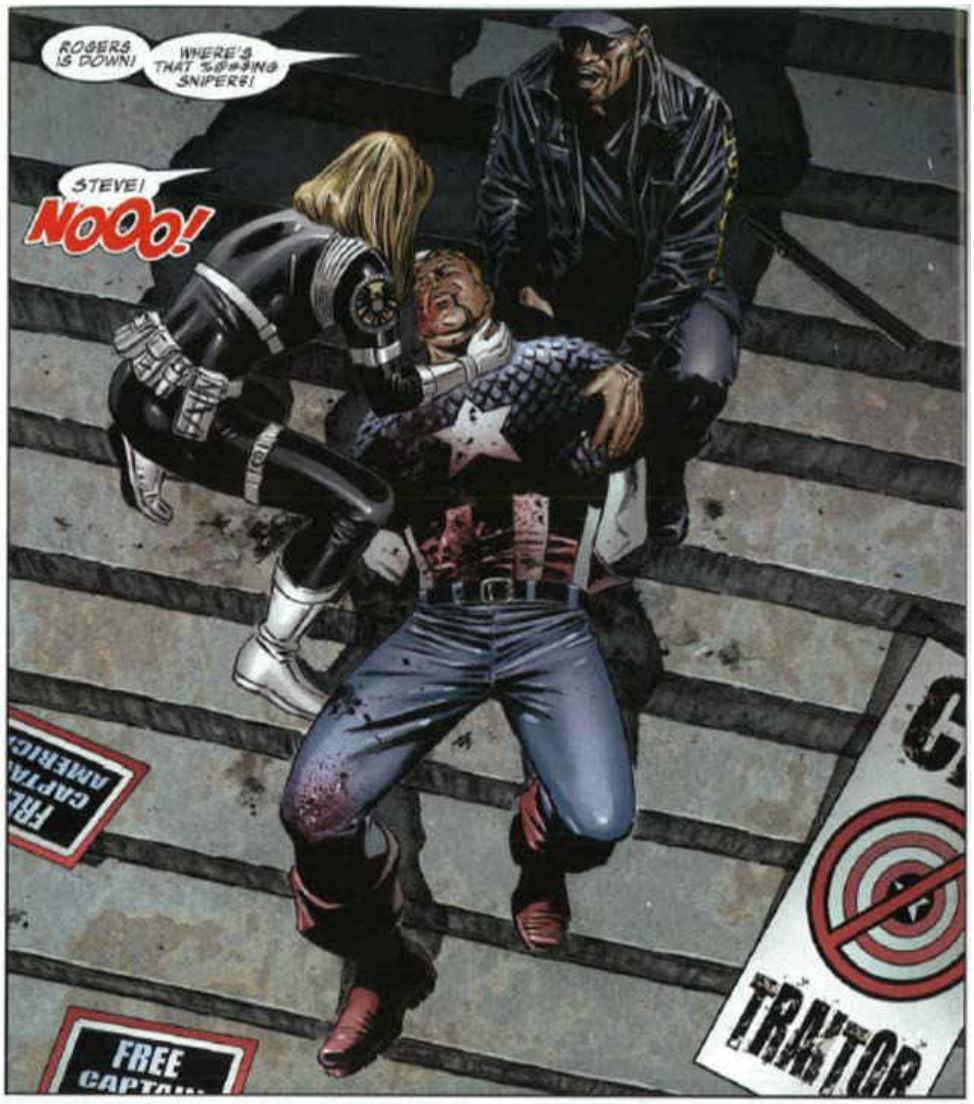

Figure 26. The "death" of Steve Rogers, in *Captain America #25* (Vol. 5)

Lines and Borders

This is about politics. It's also about other things. It's mostly about politics, though. My central concern here is explicating several comic books—visual-narrative "imagetexts" featuring Captain America, in particular[169]—in order to connect some literatures and ask some questions. Primarily, I'm interested in asking after something like "the trans-historical political" in superhero comic books: what does it look like and, more importantly, what does it do? What are superhero comic books up to, anyways?[170]

These questions are vital in a literal sense; they prod us towards poking around relational vitality as an object of political study, of tinkering not only with perverse presences and silly references, but with our bodies-in-motion amidst complex and imbricated affective tethers that make intense our relation to the world around us. Which is one way of saying that this chapter develops the longer project of my dissertation, a project interested in intensities, affect, and movement as ways of approaching the political in superhero comic books as they develop over time. But superheros have bad timing; "they have the history and endurance of their past coupled with the opportunity to be reinvented continually by successive generations."[171] And because memory persists—"there is no perception which is not full of memories"[172]—superheroes seem lodged in sticky assemblage of memorialized temporalities, irruptive futurities, creative

[169] For extensive discussion of "imagetexts" and the imbrication of pictures and language, see Mitchell, WJT. 1987. *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press; --------. 1995. *Picture Theory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[170] Constant navel-gazing, turns out.

[171] Lewis, A. David. 2013. Save the day, in *What is a Superhero*, eds. Robin S. Rosenberg and Peter Coogon. Oxford: UP, p. 38-9.

[172] Bergson, Henri. 1991. *Matter and Memory*, trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer. New York: Zone, p. 33.

potentialities, and perverse bodies in motion. The energies of this heterogeneity spell out the multiplicity of political selves, ambivalently liberating and repressing in the moment.[173]

Anyways, here I'm interested in fleeting feeling, shimmers and resonances, and sensual surfaces that I think work to critique contemporary forms of power outside of their representational capacities. That is, superhero comics might mean many things, and can perhaps be interpreted variously, but this chapter is concerned with speculatively theorizing what superhero comics do, how they affect us, and what—if anything—they can teach us about American politics in light of our ongoing popular-cultural, collective desire/revulsion for "simplistic, brawny" stories reflecting commonsense "power and morality."[174]

Specifically, I'll trace out a few relatively recent Captain America stories in order to connect some threads already introduced, as well as consider a few that have yet to emerge. As I've already shown in my previous chapters on Superman, Fantomah, Spider-Man, and the Watchmen, origin stories are a compulsion of comics storytelling. Each of these chapters showed how origins were constructed within the specificities of historical context. As I've already noted, this chapter is conceived differently. Captain America, I submit, is one of the most instructive instances of the compulsion towards origination. The practice of this "frozen" compulsion (in Freud's sense) plays out trans-historically, thus giving allowing me the opportunity to discuss more broadly what I see as at stake in affective assemblage of origins through time.

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[173] Bukatman, Scott. 2003. *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the 20th Century*. Durham: Duke UP, p. 156.

[174] Dittmer, Jason. 2013. *Captain America and the Nationalist Superhero: Metaphors, Narrative, and Geopolitics.* Philadelphia: Temple UP, p. 2.

So, out of this compulsion and in my own experimental practice of it, in this chapter I lay groundwork for a concept I call "*ut pictura anapoiesis*"—a scopo-political tactic that can be linked to the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari in its emphasis on becoming, (de-)territorialization, and affective force. *Ut pictura anapoiesis*, unlike its conceptual cousins *ut pictura poiesis* and *autopoiesis,* is not merely a mechanism of comparative likeness between the "sister arts" of literature and painting, nor is it a kind of self-generating self-regulation—a way to define, stabilize and regularize the stories we create about our origins. Instead, by insisting on the openness and creative potentialities of the "originary ground," *ut pictura anapoiesis* de-couples itself from the "memories" implied in heteronormative Freudian psychological development and self-regulatory feedback processes; like a Derridean conception of "non-originary origins" that takes the stiffness of the latter (that is, origins) seriously, *ut pictura anapoiesis* can point us toward an understanding of both the desire and effect of compulsive originizing. It is, again to point toward Deleuze and Guattari, a way to understand origins in superhero comic books as a "machinic process" through which lateral social connections are formed ("territorialized"). The micropolitical linkages of such social connections—tenuous bonds between affectively engaged becoming-subjects—are the very tethers that I will argue give shape to the political, that make alive political potentialities. They do not prescribe politics but provide the conditions of its (un)becoming.[175] Superhero comics are thus instructive as well as originarily generative; Captain America is a pedagogue of doing politics.

[175] For the concept of unbecoming I rely here on Judith Halberstam's development of the concept as an embrace of dark, unknowable futurity in *The Queer Art of Failure*.

Plot Summary, Vol. 1.

Born to the public nine months prior to America's official entrance into World War II, Captain America—the creative effort of writer Joe Simon and artist Jack Kirby—was both a pre-war commercial triumph and an un-shrouded declaration of support for US military intervention in Europe.[176] Simon and Kirby, two young, second-generation American Jewish men who by 1940 had formed what would soon become a prolific business and creative partnership, were tasked by their publisher Timely Comics[177] with tapping into the burgeoning patriotism and nationalism of the American consumer public in order to capitalize on energizing geo-political interest and increase sales revenue.[178] In *Captain America Comics #1*'s brief origin story, comic book readers learn that Steve Rogers, a duty-bound body-analogue for Charles Atlas' famously advertised "ninety-seven pound weakling," is depicted as one of the many "youth of our country" who "heed the call to arm for defense" against "the ruthless war-mongers of Europe."[179] Too small and physically ineffectual to meet the rigorous demands of the "defense"-minded Army,

[176] Hatfield, Charles. 2012. *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby.* Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, p. 20-1.

[177] In the early years of comic book publishing in America, publishing houses were often transient and operating under multiple names as method of repackaging previously published comic book stories under seemingly new titles. Timely Comics, which published such "golden age" superhero characters as *The Human Torch* and *Sub-Mariner*, was an umbrella company operated by pulp publisher Martin Goodman that eventually reorganized its corporate identity as Marvel Comics. For history on this early era of American comic book publishing, see: Jones, Gerard. 2005. *Men of Tomorrow.* New York: Basic; and David Hajdu. 2009. *The Ten-Cent Plague.* New York: Picador.

[178] Dittmer, Jason. 2005. Captain America's Empire: Reflections on Identity, Popular Culture, and Post-9/11 Geopolitics. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers 95* (3), pp. 626-643. For a discussion of how Timely Comics came to the desire for such a patriotic and nationalist character, including evidence that suggests many of the iconographic elements contemporarily associated with the Captain America character were in fact poached and plagiarized from a rival comics publisher, see: Ro, Ronin. 2004. *Tales to Astonish: Jack Kirby, Stan Lee, and the American Comic Book Revolution.* New York: Bloomsbury.

[179] Simon, Joe, and Jack Kirby. 1941. Meet Captain America, in *Captain America Comics #1,* p. 3. Reprinted in *Marvel Masterworks: Golden Age Captain America Comics, Vol. 1.* New York: Marvel Enterprises (2005).

