

Introduction: Superhumans in America

We might try to claim that we must first know the fundamentals of the human in order to preserve and promote human life as we know it. But what if the very categories of the human have excluded those who should be described and sheltered within its terms? What if those who ought to belong to the human do not operate within the modes of reasoning and justifying validity claims that have been proffered by western forms of rationalism? Have we ever yet known the human? And what might it take to approach that knowing?

—JUDITH BUTLER, *Undoing Gender* (2004)

We've changed! All of us! We're more than just human!

—*THE FANTASTIC four* #1 (November 1961)

In November 1992 Superman died. The Man of Steel would fall at the hands of the alien villain Doomsday, a thorny-skinned colossus who single-mindedly destroys life throughout the cosmos. Arriving on Earth seeking his next conquest, Doomsday meets his match in the planet's longtime guardian, known to few in his civilian garb as the meek journalist Clark Kent but beloved by all as the caped hero Superman. After an agonizing battle in the streets of Metropolis, Superman's urban home, Superman and Doomsday each land a final fatal blow, their last moments of life caught on camera and broadcast to devastated viewers around the world.¹ The fictional media firestorm surrounding Superman's death mirrored real-world responses to DC Comics' announcement of their decision to end the life of America's first superhero earlier that year. Months before the story was even scripted, national print and television media hailed Superman's death as an event of extraordinary cultural significance, propelling what initially appeared as an isolated creative decision into the realm of public debate.

Public opinion ranged widely, from those who interpreted Superman's downfall as a righteous critique of America's moral bankruptcy to those who recognized it as a marketing stunt to boost comic book sales. In an editorial for the *Comics Buyer's Guide* years later, leading comic book retailer Chuck Rozanski claimed that upon hearing about the decision, he had called DC Comics editor Paul Levitz, pleading with him that "since Superman was such a recognized icon within America's overall popular culture . . . DC had no more right to 'kill' him than Disney had

the right to ‘kill’ Mickey Mouse.” According to Rozanski, by choosing to kill Superman for sensational purposes, DC would be breaking an implicit promise to the American people to preserve the hero’s legacy as a “trustee of a sacred national image.”²

Compounding such hyperbolic claims to Superman’s national iconicity, *Superman* #75, the famed death issue, was visually presented to readers as an object of national mourning. The issue was wrapped in a sealed plastic slipcover containing a series of memorial keepsakes: a fold-out obituary from the *Daily Planet* (Metropolis’s official newspaper), a trading card in the form of a tombstone declaring the Man of Steel’s last resting place, and a black armband embroidered with the red Superman logo for readers to wear as a public symbol of shared grief.³ As potentially valuable collectibles, these keepsakes targeted hardcore fans who coveted memorabilia linked to beloved characters and narratives. As performative objects associated with and intended to elicit public displays of mourning and commemoration, they captured the attention of a wider national audience. Through these items virtually anyone could articulate affective attachments to a popular culture icon that embodied a dense network of feelings, ideals, and fantasies about the nation itself; indeed in news media, the comic book press, and print culture, everyone from fans to cultural critics and to ordinary Americans did just that.

The public debates over the meaning of the death of an American icon would be redoubled in the fictional narrative following Superman’s passing. In subsequent comic book issues, Superman’s seemingly stable identity as an emblem of American values—in fact *the* paragon of public service to the nation and a broader global community—would fracture beneath the weight of competing claims to his mantle. In his absence four mysterious figures appeared in Metropolis vying for his title as the city’s heroic representative. These potential “supermen” included the teenage clone Superboy, the African American engineer turned construction worker John Henry Irons, a cyborg known as “the Man of Tomorrow,” and a humanoid alien calling himself “the Last Son of Krypton.” At a moment when Americans were embroiled in conflicts over multiculturalism, the ethics of genetic science and new medical technologies, immigration reform, and the proper education of the nation’s youth, it was fitting that Superman’s identity crisis would be embodied in four primary figures of the American culture wars: minorities, cyborgs, aliens, and teenagers.

For nearly twenty issues each of these figures took center stage in one of the four *Superman* comic book titles. Each series, respectively,

explored what Superman would be like if he was an African American vigilante fighting crime in Metropolis's black ghetto, a rebellious and ego-centric teenager using his powers for media publicity, an alien wanderer encountering life on Earth for the first time, or a cyborg war machine programmed to maintain law and order by any means necessary.⁴ By depicting the literal proliferation of Superman's body in these four alter egos, comic book creators presented the superhero as a dynamic and contested figure through which readers and creators alike could make claims about who might legitimately represent the American people, and the wider human race, as their heroic ambassador. Ultimately it was revealed that Superman never really died, his body hibernating to allow him to heal before making his miraculous return. For those who followed the story to its conclusion, however, it was clear that despite the Man of Steel's triumphant return, the "reign of the supermen" would forever shatter the national myth of a one true Superman.