Rogers volunteers for a "confidential" experiment where he is "innoculated [sic]" with a "strange seething liquid." Professor Reinstein, the doctor conducting the experiment, calms the "frail" Rogers: "Don't be afraid, son… you are about to become one of America's saviors!"[180] [See Fig. 27]

After the injection, we scan our eyes across the panels to watch as "millions of cells [form] at incredible speeds," erecting the scrawny and flaccid young Rogers into a hard and dominating physical marvel. So thorough and powerful is the growth that his new body breaks

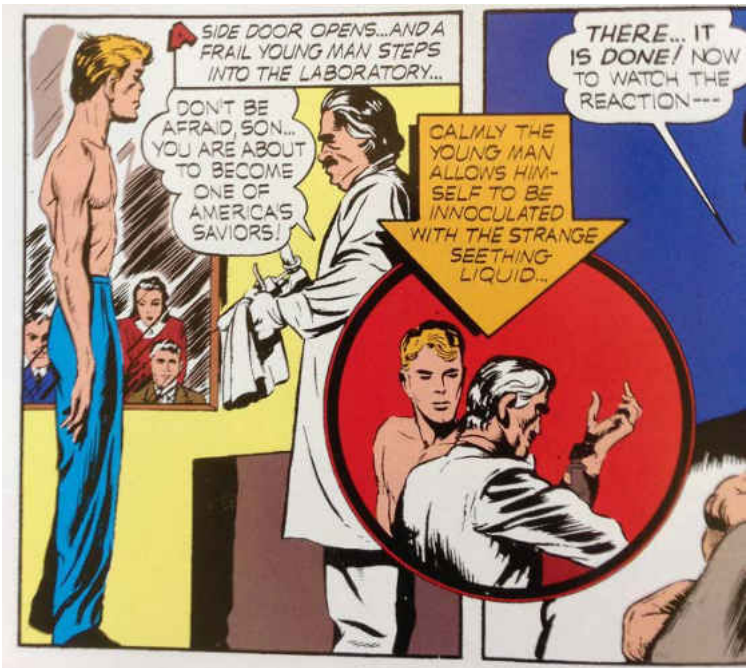

Figure 27. Panel and inset of super-serum "inoculation," in *Captain America Comics #1*

the borders of the panels that previously bound him; so electric and dynamic is his new corpo-reality that his mere presence makes impossible containment. [See Fig. 28] His body is surpassing, itself a surplus; it is a "savior's" body, radiating the righteous patriotism and duty that had lain dormant in Rogers' unenhanced natural body. (But the

[180] Ibid., p. 6.

implied distinction seems unsatisfactory here, between his natural and resultant body, one ineffectual and one powerful, where a Donna Haraway-style cyborgian reading might otherwise seem most appropriate.[181] The "seething" serum in his body is clearly technological mediation, yet one that we might consider to be hyper-natural—it encourages cell growth at unnatural "speeds" but does so in order to generate a new body capable of enacting the demands of such a fantastically patriotic and duty-bound essence. The serum merely catches Rogers' body up, as it were. Rather than suggest the borders of nature and science are porous, that bodies and technologies are imbricated and co-extensive, the "super serum" is a technology that makes the body more natural—hyper-natural—insofar as it allows for the bodily expression of immanent qualities. To call it an "innoculation," then, probably means something interesting.)

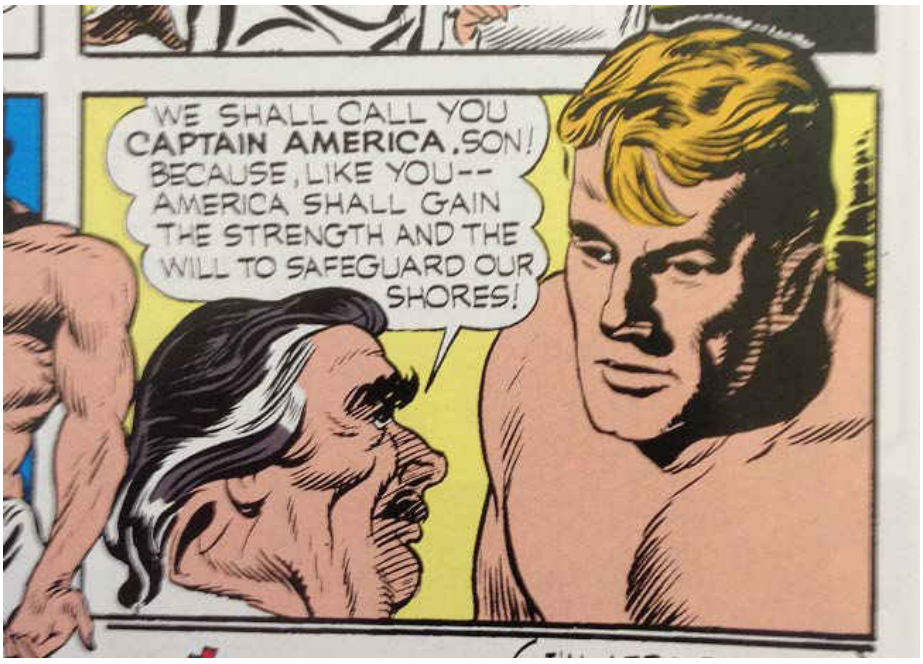

Figure 28. Panel-breaking bodily growth—and a mission, in *Captain America Comics #1*

[181] Haraway, Donna. 1991. A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century, in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature.* New York: Routledge, pp. 149-181.

Recognizing his experiment's success, Professor Reinstein claims his creation in the locutionary christening of the "fruits" of his research: "We shall call you Captain America, Son! Because, like you—America shall gain the strength and will to safeguard our shores!"[182] Shortly after this pronouncement, a fifth-column spy who managed to infiltrate Reinstein's secret military laboratory assassinates the Professor, thus denying the full mobilization of his research program—an army of "super soldiers" capable of "defending" America from aggressors. Thus, in this Oedipally-charged denial of his father, the Captain thrusts himself into the defense of his motherland while wearing the stars and stripes as markers of allegiance. He "nabs" spies and "prevents [a] dam explosion," takes on a young partner named Bucky with whom he must "share this secret together"… of costumed adventuring, and with whom he "fights side by side…against the vicious elements who seek to overthrow the US government!"[183]

This is the origin of Captain America, as told in 1941, at the conclusion of which we are invited to join a club. [See Fig. 29]

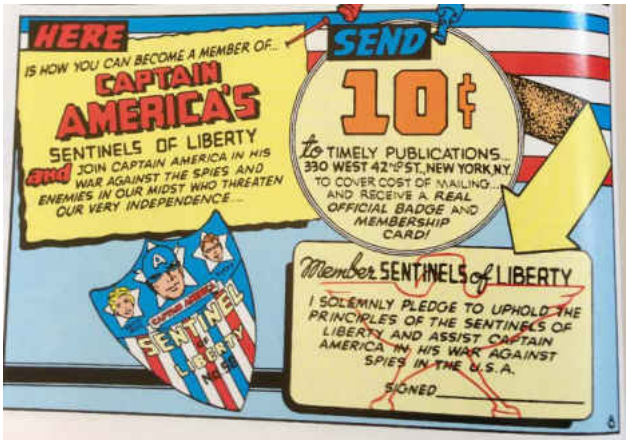

Figure 29. Invitation to join the "Sentinels of Liberty" in *Captain America Comics* #1

[182] Simon and Kirby, Meet Captain America, p. 7.

[183] Ibid., p. 9-10.

Plot Summary, Vol. 2

Written by Robert Morales with artwork by Kyle Baker, *Truth: Red, White & Black* is a seven-issue limited series published by Marvel Comics in 2003.[184] [See Fig. 30]

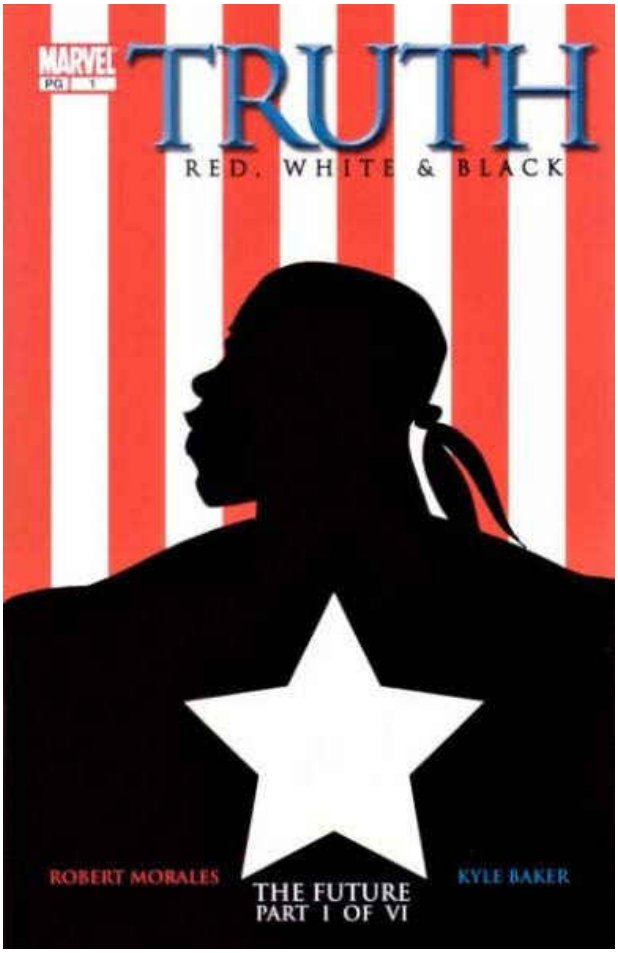

Figure 30. Cover, *Truth: Red, White & Black*

The story opens during "Negro Week" at the World's Fair in Queens, New York in 1940, where "a whopping seventy-five cents admission could buy you the dream of equality for

[184] By virtue of being a "limited series," *Truth* is distinguished from the ongoing or serialized storytelling that governs many popular titles in superhero comic book publishing where it is not uncommon to see titles running into many hundreds of issues.

a whole day."[185] Faith and Isaiah Bradley, "pretty much" honeymooning at the fair, are shown discussing the ideas of the keynote speaker scheduled for that day, W.E.B. DuBois. As they wander their way through the fair, otherwise enjoying Baker's bright and bouncing color palette, the dark tone of the following story is set through showing readers the indignities of everyday racism in pre-World War II America. Isaiah, attempting to purchase tickets for he and Faith to an exhibit featuring "exotic" women from around the world, is denied entrance based on the color of his skin. Over the shoulder of the ticket-seller, who explains to Isaiah that some of the women are uncomfortable being looked at by people "like [Bradley]," the reader sees the faint outline of a "Hottentot Woman" on stage, around whom a crowd has gathered. Isaiah, seemingly incensed by such a blunt denial during "our week," is calmed by Faith, who doesn't want to see Isaiah get into trouble over a banal (if intense) refusal.

This tension carries the story forward, an ambivalent and circuitous tracing of race, military power and, eventually, superhero mythology. After the US is drawn into war, Isaiah and a group of young black men are shown entering the military, led by a physically disfigured Sergeant—a veteran of WWI named Luke Evans—who seems relieved to again be at war. Evans, after relating the story of his demotion from Captain to Sergeant to an old friend over a game of pool, says of his previous military service while hovering his stick near the foregrounded cueball: "If anything, I learned something… this is the only place I get to push ol' whitey around."[186] Later, while in the barracks of Camp Cathcart in Mississippi, Evans coolly snaps at a young soldier who exclaims that he's

[185] Morales, Robert, and Kyle Baker. 2003. *Truth: Red, White, and Black.* New York: Marvel Enterprises.

[186] Ibid.

"looking to kill me some white mens." Says Evans: "…killing white men is a gift you only get from other white men." [See Fig. 31]

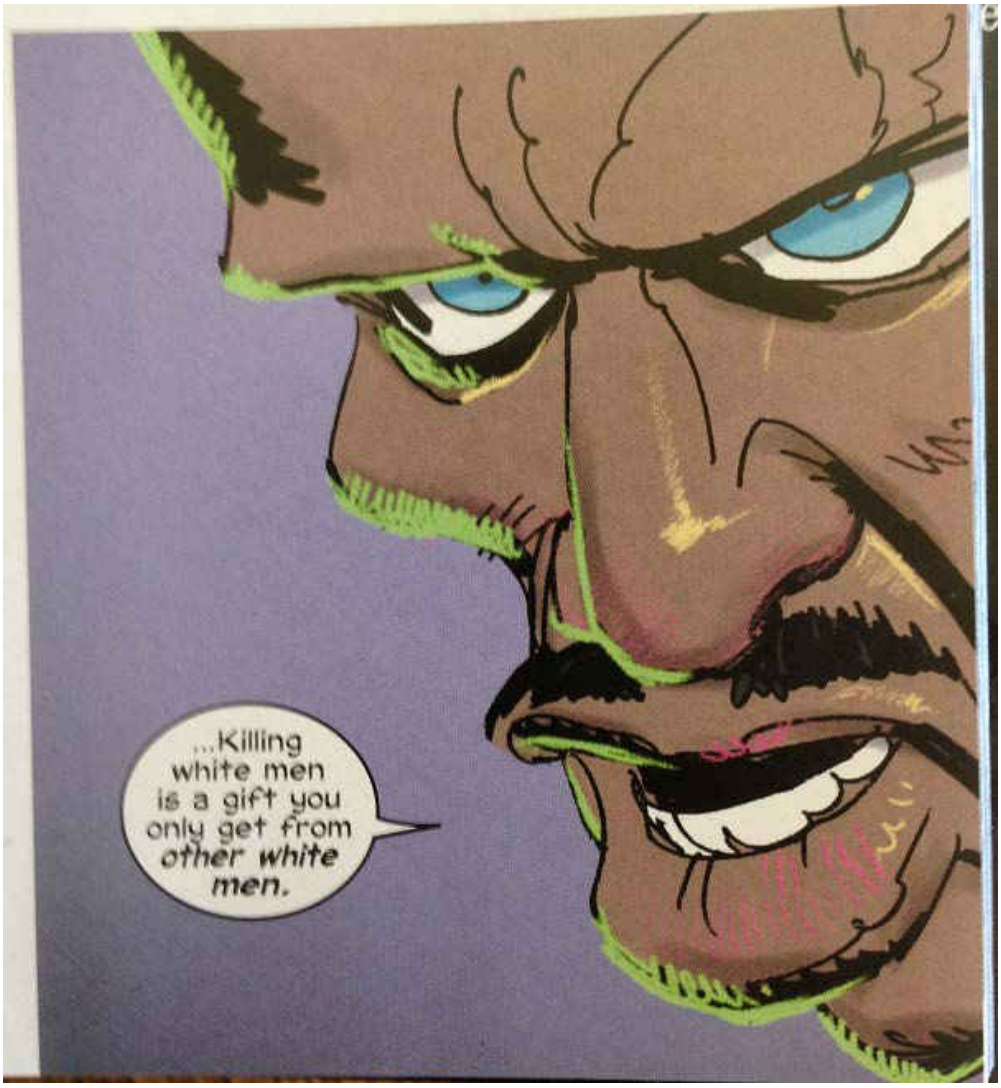

Figure 31. Sgt. Evans on the "gift" from white men, in *Truth: Red White and Black*

The gift, in this case, is horrifying for the young soldiers in a very precise sense; the gift is horror none of them could have imagined. Standing in battalion formation before a high-ranking military intelligence officer, Colonel Walker Price, three hundred soldiers are ordered onto trucks and denied the details of their new deployment orders.

When Major Brackett, the commanding officer of Camp Cathcart, questions the actions of Colonel Walker, he is executed before the remaining battalion. And as the trucks loaded with soldiers drive away, and the reader is brought into their perspective, gunfire pulses through the image—we know as they know, that the remaining soldiers at Camp Cathcart have been murdered by their own military leaders.

The secret being protected in such violence? A fledgling science experiment, still being perfected by an expatriate German doctor named Professor Reinstein. A serum designed to make soldiers better—faster, stronger, with enhanced strategic-thinking abilities. But it's not ready; there are more tests to be done. And Colonel Price, the commanding officer of "Project Super Soldier," is demanding "negro blood."[187]

Straining against the straps of the gurney to which he's held, a nude black soldier is prepared for the injection of "5 cc's of the serum." [See Fig. 32] In this position the soldier is erased, remade as "Subject A-23," a vessel of science that happens to him, at him—against his body. Visually subjugated and made analytic object, a nurse wishes Subject A-23 "good luck" before she and a uniformed soldier are ordered to "evacuate the observation room." Then, alone, Subject A-23 is left to the force of experiment.

[187] Ibid.

Figure 32. Experimental grotesquery, in *Truth: Red, White & Black.*

Over a full page of art, we come into A-23's pain with him, the strain and sweat building, the "camera" of the panel tightening on his face until he breaks, muttering "Mother Mary…" through clenched teeth. Abruptly moving from extreme close-up to a mid-length framing of A-23's body, we see (just at the moment he sees) the transformation his body has undergone. Grotesquely engorged and elephantized, A-23 is nearly beyond the bounds of human recognition—he is horrifying, made monstrous, a throbbing mass of muscle and veins convulsing on the experiment table. But turning the page reveals the process is not complete; A-23's body comes to dwarf the table that holds it, and it is driven forward in the room through the vibratory pulsing of physical growth. And as he moans, he lets loose the last element within his body he can control. The following panel, illustrated with the streaking sound effect "SKISSSH" and red splatter across the walls of the room, suggest to us the fate of Project Super Soldier's Subject A-23—an inglorious pop, a rending release of out of control internal pressure. And Professor Reinstein, in sinister silhouette against the blood-tinge of the background, coldly remarks: "Subject A-23 expired at 1718 hours. Now it is certain that 5 cc's of serum is too much."[188]

Eventually the Professor is able to tune the dosage of the serum accurately enough to produce "successful" experiment results, and a squad of six "Super Soldiers" is created, including Isaiah Bradley. The success is not complete, though. In a particularly powerful (and ambivalently constructed) scene, Jack—one of the six soldiers who made it through Reinstein's program—is struck with a fever dream in which he has visions of his compatriots dressed as African warriors (face paint, large bead necklaces, bare feet, and so on). The ghostly apparitions seem to shepherd Jack from his body as he passes

[188] Ibid.

away, but their fascinating construction as idealized (Africanized) doubles offers the reader an essentializing vision of the soldiers' corporeal function within the narrative. Their bodies, made militarily ideal in the secret laboratory of a coldly-calculating doctor, are now doubled by a stereotypically cultural ideal that is itself an explicitly imperial project—the noble African warrior. They are smiling, open and gentle with Jack as he passes, but remain symbolically violent as an iconological tool of colonial oppression. (Ripped out of context, they are not unlike the Hottentot Woman of the early World's Fair scene—only here, they impress themselves on the reader's eyes rather than the eyes of some distant audience.) Yet they are Jack's visions, the visions of a (doubly? triply?) colonized body. They float within an interior space that, in its newfound raw power, seems to be struggling to dislodge the binary of colonizer/colonized. The visions are both his and made through him (authentic ventriloquization?).

When deployed to the European theater, the Super Soldiers are a depicted on the pages as a devastating fighting force. Their primary missions covert, they attack enemies in "Bavarian forests" while dressed in black, swollen masses rolling beneath issued knits.[189] However, while in Portugal on reprieve, Isaiah Bradley is shown reading a rumpled copy of *Captain America Comics*, a "funny book" he "traded some chocolate for" before leaving Spain.[190] A relatively common narrative device in the early Captain America stories, the interjection of the comic book within the comic book we read offers a level of "reality" to the reader's experience of the story—a "hey I'm doing that, too!" spider-cracking of the fourth-wall that lends subconscious credibility to the story as it

[189] Ibid.

[190] Ibid.

unfolds before us (as though a visual representation of a thing similar or related to the thing we hold transubstantiates into truth the contents of that thing).

Bradley is confused by the story. "Don't it make you curious? I mean, this comic came out more'n a year ago, but it pretty much got our whole story. It has Doc Reinstein, the drug we got, and this Steve Rogers fella the brass is so high on." This altered version of himself, a white soldier with whom he shares a shares significant history, is a stand-in with whom he seems to identify but against whom he projects a hostility—"the brass" has a favorite, and Bradley isn't it. Even if Steve Rogers is deserving of sympathy—Sergeant Evans suggests he's a tool of the Army just like the rest of them—Bradley and the remaining Super Soldiers actively question their relationship to Rogers and his status as a praise-laden public figure when they are fighting and dying behind the front lines of the war. Following a fight that leaves him the last remaining Super Soldier, Bradley takes the lingering question of relation to Steve Rogers and Captain America into his own power, stealing a uniform meant for Captain America before leaving on a mission Colonel Price all but assures him he wouldn't come back from. Bradley parachutes into the penultimate page of the issue, splashing readers with the red, white, and blue costume so recognizable as belonging to the Captain, and escalating the diagetic narrative "to a new level of deniability."[191] [See Fig. 33]

[191] Ibid.