The death of Superman begs a central question of this book: How could a figure commonly associated with seemingly trivial childhood fantasies become a site for debating questions of political significance and collective public concern? In *The New Mutants*, I argue that Superman's death and the subsequent fracturing of his identity bookended nearly three decades of creative innovation in American comics that transformed the superhero from a nationalist champion to a figure of radical difference mapping the limits of American liberalism and its promise of universal inclusion in the post-World War II period. On the one hand, the depiction of Superman's four alter egos cynically played on popular debates about multiculturalism and diversity in the early 1990s in order to sell comic books; on the other, the very fact that such minority figures could vie for Superman's vaunted place as an American icon—two of these characters even garnering their own comic book series—suggested that the superhero had undergone a symbolic reinvention that enabled previously ignored or marginalized identities, including African Americans and "alien" immigrants, to inhabit the space of superheroic power. *The New Mutants* narrates the history of this creative transformation by showing how the American superhero, once an embodiment of nationalism and patriotic duty, became a popular fantasy of internationalism and the concept of universal citizenship in the second half of the twentieth century.

With its inception in the late 1930s, the superhero quickly became a popular national icon that wedded a fantasy of seemingly unlimited physical power to an ethical impulse to deploy one's abilities in the

service of maintaining public law and order. The great superheroes of the 1930s and 1940s—among them Superman, Batman, Captain America, and Wonder Woman—were legendary crime fighters who protected civilians from the machinations of organized crime, saved innocent victims from natural disasters, and, in the case of Captain America, battled foreign threats to American democracy like the Nazi menace. Despite their disparate and often nonhuman origins, these inaugural characters were perceived as exceptional Americans whose heroism could provide an aspirational model of ideal citizenship for the nation's impressionable young readers.

Starting in the late 1950s, this model of the American superhero as a local do-gooder and loyal patriot was radically transformed by a generation of comic book creators who reinvented the figure to speak to the interests and worldviews of postwar youth. Unlike their fictional forebears, whose powers were natural extensions of their body, postwar superheroes gained their abilities from radioactive exposure, technological enhancement, and genetic manipulation. Where once superheroes were symbols of national strength and paragons of U.S. citizenship, now they were framed as cultural outsiders and biological freaks capable of upsetting the social order in much the same way that racial, gendered, and sexual minorities were seen to destabilize the image of the ideal U.S. citizen. Rather than condemn these figures, superhero comics visually celebrated bodies whose physical instability deviated from social and political norms. Consequently they produced a visual lexicon of alliances between a variety of "inhuman" yet valorized subjects as a cultural corollary to the cosmopolitan worldviews of movements for international human rights, civil rights, and women's and gay liberation.

The traditional view of the superhero as a nationalist icon has blinded scholars of cold war cultural history to the dynamic role the figure has played in offering alternative and often radical reinterpretations of the central political terms of liberal democracy in the post-World War II period. I complicate this view by exploring how superhero comics articulated the tropes of literary and cultural fantasy to a variety of left-wing projects for political freedom. In the chapters that follow I show how postwar superhero comics made fantasy a political resource for recognizing and taking pleasure in social identities and collective ways of life commonly denigrated as deviant or subversive within the political logics of cold war anticommunism and an emergent neoconservatism. In case studies of *The Justice League of America* (1960) and *The Fantastic Four* (1960), I show how these comic book series recast the vigilante

superhero as a member of a democratic collective through the invention of the “superhero team.” The egalitarian image of the superhero team as an intergalactic peacekeeping force provided readers with a popular fantasy for imagining alternative social and political responses to the cold war, including international cooperation and cross-cultural alliance, rather than unilateral military power. In later chapters I investigate the emergence of mutant, cyborg, and alien superheroes in comic books like *The Silver Surfer* (1968), *The X-Men* (1974), and *The New Mutants* (1981) as visual allegories for racial, gendered, and sexual minorities. Though socially outcast by a bigoted humankind for their monstrous biology and alien lineages, benevolent mutant superheroes like the X-Men and alien warriors like the Silver Surfer were celebrated in comic books as figures who sought alliances on the basis of shared ethical goals rather than national or ethnoracial identity. Tracking these and a variety of other fictive innovations in superhero storytelling, I argue that postwar comic books used fantasy to describe and validate previously unrecognizable forms of political community by popularizing figures of monstrous difference whose myriad representations constituted a repository of cultural tools for a renovated liberal imaginary. *The New Mutants* tells the story of these monsters and the world of possibilities they offered to readers who sought the pleasures of fantasy not to escape from the realities of cold war America but to imagine the nation and its future otherwise.