Figure 33. Bradley, the Captain's costume, and "deniability," in *Truth: Red, White & Black.*

In commandeering the costume, Bradley usurps the history he lives within. But the power of the act is not "historic" in some grand-narrative sense, as though so minimal an alteration as a change of clothing can redirect the teleological rightness imbued in the political-cultural authority of the stars and stripes as always already inclusive and egalitarian. In what Michel de Certeau might call a "poaching" of the costume, Bradley opens up (remaps) the official topography of Captain America and makes do with it as a

tactician;[192] the strategies of his commanding officers funnel him through mission objectives, but his tactics (and their intensity both on him and in us) smooth out the silo-ed versions of history-as-it-happens and make parallel lines intersect.

Wearing the costume of Captain America, Bradley's actions are caught up in the "funny book" he holds in Portugal. Crucially, however, his actions are non-mimetic; that is, he doesn't seek to base his actions on the culturally-recognized pedigree of Rogers, but adapts the costume to his own drives and desires—some of which decompose in the process of carrying out his "final" mission.

Tasked by Colonel Price to destroy a concentration camp, Bradley encounters a primal scene not unlike his own birth as a super-enhanced military fighter. Opposed to his own story, though, which can be experienced as a kind of crude and perverse triumph, the story of the concentration camp is one of unredeemed death and brutality: rows of operating tables littered with nude corpses; stacks of human remains warehoused; bodies made specimens, jarred and preserved; shambling victims, women barely alive and alien to Bradley's liberationist intentions. In the shock and confusion a mass of prisoners turn against Bradley, and before we understand the din the characters find themselves corralled in a gas chamber. Bradley protests, "Ladies, please! Please! I'm trying—trying to get some leverage," but is unable to free they or himself before being gassed by the Nazis.

And in yet another of Baker's poignantly rendered and resonant scenes (Fig. 34), we see the gas take effect in fantastic-realist terms; as the prisoners and Bradley fall to the ground amidst the green-hued poison, the identificatory numerical tattoos on the arms of the women illuminate, dislodging from their arms, floating in the air as shelter-less

[192] De Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life.* Berkeley: UC Press, pp. 165-176.

golden beacons before they settle to the floor of the chamber, there transforming first into tiny ingots, then finally resting in Hebrew letters as "hey yod" (Yaweh), raked up by Nazi soldiers as the prize of inhuman exterminatory practice. Rebecca Wanzo writes:

> With their mutual history as objects of military experimentation and their similar objectification during the war, Isaiah and the Holocaust victims share a similar status as citizens—they are global victims. But as Isaiah is trapped in a gas chamber, the women's bodies evaporate and the numbers on their bodies are all that are left of their presence. The glowing numbers surround Isaiah and while the ''math'' of the situation would position them in solidarity with each other, it also demonstrates that he cannot save them. They are tools of the people in control of their bodies and there is little space to maneuver a revolution.[193]

Essentially similar as "global victims," Wanzo sees in the similarities between Bradley and the Jewish captives a political linkage, a "solidarity." But where Wanzo sees that link as weakened by the externalized control of their bodies by forces both personal and institutional, Bradley's disruptive presence marks a discontinuity in the circuit of the "global" political. He is not (cannot) be erased in the tragic magic of Baker's art; he is not an "absent presence," a site of tracings and play, but a very present presence, a body-in-motion that is becoming through complex and shifting corporeal materiality. Bradley is not an erasure; rather, he is vitally present (and made present) in his survival beyond the "similar status" as a "global citizen."

[193] Wanzo, Rebecca. 2009. Wearing Hero-Face: Black Citizens and Melancholic Patriotism in *Truth: Red, White, and Black. Journal of Popular Culture 42* (2), pp. 339-362.

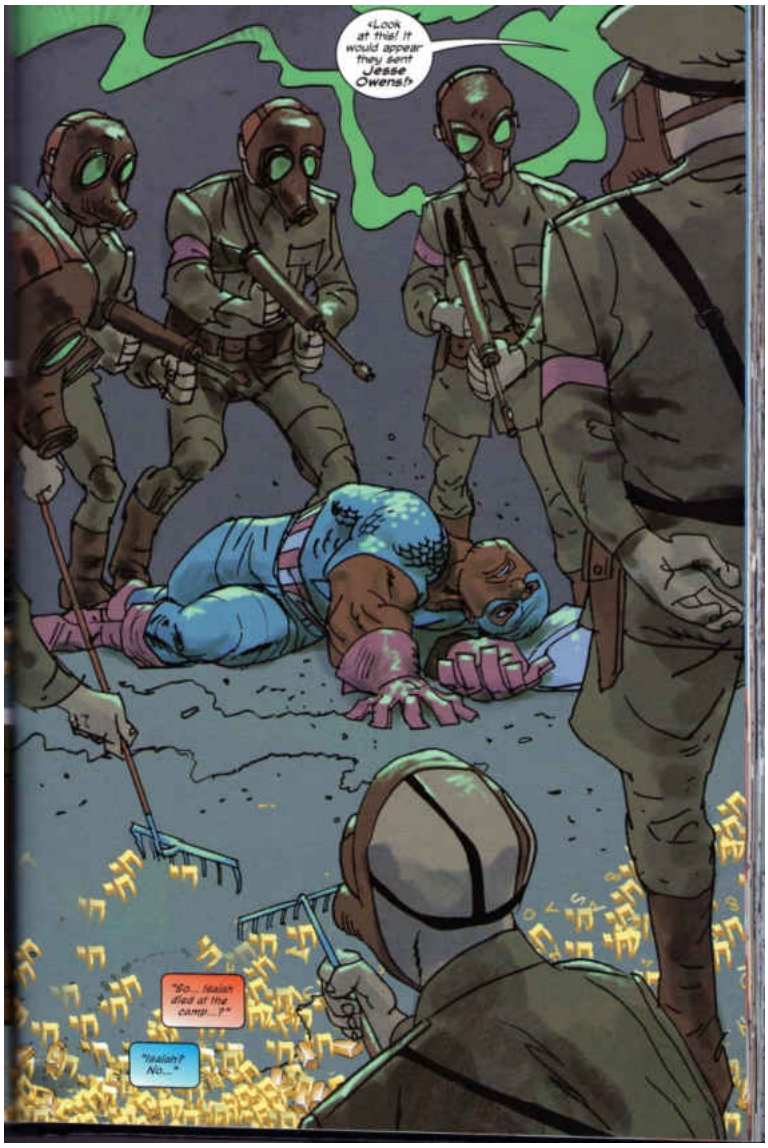

Figure 34. The gold ingots and Bradley's crumpled body, in *Truth: Red, White & Black.*

Great effort is made to erase Bradley, even in survival. Between facing down Hitler in a negotiation intended to recruit Bradley to the Nazi cause, to the cover-up of his very existence by US military intelligence forces upon his safe return home—he was imprisoned in solitary confinement for the theft of Captain America's costume, only to be quietly pardoned by President Eisenhower on the eve of President Kennedy's

inauguration—an enforced silence comes to govern his official existence. Despite this, as one character intimates to Steve Rogers many years forward in the story's chronology, "…every black person in America's heard of Bradley…I remember Denzel and Spike Lee were going to do a movie about it years ago, but they wound up doing the Malcom X story instead."[194] Very few people know what happened to Bradley, but "the blackvine," a transmission belt of intergenerational knowledge that links pasts-as-lived to presences-being-lived, has kept him alive in remembrance.

After some detective work through which he learns the muddy details of his own origin, Captain America, Steve Rogers, learns that Isaiah Bradley is still alive and living in Queens. Although his military service and subsequent betrayal have left him so intellectually damaged that he does not speak with Rogers, Bradley receives him in his home with the help of his wife Faith. Waiting in an anteroom as Bradley is situated, we look over Rogers' shoulder at a wall of photographs that show Bradley's deep and thoroughgoing connection to the (international) black community over many years; photos of Bradley show him shadowboxing with Muhammad Ali, embracing Malcolm X, laughing with Richard Pryor, smiling with Nelson Mandela, soliciting an autograph from Alex Haley, and posing with Public Enemy. These images, displayed in the privacy of Bradley's home, suggest the ineffectuality of "official narrative." They are a bubbling over of Bradley's ongoing presence, a networking of him within a recognizable political history filled with recognizable cultural icons. Again, his official erasure is not productive of absent presence, but of affectively intense and vital presence. Bradley is not remade and fixed as other, but is becoming-other in the smoothing out of the space he inhabits.

[194] Morales and Baker. *Truth.*

In the final scene, we watch as Rogers finally meets Bradley. Because of Bradley's deterioration, he does not speak with Rogers; rather, Rogers enacts a form of official acknowledgment of Bradley by apologizing for the inexcusable wrongs that have been committed against he and his family, and his friends. As a token of this apology, Rogers gifts Bradley the uniform he had stolen back in 1942, the now badly-worn Captain America costume that Bradley once made his own. In the final panel (Fig. 35), Bradley and Rogers embrace, another stirring portrait to add to the wall of memories.

Figure 35. Historical recovery: Rogers meets Bradley, in *Truth: Red, White & Black.*

This is the origin of Captain America as told in 2003, at the conclusion of which we are given an appendix justifying the mix of history and myth used by Morales to construct the story.

Plot Summary, Vol. 3

Man Out of Time, written by Mark Waid with pencils by Jorge Molina and inks by Karl Kesel and Scott Hanna, is a five-issue limited series published by Marvel Comics beginning in November 2010. A re-telling of Captain America's 1963 origin story with more modern sensibilities, the story is centered on Steve Rogers' psychological transition to life in a time that is beyond him. Dislocated from the familiar, Rogers struggles to come to terms with his new life and the acceptance of loss that inheres in temporal slippage.

Opening in the throes of WWII, Privates Rogers and Barnes are discussing the adventures of Captain America and his sidekick Bucky with a number of fellow soldiers gathered around a small newsreel projector. Barnes (Bucky) has procured the newsreel for the soldiers and wryly seizes the opportunity to trumpet the qualities of the Bucky that flickers black-and-white on the small screen before them: "Hey! Hey! Best part! Cap's partner Bucky! Now, there's a hero for ya! No fancy indestructible shield! Nothin' but a smile!" Rogers (Captain America): "And a tommy gun." Barnes: "But what a smile!"[195]

When Rogers is too cool to reciprocate in the praise his fellow soldiers have for Captain America, Private Noonan attempts to check him down: "Show a little respect! I didn't see you stormin' Normandy, Private! Cap's been on the front lines since Pearl Harbor!"

[195] Waid, Mark, et. al. 2011. *Man Out of Time.* New York: Marvel Worldwide.