From American Marvels to the Mutant Generation: Reinventing the Superhero

The superhero was introduced to American culture in 1938, when Superman made his first appearance in *Action Comics* #1, a variety adventure serial produced by publisher Detective Comics (later known as DC Comics). The superhero’s debut launched the comic book medium to national notoriety while providing Americans with a fantasy of unlimited physical power and agency in an era when the promise of individualism and self-determination appeared all but impossible in light of an unremitting economic depression. Comic books emerged as a distinct cultural form in the early 1930s, originally sold as pamphlets containing reprinted newspaper comic strip materials; cheap, portable, visually sensational, and accessible for repeat readings, comic books embodied the populist ideals of folk culture but packaged in mass cultural form. As the medium gained public attention and sales figures expanded, publishers began developing original content in a variety of genres, including

crime and suspense, romance, and war stories. It was the invention of the superhero, however, that would cement comics as one of the most influential forms of twentieth century American popular culture, by linking the populist character of the comic book medium to a fantasy figure that embodied American ideals of democratic equality, justice, and the rule of law. DC Comics initially refused to publish Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel's *Superman* comic in 1936, fearing that the character was too "unbelievable," but they soon discovered that if someone could draw the Man of Steel, readers would believe in him.

First introduced as the opening feature of *Action Comics* #1, Superman immediately became a national sensation, soon starring in his own series and spawning countless imitations that would compose a growing pantheon of American superheroes. Between the late 1930s and the end of World War II, superhero comic books like *Superman* (1938), *Batman* (1939), and *Captain America* (1941) reached monthly circulation figures of nearly 900,000 issues, making superheroic fantasy a common fixture in American households and an anticipated monthly escape for GIs on the front lines of war.⁵

Gifted with abilities beyond the ken of normal humans, superheroes possessed an unprecedented capacity to extend their bodies into space and manipulate the material world with physical powers—among them extraordinary strength, speed, agility, and energy projection—that mimicked the capacities of modern industrial technologies. Both scholarly and fan literature often locate the American superhero at the tail end of a long tradition of mythic folk heroes, namely the frontier adventurers and cowboy vigilantes of nineteenth-century westerns. Though the superheroes of the late 1930s limned these figures through recourse to heroic masculinity and the embrace of vigilante justice, the superhero is historically distinguished from these previous icons by its mutually constitutive relationship to twentieth-century science and technology. Unlike the frontier hero escaping the constraints of civilization, the modern superhero is an embodiment of the *synthesis* between the seemingly "natural" biological self and the technologies of industrial society.

What distinguished the superhero from the merely superhuman, however, was its articulation of an extraordinary body to an ethical responsibility to use one's powers in service to a wider community. When attached to the prefix *super*, the word *hero* irrevocably transforms the concept of a body gifted with fantastic abilities by framing the bearer of such power as an agent of universal good. At once capable of refashioning the world in his image yet ethically committed to the well-being

of a broader community beyond his own self-interest, the superhero has historically functioned as a visual meditation on the political contradiction between the values of individual liberty and collective good.

I conceive of the superhero's dual relationship to individual agency and public life as embodying the central tension of American liberal democracy, which articulates a belief in the unfettered autonomy of the individual with a form of governance dedicated to protecting political freedom for all citizens through collective political representation. Liberalism can be defined broadly as a worldview that values individual agency as the ultimate goal of organized politics and recognizes the rights of individuals on the basis of their universal humanity;⁶ alternately, democracy is a collective solidarity between disparate individuals equally vested with political power, who seek to achieve a common good for a community above the pursuit of individual license. In the United States the uneasy alliance between liberalism and democracy has consistently been threatened by the historical exclusion of those deemed outside the boundaries of legitimate humanity, including the disabled, the stateless, and those believed to lack the capacity for reason on the basis of their race, gender, or class.⁷ In its commitment to protecting the political interests of these alienated social groups the superhero had the potential to redefine the meaning of political freedom in America by recognizing the rights of those excluded from the national community. The lack of definition surrounding the superhero's ethical purview—whether her commitments ended at the borders of the nation or the broader sphere of humanity or included all life in the cosmos—and to whom the superhero was ultimately accountable in the use of her powers made the figure a generative site for imagining democracy in its most radical form, as a universally expansive ethical responsibility for the well-being of the world rather than an institutional structure upholding national citizenship.