Roger's responds: "Captain America's not a god, Noonan. He's just a soldier."

This blasphemy, a refusal of Captain America's deification within a warzone, amidst soldiers ghosted by the light of a newsreel documenting the exploits of a national hero "on the front lines" like them—it would seem enough to cause concern for Private Rogers. Molina's art shows the soldiers turned away from the screen they were just watching, looking back now at Rogers and Noonan with frowning faces contorted in disgust. If not for Barnes' quick wit defusing of the situation, Noonan might have explored the limits of his "Golden Gloves" training.

The scene is touching in its insistence on the humanity of Rogers and Barnes despite the "soldierin'" lifestyle they must attach themselves to. Hiding in plain sight as enlisted men, Rogers describes their existence as "two vagabonds" that "go wherever we're needed."[196] As a sergeant arrives to deliver new orders for Rogers and Barnes, the other soldiers complain, reading preferential treatment in the new orders for only those two. "Sarge, we don't get it! What makes them two so special?" The sergeant replies that he doesn't get it either, that whoever they are they must have friends in high places. And as Rogers and Barnes walk off, their frames in silhouette against the rubble-strewn streets of Leipzig, the soldiers second-guess themselves concerning the identities of the two men they had just met—"No…! It couldn't be…!"

And so a simple encounter keeps alive the hero dreams of dutiful fighters, a glancing run-in with the gods who fill the newsreels with wonder.

The rest of the story goes like this: in an attempt to stop a remote-control bomber drone from attacking "the whole Eastern seaboard," Bucky is killed in an explosion that throws Rogers to the freezing ocean below. There, Rogers' body is preserved in block of

[196] Ibid.

ice for more than a generation until it is discovered by a group costumed adventuring superheroes that call themselves "The Avengers." The Avengers, understanding the historical gravity of their discovery by virtue of Rogers' immediately recognizable costume, attempt to bring him to New York for a full de-briefing. The Captain, however, does not understand how this could be anything but a ruse, an attempt to pry from him military intelligence that could be used against the United States. Overhearing a between two of the Avengers concerning "D.N.A. profiling" and "tissue testing," Rogers notes in an internal analysis of his situation: "They don't realize I'm under orders. I am never to surrender blood samples without presidential authorization."[197]

Rogers' careful allegiance to once-extant military chains-of-command is materialized as one of the many quaint affectations he has carried with him in his "suspended animation" journey to contemporary society. As another example of this, following some confusion during the debarking of the Avengers' submarine (that is, in turn, a central mystery of the story), in the final pages of the first issue Rogers attempts to save a young woman who is being attacked by three men in an alley. As she screams for help, Captain America hurls his shield at the attackers, knocking one of them to the ground. The attackers respond with gunfire ("Guns? How old are you kids? Well, guess it doesn't matter.") that the Captain deflects with his shield before incapacitating the assailants with a boot and shield-jab to the face, respectively. Assuring the young woman she is safe, that she should "just take [his] hand," Rogers is shown his first lesson of essential alienation in contemporary society: the young woman, shocked and ostensibly traumatized by the attack committed against her, reaches into the inside pocket of her circle-A-anarchy-pinned leather jacket, produces her own semi-automatic pistol, and

[197] Ibid.

shoots Captain America in the belly. Steve Rogers, a man out of time, lies bleeding on a sidewalk as traffic creeps slowly by.

Although he is taken to a hospital and good again, what with his whole super-soldier-strength thing healing him faster than a normal person would otherwise, he suffers from hallucinations that connect his contemporary experience to memories past. He mistakes his hospital ward for an Army Medical station; he repeatedly sees his former partner Bucky in the face of Rick Jones, an unpowered (if routinely pivotal) ally of the Avengers; he describes himself as "someone who needed something to hang onto for a little while," and as someone who needs "to go home."[198] Such is the basic struggle for Captain America throughout the remaining story—how do we come to terms with the fact that sometimes there's no going home?

Tony Stark, an Avenger whose robotic exoskeleton allows him to fight bad guys, and sometimes good guys too, also known as Iron Man, attempts to convince Rogers that he is home. In an emotional highlight of the story, Stark takes Rogers on a personal tour of the Smithsonian Institutions in Washington, D.C. There, among the many familiar exhibits at the Air and Space Museum, Stark traces the history of spaceflight that Rogers didn't have the chance to experience firsthand. Breaking the sound barrier, ultra-high altitude flight, the rockets of Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo, the moon landing, and Mars exploration: the space-play of the most powerful military force ever built, to which in the story much is owed to Rogers. "Spaceflight's become so common," says Stark, "we launch as many as nine orbital shuttles a year. The glamour took some tarnish in '86 after flight 51-L. Due to a stupid, pointless mechanical error, it exploded 73 seconds after launch on live TV…and now when we reach for the stars, we do it in honor of the

[198] Ibid.

Challenger crew." As they look over the portrait photograph of the Challenger Shuttle crew, Rogers asks, "And they're all honored, right?" Stark says he doesn't understand the question. Rogers: "I'm glad to hear that."[199] [See Fig. 36]

The implication of the short exchange over the Challenger crew is intimately tethered to the affective work done in this re-telling of the Captain America origin. Here, in this very subtle moment, Rogers is cast as a progressive racial egalitarian, making sure that "all" of the crew are honored today. The question, so carefully delivered to Stark, almost seems to expect a stinging denial—a denial that, for this version of Rogers, would likely have personal experiential precedent. Because there is no denial forthcoming—indeed, Stark can't understand the question—Rogers is almost elated at the shape of this still-fresh socio-political reality: "See, what impresses me, isn't the technology, Tony…it's society itself. The freedom of the people. All people, regardless of their race or their gender. That's what I can't get enough of."[200] A crystallization of the humanist impulses that drove a young Steve Rogers to fight against the fascist evils of Nazi Germany, this society is the vision that moved him. This society, a society that could produce Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his—according to Stark—"greatest speech of all time…seventeen minutes that changed the world," this is what Rogers fought to ensure.[201] And seeing that it has come to pass, "that others can carry this shield and do it justice," he can "go home with a clear conscience…my tour of duty as Cap is already finished. This just makes it official."[202]

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[199] Ibid.

[200] Ibid.

[201] Ibid.

[202] Ibid.

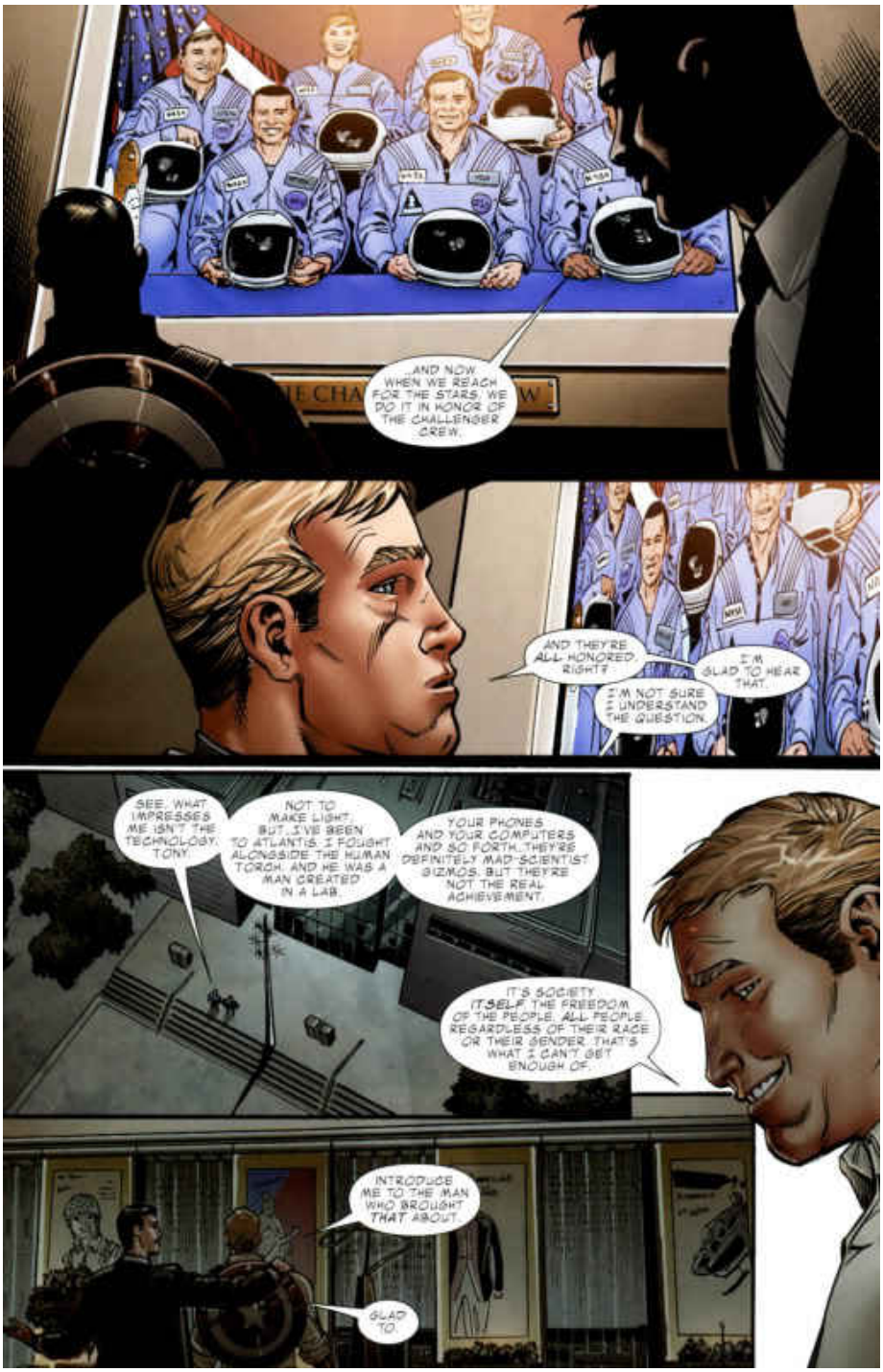

Figure 36. Rogers learning how to be out of joint, in *Captain America: Man out of Time*

Of course, in an imaginary where "suspended animation" is only the premise of the narrative arc, having options like time travel available to the titular character would seem not only justifiable but, to some degree, responsible. In service to this, a sometimes-

villain, sometimes-hero named Kang the Conquerer, a 40th century descendent of Victor von Doom (the recurring nemesis of the Fantastic Four and monarch of the fictional European hamlet Latveria) arrives in the contemporary timeline of the primary narrative arc to be very very bad and make things hard for everybody we're supposed to care about. Eventually, Rogers is sent back to his "original" timeline, 1945, where the expected comforts of home offer him little; in his knowledge of the future he is psychologically alienated, and on Molina's page he is visually alienated from the faded-to-black-and-white world around him. In 1945, only Rogers blooms in color. Against the drab monochromatic background, he stands out (of time) as something more than can be understood in the space he desired so seriously. Distraught, he concocts a plan to signal his now future-bound allies that he would like to return to their timeline to fight Kang at their side, and promptly receives a lift in Dr. Reed Richards' (of the Fantastic Four) deus ex time machine.