During World War II this creative potential was mitigated by the superhero's affirmative relationship to the state. The comic books of this period depicted the superhero as an American patriot with definite national loyalties; often deploying his abilities in service to national security, the superhero's robust masculinity served as a metaphor for the strength of the American body politic against the twin evils of organized crime at home and fascism abroad. As Bradford Wright argues, the superheroes of this period embodied an idealized form of liberal citizenship as champions of individual freedom who supported outside intervention (whether in the form of the superheroic vigilante himself or the strong state) to protect and expand the political rights of individuals

and maintain law and order.⁸ This form of liberal citizenship embraced the use of science and technology in forwarding the goals of American democracy by imagining that mechanical or biological enhancement of the body would grant Americans an unprecedented ability to perform acts of civic duty beyond the physical capacity of ordinary humans.

The most famous cultural product of comics' articulation of science and liberal citizenship during World War II was Marvel Comics' Captain America (1941). Once a sickly army reject, Steve Rogers is transformed into the supersoldier Captain America, the nation's premier Nazi fighter, when the government backs the invention of a "super-serum" that alters his physiognomy, granting him unparalleled strength, speed, agility, and invulnerability.⁹ With his exceptional physical powers and rigorous military training, Rogers is able to take on the Nazis with few physical or moral limits. Captain America manifested the belief that science was a vehicle for political freedom and that scientific and technological enhancement of the human body could produce more capable citizens. As Rogers's transformation from scrawny stripling to muscular powerhouse suggested, this particular image of ideal citizenship through scientific intervention was consistently coded as masculine and virile (not to mention white and heterosexual); with rare exceptions the defining characteristic of World War II superheroes was an invulnerable male body whose physical strength functioned as a literal bulwark against threats to the nation's borders and ideological values. No surprise, then, that this period of superhero storytelling is traditionally dubbed "the Golden Age" of comics, implying a nostalgic reverence for an era defined by the superhero's triumphant embodiment of American ideals.

Alternatively, postwar superheroes emerged as the monstrous progeny of the age of atomic and genetic science, no longer legitimate citizens of the state or identifiable members of the human race. Their mutated bodies and bizarre abilities—variously obtained from radiation exposure, genetic mutation, and alien science—suggested that the innovations of molecular engineering might destabilize the biological integrity of the human, producing political subjects whose abnormal physiologies rendered them unfit to engage in national civic life. What comic book historians call "the Silver Age" of comics was defined by an interest in exploring how various experiences of superhuman transformation might change what it means to be human and, consequently, what kind of community the superhero might affiliate with when the traditional markers of belonging—namely, proper humanity and national citizenship—no longer held true.

A variety of historical circumstances made this creative project viable for the comic book industry beginning in the late 1950s, including demographic shifts in reading audiences; changing social attitudes toward race, gender, and sexuality; new technologies of media production and circulation; and national interest in atomic and genetic science. A central motivating force, however, was the transformation of the relationship between the comic book industry and the U.S. government from one of mutual affirmation during World War II to one of clashing political and cultural interests in the postwar period. Following the war, crime and horror comics supplanted superhero stories as the highest selling genres among teenage readers. Narrating the violent exploits of criminals and social deviants, these comics joined other contemporary cultural genres such as film noir and dystopian science fiction that uncovered the seamy underside of postwar prosperity.¹⁰ Responding to public criticism of the violent content of crime and horror comics by Catholic decency groups, psychologists, and school officials, in 1954 the House Un-American Activities Committee convened a special Senate session on juvenile delinquency, which threatened comic book publishers with regulatory action if they refused to develop content standards for their publications.¹¹ In the wake of government chastisement, mainstream comic book producers returned to the superhero as a fantasy figure traditionally understood to embody patriotic American values. Ironically this creative shift allowed writers and artists to explore bodies whose monstrous abnormality offered a rich site for critiquing the regulatory powers of the state and its inconsistently applied guarantee of national citizenship based on liberal ideals. Galvanized by such possibilities, the two most productive publishers of superhero comics, DC Comics (creator of Superman, Batman, and Wonder Woman) and Marvel (creator of Captain America), reinvented the superhero as a biological misfit and social outcast whose refusal or failure to conform to the norms of social legibility provided the ground for a new kind of political community.