After defeating Kang, the story ends with Rogers visiting the Grand Canyon—something of a finding himself kind of trip. [See Fig. 37] There, he listens to Radiohead album "Kid A" (on compact disc), draws pictures of Bucky, and journals, writing:

> Adapting to circumstance is its own skill. As General Patton once told me, to a good soldier, there is no such thing as "unfamiliar territory." You either plan where you're going or you make the terrain your own the second your boots touch the ground. Patton, of course, had the luxury of marching into the future one day at a time, but he wasn't wrong. It's tempting to want to live in the past. It's familiar. It's comfortable. But it's where fossils come from. My job is to make

tomorrow's world better. Always has been. Once, long ago, I asked Bucky what purpose Captain America served outside of combat. It was a foolish question. There'll always be something to fight for. And I'll always be a soldier.[203]

Figure 37. Dislocating from the past, in *Captain America: Man Out of Time.*

[203] Ibid.

Pencils and Inks (and a Touch of Color)

Tick-tick-ticking only so long on his own, Captain America must be wound if he is to remain present—that is, to have present relations; but he must also be a wound, a stalking death.[204] So it must be true: "Obviously, if you're going to be doing something new, then to a degree you're destroying…whatever preceded it."[205]

These stories, origins all, profess the immediacy of Captain America within the present-as-experienced; their claim of originary title is a force that energizes viewers' own looking at his unfolding into the world. Through that force, viewers are tethered to the story. They vibrate with it, resonate with it, shimmer in bond with it, become caught up in it, and are brought to temperature in it. Turning a Barthesian sense of "punctum" upside-down while maintaining the energy inherent in the violence of the wound, the pure negative of pre-subjective annihilation is reconstituted as an other-than-subjective sensory swirl.

In that swirl, I argue, we can locate *ut pictura anapoiesis.* Roughly translatable as "out of the picture, stories of beginning," this concept gestures towards the capacity of serialized comic book visual images to create anew (and anew again). The force of the creativity is not in a truth claim; it is not a return to Aristotelian mimetic sensibilities (or worse) about the relationship between visual images and truth. Rather, this concept moves us beyond the post-structuralist critique of such originary truth claims—that all such claims are mimeses of mimeses (simulacra of simulacra); that experience is the play of language; that we're caught in the endless chain of signifiers; that it's turtles all the

[204] Eco, Umberto. 2005 (1962). The myth of Superman, in *Arguing Comics: Literary Masters on a Popular Medium*, eds. Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, pp. 146-64.

[205] Attributed to Alan Moore and qtd. in: Thomson, Iain. 2005. Deconstructing the hero, in *Comics as Philosophy*, ed. Jeff McLaughlin. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, p. 100.

way down; and so on. *Ut pictura anapoiesis* moves us beyond these critiques leveled in post-structural and post-modern theory by offering up an alternative site of experience—visual images.

Therefore, it cannot be true, as Richard Reynolds has argued, that the "evolving mythology" of something like *ut pictura anapoiesis*, the originary revision of new visual-narrative beginnings, is a "fractured prism through which the reader perceives distorted images of the original."[206] Traumatic as the emergence of origins may be, a "fractured" brokenness will not obtain. Originary revision and contest is not a "deconstruction" of prior authority, in either the vulgar or theoretically precise understanding of that word; nor is it necessarily a "doubling back" to recover alternate histories (or historiographies).[207] It is a synchronic enfolding of many presents, many histories that, in their refusal to inhabit diachronic order, "appear as, precisely, asynchrony, or time out of joint."[208] Thus, Captain America, the "man out of time" makes himself perversely present. He is a frozen rupture, a wounded and wounding presence. And with each next encounter, the assemblage of cacophonous images, temporalities, desires, and political visions creaks forward, turning the screw in his back: Captain America is wound up again.

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[206] Reynolds, Richard. 1992. *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology*. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, p. 122.

[207] Jared Gardner discusses the need for "doubling back" in a comics narrative when he comments on the complexity of *Watchmen*, but here I believe I've shown that long-serialized comics like the visual-narrative stories featuring Captain America maintain a similar level of complexity. In that sense, "doubling back" to work through "densely packed…visual information, much of which makes little narrative sense the first time through" is a standard element of comic book experience. Although *Watchmen* is self-reflexively built in this manner, critically commenting on the histories of comics up to point of its creation, comics featuring Captain America exemplify the complexity and density that *Watchmen* seeks to emulate. See: Gardner, Jared. 2012. *Projections: Comics and the History of 21st Century Storytelling.* Stanford: UP, p. 187.

[208] Freeman, Elizabeth. 2010. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories.* Durham: Duke UP, p. 19.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I experimented with a process of origins—a critical and notational retelling of Captain America stories that, in their trans-hisotrical plasticity, serve to highlight the ongoing, unstructured, and affectively energetic qualities of superhero origin stories. In so doing, I float the concept of *ut pictura anapoiesis.* Intended to be understood as something like "out of the picture, origin stories," the concept helps me further consider the developing relationship between origins, affect, and assemblage in superhero comics over time.

The affective and originary force of *ut pictura anapoiesis,* I argue, is in its ability to make present and effectual an amalgam of moments—composite histories, futurities, and the *longue durée* of processually imbricated assemblage in superhero origin stories. And by consciously refusing the structural-analytic baggage that post-structural theory (by and large) clings to—namely the obsessive originary treatment of language as the space in which political identifications and affinities are born, announced, and contested within—the shift of (playful) focus to visual-narrative imagetexts entailed is a not-so-tentative rejection of language as the meta-theoretical explanatory tool of the political in contemporary society.

I've shown just three examples of superhero origin stories in this chapter, all following a single comic book character as (re)produced over time. In that effort, I attempted to highlight the micropolitical work such origin stories accomplish as originary claims. Instead of adding layers to extant narrative structures, building on top of previous work, I showed how each story can be understood as an "assemblage" or "machinic process" that (de)territorializes the political topography on and through which their

intensities resonate. In that sense, I've demonstrated by example how originary development in Captain America comic books over time ought not be understood through recourse to linear temporal mapping, but rather through attending to the mutual imbrication and co-presence of multiple stories, intensities, and potentialities in the same present temporal space of encounter. Attending, in this sense, it critical curation—images out of joint mashed together to bring to the surface intensities of relation that organize times we understand and times merely think we do. These intensities affect in an immediate sense (materially, corporeally); they also linger within us, shaping our comportment and pose toward potentiality and becoming as a political tactic.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION:

THE FUTURE BIRTH OF ORIGINARY FACT

"But by my love and hope I beseech you: Do not throw away the hero in your soul! Hold holy your highest hope!"

- Friedrich Nietzsche[209]

Hope in Origins

One of my remaining hopes—and of my remaining hopes, I suppose there are many[210]—is that throughout this dissertation I've shown how superhero comic books, as visual-narrative or imagetextual forms, sprung to life with, and despite subsequent upheavals, remain committed to, the creative potential of origin stories. To me, this is the heart of what we might call four-color politics: a creative and dynamic commitment to retellings, shufflings, mash-ups, ret-cons, elseworlds, non-canon, non-continuity, speculative suggestions to the contrary that, at various points in history and through various visual-narrative techniques, pop up in these mass cultural superheroic objects and, in so doing, work their way into the affective fields each and every one of us share—whether we call it "zeitgeist" or anything else meant to stand in for the political-cultural-relational space between bodies that sometimes (but need not necessarily) allow for political affinities to take shape and develop over time. This layering of creative markers

[209] Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1989. *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufman. New York: Random House, p. 156.

[210] Such is the nature of a project like this, perhaps.

in political assemblages—an imbrication of superhero imagetexts and their affective resonance with people and things in the world—works to shape a politics similar to the processual layering of four-color plate printing, each next compositional element adding to the dynamic ends of the next.[211]

In this creative (re-)genesis there is a political vitality to superhero comic books, a four-color becoming-political. The constancy of origins taking shape over time harkens us to what Deleuze and Guattari might call an unsettled and "nomadic" restlessness, a desirous reaching for the horizon that bubbles up not from a need to achieve finality (in actually coming to rest at the horizons sought) but in a desirous attachment to movement itself.[212] For Deleuze and Guattari, there are always horizons, always new problems to be tackled, to be politicized and philosophized and conceptualized. And following from their argument that because "All concepts are connected to problems without which they would have no meaning and which can themselves only be isolated or understood as their solution emerges,"[213] students of politics are challenged to confront the processual emergence of origin stories in superhero comic books as intimately tethered to the problems that emerge with them, the techniques of representation that shape them, and

[211] I briefly discuss this four-color printing process, developed by Eastern Color Printing, in the Introduction of this dissertation.

[212] Scholars of affect have been keen to point out the spatio-political qualities of movement and the links made possible by considering movement and affect (or affectedness) in tandem, drawing heavily on the concept of the "nomad" found in: Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. For a taking up and expansion of nomadic thought and movement, see especially: Brian Massumi. 2002. *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation.* Durham: Duke UP, pp. 1-23; and the concept of "affected bodies" in: Denise Ferreira de Silva. 2007. *Toward a Global Idea of Race.* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

[213] Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. 1994. *What is Philosophy?* Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia UP, p. 16.

the affective political attachments that resonate around them. To paraphrase and elaborate on Elizabeth Grosz: origin stories in superhero comic books move; they do.[214]

There are always new questions to wrestle with, just as there are always new stories to tell and new adventures to undertake. Put another way, "there is no present that is not haunted by a past and a future."[215] Origins in superhero comics are thus a kind of window into agonistic politics—a politics that sees hope in contemporaneous struggle, that sees the specificities of desire and conflict as productively imbricated, always moving, always organizing new means and ends in the moment. The trappings of generic framework—superheroic capes and tights, the dual-identities and the amazing powers, and yes, the origin stories— are critically enlisted in this political struggle. They are abstract, affectively resonant representations of how our everyday politics works in real time, showing us the material means through which political affinities are captured and honed, develop over time, and change within the exchange and circulation of energies/intensities/desires immanent to the assemblage.

[214] Grosz, Elizabeth. 1994. *Volatile Bodies.* Bloomington: Indiana UP, p. 165. Here I borrow from Grosz's description of Deleuzoguattarian "desire," a formulation she sees as having an affirmative potential for feminist philosophy and practice: "Desire does not take for itself a particular object whose attainment it requires; rather, it aims at nothing above its own proliferation or self-expansion. It assembles things out of singularities and breaks things, assemblages, down into their singularities. It moves; it does. Such a notion of desire cannot but be of interest to feminist theory insofar as women have been the traditional repositories and guardians of the lack constitutive of desire, and insofar as the opposition between presence and absence, reality and fantasy, has traditionally confined and constrained woman to inhabit the place of man's other."

[215] Gilles Deleuze on time-image, quoted in: Groensteen, Thierry. 2013. *Comics and Narration,* trans. Ann Miller. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, p. 86.

Between the Silly and the Speculative

As much as superhero comic books might be considered a "silly archive,"[216] a welcome tongue-in-cheek (in-)distinction, they are also a speculative archive. Through trading in the fantastic and the absurd, flamboyant impossibilities and shadowy potentialities, I have shown that superhero comic books exhibit a rich and interestingly complex futurity. Using "a range of political tactics, and new technologies of representation," superhero comic books can usher those that choose to look toward new and different identifications and affinities, identifications and affinities that "search for different ways of being in the world and being in relation to one another than those already prescribed for the liberal and consumer subject."[217]

These new ways of being, tethered as they are to visions of desirous potential, are explicitly political—at least insofar as they run up against the ossified and siloed subjectivities that dominate traditional conceptions of political identity, and at least insofar as they remap the potentialities of identification and affinity to include the vital relations that tether these emergent political agents to the objects in their world. Superhero comic books—sometimes maligned even within Comics Studies as childish and "subliterate"[218]—can therefore be linked to a radical strain in American political

[216] Halberstam, Judith. 2011. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham: Duke UP.

[217] Ibid., p. 2.

[218] For instance, consider the following passage, written by comics historian Joseph Witek in regards to the burgeoning "literariness" of comics dedicated to historical narrative: "[A] general reading audience now exists in the United States for narratives written in a medium which has historically been considered solely the domain of subliterate adolescent fantasies and of the crassest commercial exploitation of rote generic formulas… Whether the comic-book form will make good its bid for wider cultural acceptance as adult literature remains to be seen, but it is worth remembering that the major modes of artistic expression of this century, the novel and the cinema, were both at first scorned as vulgarities until serious artists demonstrated their potential." For a bit more of the same, see: Witek, Joseph. 1989. *Comic Books as History*. Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press, p.5; see also, Hillary Chute. 2008. Comics as literature? Reading graphic narrative. *PMLA 123*(2), pp. 452-465.

culture and thought. Superhero comics evoke what Lyman Tower Sargent calls "social dreaming,"[219] or what Ruth Levitas describes as the "desire for a better way of being and living"[220]: political utopianism.

That Dirty Word?

But who invokes utopianism these days, really? Or, more accurately, who that most folks interested in working toward improved social conditions for people across the rainbow spectrum of need and desire actually want to talk to? Eco-kooks and back-to-the-landers, Guy-Fawkes hacktivists and doomsday preppers, teenage anarchists and jeremiad-howling zealots: these are marginal actors in contemporary left politics, in some ways self-marginalized. They carry the force of political annoyance, mostly, an ability to draw out the tut-tutting (or worse) from respectable political actors, those who channel their "voices" within the appropriate, pre-designated institutions and, when called upon to make their claims heard (if at all), wield just the right amount of affect, if not a little less, just to be safe and taken seriously. Because above all else, politics these days is serious business. In a real and palpable way, we're all neoliberals now. Political organizing and consumer pollster-izing travel hand-in-hand.

However, if we can trust the popularity of the genre at the film box office, where superhero films currently command billions in revenue, as well as the increasingly dynamic and responsive publishing industry—particularly "creator-owned" and independent publishing, where writers and artists maintain legal copyright over their

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[219] Sargent, Lyman Tower. 1994. Three faces of utopianism revisited. *Utopian Studies 5*(1), pp. 1-37.

[220] Levitas, Ruth. 1990. *The Concept of Utopia*. Syracuse: UP.

intellectual property, but also in "mainstream" publishing from the likes of Marvel and DC, where annual revenues are measured in nine figures—then the speculative futurity invited towards in superhero comic books doesn't seem marginal at all. Superheroes are having a moment, not only in the United States, but in the global matrix of cultural consumption. And their elaborate visions of four-color futures are brought along in close tow.

There are likely many reasons for the current superhero moment, and it's likely that those reasons range broadly. Trans-historical cultural attachment to sweeping myth and mysticism; consolidation of intellectual property into major international media conglomerate control; increasingly inexpensive computer-generated imaging technologies; the rise of a humming consumer-oriented "geek culture": all of these (and I'm sure many others) can offer us some sense of clarity as to why superheroes have so thoroughly permeated our media cultural landscape.

I believe that another way we can explain this phenomenon, at least in part, is by highlighting superheroes' unique combination of originary capacity and utopian futurity—a project I've worked through hermeneutically here, if not fully explanatorily. As a silly and speculative archive, superhero comic books engage in an everyday political labor of reaching out and offering something new, something potentially—sometimes ambivalently—better. In the very least these speculative visions are different: imagined alternatives to the quotidian every-day. Though fantastic, and indeed impossible, they set out new (explicitly unobtainable) horizons before viewers, beckoning them to imagine worlds differently alongside the comics. And they do so with affective energy and verve, a kind of stilted and self-reflective nod to the power of the not-so-serious to actually do

things in the world, to bring together people and things into new associations, new conglomerations—new political assemblages. Such a project, I submit, can never be "only entertainment,"[221] so-called escapist fantasies that placate the masses that consume them. The project is explicitly political, and affectively so.

The Shape of Four-Color Politics to Come

Superhero comic books, through their plastic and kinetic use of origin stories as generic narrative vehicles, do actual political work. This is not a theoretical argument; it is a material argument. When viewers feel drawn into the world of comic books, whether positively or negatively—as consumers or detractors or something in between—we participate in the potentialities of political "worlding"[222] by integrating the felt force of affect into the orbits of our everyday, ordinary, embodied selves. In this way, affect is an emergent political tool. Emergent in the sense that it rises out of assemblages of people and things just "bowling along," and a political tool in the sense that it can be used by the assemblage to work toward the ends immanent to it. What those specific ends are and where they might take the assemblage are not as interesting to me as gesturing toward and tentatively theorizing the myriad potentials of superhero comics books as they go about what they will. I therefore follow Ursula K. Leguin, as thoroughgoing a political theorist as any, who writes, "Science fiction is not prescriptive; it is descriptive."[223] The futurological is historiographic and forceful in the moment.

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[221] Dyer, Richard. 2002 [1992]. *Only Entertainment,* 2nd Ed. London: Routledge.

[222] Stewart, Kathleen. 2007. *Ordinary Affects*. Durham: Duke UP.

[223] Le Guin, Ursula K. 1987 [1969]. *The Left Hand of Darkness*. New York: Ace Books. In the introduction to this novel, Le Guin writes on the nature and craft of science fiction, noting in particular and at length the relationship between speculative writing and a kind of description of already-extant socio-political structures.

As a descriptive archive, superhero comic books are alive with affect, and consequentially so. The visual-textual imbrication on the page creates a resonance that speaks to the historical milieu from which they arrive as well as the specific situations of interpenetration and assemblage constituting potential relations in the world. By focusing my critical attention here on popular examples of the genre and form, I've shown how the technologies of origination and constitution represented and made manifest in superhero comic books provide a lens to theorize the changing relations between selves, objects, and worlds over time.

Inter-disciplined

But I also hope I've shown more than that. I hope I've shown the promise of working with non-traditional archives, and using intuitively responsive, metamorphic analytic tool sets to, as I say a bit earlier in the project, get after some questions and speculate on some answers. Traditionally speaking, academe is not a welcoming space for non-traditional enquiry. Despite ever-increasing lip-service to the contrary, doing actual interdisciplinary research and writing is neither "in," stylistically speaking, nor particularly supported institutionally. Instead of breaking down the barriers that so long set apart researchers engaging in so-called disciplined thinking, effectively striking down the possibility of other than idiosyncratic and episodic discussion across the chasmic divides of institutionalized academic units, interdisciplinary scholars today find themselves in the damned position of servicing the demands of (at least) two bosses instead of just one—the "home discipline" where housed (warehoused) as well as the demands of whatever new intellectual territory risked.

Interdisciplinarity as a political project, then, ostensibly intent on dis-organizing the calcified and strangling search for knowledges-according-to-rules, has instead been swept up by those same norms it once purported to critique. In order to service inopportunely polarized demands—demands that stunt academic career trajectories and place ever-greater burdens on nomadic research—interdisciplinarity has begun disciplining itself.[224] The political edge has blunted, replaced instead by a dull and lolling institutionalized rule-set. Now, apparently absent the echo of James C. Scott's critiques of "legibility" as a high-modern technique of subjugation,[225] disciplined thinking permeates the discourse of interdisciplinarity, strapped to the rolling gurney of "professionalization" and Taylorist work-management that routinely strip away creative, provisional, experimental, and speculative autonomy.

We're all neoliberals again.

The Future Is Now

It doesn't need to be this way, of course. Where interdisciplinarity was once imagined as shaking the rust off old ways of thinking, traversing new territories and building links across essentially artificial (if vested and powerful) institutional divides, an animated and dynamic research agenda utilizing comic book archives of various sorts might well provide a kind of answer. By harnessing their mass-cultural appeal, and by attending to them with rigor and care (as defined immanently to the specific questions/projects), the silly and speculative archive of superhero comic books may be

[224] Jacobs, Jerry A., and Scott Frickel. 2009. Interdisciplinarity: A critical assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology 35*, pp. 43-65.

[225] Scott, James C. 1999. *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*. New Haven: Yale UP, p. 183.

primed to participate in what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney have called "the Undercommons" of the university, an anti-disciplinary return to open curiosity and study that, rather than traverse extant institutional boundaries, works beneath them.[226]

The Undercommons, as described by Moten and Harney, are marooned and fugitive communities, composite amalgams of dilettantes and ne'er-do-wells the University seeks to interpellate as "refugees…uncollegial, impractical, naive, unprofessional."[227] They are communities of:

> composition teachers, mentorless graduate students, adjunct Marxist historians, out or queer management professors, state college ethnic studies departments, closed down film programs, visa-expired Yemeni student newspaper editors, historically black college sociologists, and feminist engineers. And what will the university say of them? It will say they are unprofessional.[228]

These "fugitive knowers" are unprofessional precisely because they grate against the expectations and norms that govern the modern University Subject. They do not yet "see themselves properly as obstacles to society," haven't yet "successfully diagnosed themselves as the problem."[229] In refusing to be interpellated into proper subjectivity, they also refuse the police function of self-surveillance that is concomitant to and constitutive of disciplinary order. So they go underground, making a muck of things as

[226] Moten, Fred, and Stefano Harney. 2004. The university and the undercommons: Seven theses. *Social Text, 79 Vol. 22*(2), pp. 101-115.

[227] Ibid., p.103.

[228] Ibid., p. 104.
[229] Ibid.

they do, exposing the University as neo-colonial jailer and working toward its abolition. Indeed, they work toward "Not so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society."[230] Subterranean originary subterfuge, as it were.

More than subterfuge, though, the Undercommons is a dislocation from the structures and strictures of the University—a "nonplace" from where curiosity and study will not be prevented, disqualified, or cast as insufficiently systematic or coherent.[231] The Undercommons, as a nonplace, is free to engage the play of what Michel Foucault calls "naïve knowledges, hierarchically inferior knowledges, knowledges that are below the required level of erudition or scientificity."[232]

Superheroes, "the public and private shame of American comics,"[233] may be fairly—and I think productively—linked to Foucault's conception of naïve knowledges. Superhero comics readers, as suggested by critic-historian Douglas Wolk and others, are every so often said to exist somewhere on the spectrum of terminally nostalgic and developmentally arrested.[234] If naïvete is at least akin to "sublimating 'adult' impulses

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[230] Ibid., p. 113.

[231] Ibid., p. 115.

[232] Foucault, Michel. 2003. *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College de France, 1975-1976,* trans. David Macey. New York: Picador, p. 7.

[233] Wolk, Douglas. 2007. *Reading Comics: How Graphic Novels Work and What They Mean.* Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, p. 100.

[234] Ibid., p. 100-1. Wolk writes about superhero comics: "They're a Peter Pan façade that refuses to grow up, the idiot cousin that the whole family resents for being the one who supports them and brags about it." See also: Ian Gordon. 2001. Nostalgia, myth, and ideology: Visions of Superman at the end of the "American Century." In *Comics and Ideology*, eds. Matthew McAllister, Edward Sewell, and Ian Gordon. New York: Peter Lang, pp. 177-193.

into something that's not exactly maturely sexual,"[235] then Foucault and Wolk might agree that superhero comic books, considered as they are in the University at all[236]—and only then by those perhaps "fundamentally unable to grow up in some sense"[237]—invite themselves toward the nonplaced, unprofessional, and fugitive knowledges of the Undercommons.

And why not? Maroon the childish. No great loss. After all, abortive subjects have no place in the University; and subjugated subjects always have mastery. (That prize!) But, on the other hand, if not a respite then a smooth space to keep on keepin' on, the nonplace of the Undercommons encourages abortive projects, queer loops, tentative leaps, blind searchings, and otherwise ill-conceived constructions that "steal from the university,"[238] founding a new society in their wake. If they fail then all the better, for in the words of Quentin Crisp: "If at first you don't succeed, failure may be your style."[239]

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[235] Wolk, *Reading Comics*, p. 101.

[236] Margaret Atwood once quipped: "It's always encouraging to be told that it is intellectually acceptable to read the sorts of things that you like to read anyway." Although here she speaks of speculative fiction (SF), over the last odd decade or so it has been increasingly true that comic books have found their way into "intellectual acceptability," both in universities and the broader cultured public, usually ushered under the moniker of so-called "graphic novels." As those energies persisted, congealing through an amorphous, ad-hoc, off-the-clock, labor-of-love set of prerogatives, Comics Studies as a formal research and publication project was born. Today, a number of research universities around the world have instituted official tracks in Comics Studies at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Indeed, the University of Oregon leaped into a kind of lead on this institutionalization project; UO tentatively regards itself as the first university in the United States to offer a structured undergraduate "minor" in Comics Studies. It has also been self-reflective in the process, considering at length the kinds of questions about disciplinarity I raise here. For briefs on that reflectivity, see: Hatfield, Charles. 2010. Indiscipline, or, the condition of comics studies. *Transatlantica 1*, pp. 2-17; and Angela Ndalianis. 2011. Why comics studies? *Cinema Journal 50*(3), pp. 113-117. For Atwood's writing on SF, see: Atwood, Margaret. 2012. *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*. New York: Anchor Books.

[237] Ibid., p. 102.
[238] Moten and Harney, p. 112.

[239] Qtd. in: Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure*, pp. 1-25; and Ibid., pp. 87-121.

Failing Toward the Future Birth of Originary Fact

Concerning the affective logic of threat, Brian Massumi writes: "Self-renewing menace potential is the future reality of threat. It could not be more real. Its run of futurity contains so much more, potentially, than anything that has already actually happened. Threat is not real in spite of its nonexistence. It is superlatively real, because of it… The future of threat is forever."[240]

The future of threat is forever.

There's a deep terror in these words. A justificatory terror. Indeed, Massumi goes on to trace the actual effect of this logic in the American regime of power that, in 2001, so acutely resonated with the "affective fact" of threat—the decision of the George W. Bush administration to go to war with Iraq, ostensibly (retroactively) over the perceived threat of Saddam Hussein's pursuit of weapons of mass destruction, a pursuit that Hussein surely would have undertaken, had he been able, had he the resources and capacity and will to destroy, next time. The very threat of this, a "superlatively real" felt force of knowing-in-the-moment what future terror might lurk, effectively (affectively) authorized a ground war and subsequent open-ended occupation, creating an entire generation of Americans who have since known nothing but wartime. A very deep terror.

"The invasion was right because *in the past there was a future threat*."[241]

Fine logic—a certain aesthetic to it, even.[242] Where we came from is right because it once helped put us on the path we needed to travel. Not quite circular yet all

[240] Massumi, Brian. 2010. The future birth of the affective fact: The political ontology of threat. In *The Affect Theory Reader*, ed. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth. Durham: Duke UP, p. 53.
[241] Ibid.

[242] See Anne Norton's claims concerning the aesthetics of logic in *95 Theses.*

the same self-contained, affective justification is a looping resonance, vibrating on the register of William Connolly's "un-sung" political melody.[243] "The threat *will have* been real for all eternity."[244] Just like the justification for where we come from *will have* been right, else we wouldn't still be here. That's a simple fact.

If it's a fact, though, it's also a failure of originary potential. The future birth of affective fact is a crystallization of momentary felt force, a rigidly shot forward architectural artifice locking in the instance of sensuous facticity. Truth isn't retrograde, but it's always retroactive. Instead of looking to the future as hope, as myriad potential that can point to horizons presently unknown, the future birth of affective fact already knows what comes next—a futurity loaded down by the myriad potential to commit harm presently. Insofar as the next moment has been justifiably birthed in the negative affect of the present—the self-justifying and pre-emptive felt force of terror—we truly have no future but for the certainty of what has already been registered in our guts, that slinking stuff we feel in our viscera and just know, you know?

There is no hope in the future birth of affective fact, no new origins to spark. There is only the threat of what might happen next but hasn't yet. The future birth of affective fact is a grave.

Massumi traces the political consequence of this truth through the decision-making apparatus of the aughts American neoconservative war machine, but it may be fair to say that the existential threat of the aughts neoconservative has leaked out into the general neoliberal political regime, a regime literally invested in futurities as traded

[243] William Connolly. 2005. The evangelical-capitalist resonance machine. *Political Theory 33* (December), p. 879.

[244] Massumi, Future birth, p. 53.

futures. Today, neoliberal hope is an appropriated billboard. Neoliberal hope tears open its dress shirt to reveal the same technologies of origin and power we already know. It has/is structuralist genre. No hope counts anymore but the Hope that follows the rules we already know.

But if the neoliberal political power of capital shorts futures by betting against them, marooned radicals, abolitionists, queers, kooks, and all stripes of refusenik ne'er-do-wells can respond with an embrace of futurities, a subterranean dislocation from the crystalline birth of affective fact through the sensuous, bodily capacity of originizing. Earlier in this dissertation I wrote on Jane Bennett's methodological distinction between the politics of historical excavation and the politics of embodied experience. Paraphrasing her, I take up the argument that "broadly narrative historicity" is "a telling backwards of why and/or how," and that Bennett sees embodied experience "as always providing new potential moments of origin and constitution—a telling forwards of what." Massumi's account of "affective fact" problematizes Bennett's sense of embodied experience telling forwards; insofar as certain kinds of telling forwards—at least those rising out of strong negative affect—may enact and auto-authorize keenly destructive politics, the originary capacity of embodied experience may be intimately tethered to a kind of political failure.

Yet we must fail: grandly, obliquely, doesn't matter. Because failing the future birth of affective fact means allowing ourselves the space to imagine futures collectively outside of structuralist strictures, to engage ludic—playful—senses and sensibilities, working together as "we wander, improvise, fall short, and move in circles."[245] After all, imagining alternative ways of being in the world is an essential element of political

[245] Halberstam, *Queer Art of Failure,* p. 25.

change. It's also childish and disruptive, sometimes predictably resistant to the rules and norms that dictate who should go where and how they should go about it. Superhero comic books engage and enhance this resistant comportment, and thus are not only viable for political study, but reverse the lens of analysis back on ourselves as we do our politics in the process, threatening us with charges of impropriety and failure all the way down.

Failure isn't a threat to the Undercommons, though. It is not a threat to the maroon communities that are rolled over on by hierarchized institutions like the University, institutions designed to consolidate and maintain power through domination and subordination. We already know failure. And we know the truth that originizing has always carried its darknesses, even when it tries to obscure their memories and violent births. Failure is a practice,[246] a syncretic[247] "weapon of the weak" that disrupts prescriptive logics,[248] confounding order through improvisation and making-use of the materials at hand in order to resist assimilation, normativization, modernization, and professionalization. Superhero comic books are failures, too, toiling in the assemblage of the Undercommons. And if failure is even a tiny rupture in the white supremacist, masculinist, heteronormative, reproductive, competitive, self-policing, common sense logic that political institutions use to govern, then failure… well, failure is a welcome alternative.

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[246] Ibid., p. 88.

[247] Berk, Gerald, and Dennis Galvan. 2013. Processes of creative syncretism: Experiential origins of institutional order and change, in *Political Creativity: Reconfiguring Institutional Order and Change*, eds. Gerald Berk, Dennis C. Galvan, and Victoria Hattam. Philadelphia: Penn UP, pp. 29-54.

[248] Scott, James C. 1987. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale UP.

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