This new generation of heroes challenged dominant assumptions in three key arenas of postwar cultural and political life. First, postwar superheroes upended the assumed relationship between scientific enhancement of the body and liberal citizenship. Simultaneously made superhuman by scientific interventions on the body, yet physically and symbolically shattered by such experiences, postwar superheroes were as damaged and vulnerable as they were powerful. By making vulnerability the ground upon which unexpected forms of solidarity might flourish, superhero comics reorganized the dominant narrative of

liberal progress that associated science with man's mastery over nature and the body; according to these new stories, it was the *failure* to manage the consequences of scientific and technological innovation that laid bare the instability and unpredictability of the human. Second, these vulnerable figures overturned traditional hierarchies of gender and questioned presumptions about the physical superiority of the virile white male body. In the 1960s and 1970s male superheroes were repeatedly depicted as physically and psychologically unstable beings, their bodies seeming to switch genders through an array of anatomical metamorphoses or appearing incapable of performing the proper sexual functions of heterosexual masculinity. Unlike earlier depictions of the rigid male body struggling to secure its boundaries from perceived hostile forces, a new generation of superhero comics presented the unpredictable transformations of the male physique as a far more pleasurable and liberating form of embodiment than traditional models of sex and gender could ever conceive. These texts also showcased the development of empowered female superheroes, using the ecstatic visual cultures of women's and gay liberation to depict the exercise of superhuman powers as an expression of liberated female sexuality, pleasure, and agency.

Both the qualities of bodily vulnerability and gender instability constituted the postwar superhero as a figure in continual *flux*, visualized on the comic book page as constantly moving among different identities, embodiments, social allegiances, and psychic states.¹² At first glance the extraordinary physical malleability (and sometimes *literal* flexibility) exhibited by postwar superheroes—such as Mr. Fantastic's seemingly limitless physical pliability—might appear an expression of what some cultural critics have called neoliberal flexibility. Neoliberalism describes a shift in the ideological and political structure of capitalism in the late twentieth century—the same period as the superhero's reinvention—that involves the increasing imposition of market demands on all aspects of American culture, politics, and social life. Under neoliberalism formerly vilified or outcast social identities—for instance being gay or lesbian—have been revalued on the basis of their profitability, both as new target markets for consumer products and as sites of cultural expertise that aspiring entrepreneurs can claim “insider” knowledge about on the basis of their own racial, gendered, or sexual identity. This accelerated diffusion of market demands into private life has encouraged the development of the “flexible subject,” a social type who exhibits the capacity to flexibly adapt every aspect of her identity to accommodate the demands

of neoliberal capital and its periodic crises, including recessions, market fluctuations, and increased economic risk.¹³

Rather than performing flexibility, I argue, the monstrous powers and bodies of postwar superheroes exhibited a form of *fluxability*, a state of material and psychic *becoming* characterized by constant transition or change that consequently orients one toward cultivating skills for *negotiating* (rather than exploiting) multiple, contradictory identities and affiliations. Fluxability identifies one mode of being, fictionally depicted in the superheroes' many mutated or transitional forms, that exists in tension with neoliberalism's co-optation of oppositional identities. The visibly unruly and in flux bodies of superheroes like the Hulk, the Fantastic Four, and the mutant X-Men not only identified them as social deviants but also made them notoriously bad laborers, neither capable of holding down steady jobs nor interested in conceiving of their ethical service to the world in economic terms. The postwar superhero's fluxability attenuated the figure's potential as an effective laborer and also came to describe a form of material existence in which one's relationship to the world and its countless others was constantly subjected to questioning, transformation, and reorganization. This fact defines the third intervention of the postwar superhero: its generative engagement with the production of alternative alliances across difference at local, global, and cosmic scales.

Specifically, postwar superhero comics depicted the social communities and solidarities produced by a new "mutant generation" of heroes as the ground upon which progressive social transformation could take place. If cold war political rhetoric touted the hyperindividual, heterosexual, and presumably middle-class citizen as the antithesis of the communist subversive, superhero comics presented such individuals as narcissistic, alienated, and potentially destructive of social community. Against this self-centered figure of liberal politics, superhero comics celebrated the production of implicitly queer and nonnormative affiliations that exceeded the bounds of traditional social arrangements such as the nuclear family and the national community. Whether willfully choosing alternative solidarities or unwittingly thrown into relation with a host of mutated or monstrous others, postwar superheroes produced complex and internally heterogeneous communities of fellow travelers—often brought together under the rubric of the superhero "team" or chosen "family"—who sought to use their powers for shaping a more egalitarian and democratic world. Like the bodies and identities of the superheroes, aliens, mutants, and outsiders that composed their ranks,

these alternative solidarities were depicted as being in constant flux, expanding, retracting, and transforming their stated values on the basis of unexpected encounters with a wider world.

Few superheroes exemplified these transformations more than Marvel Comics' Incredible Hulk (1962). Bombarded by radiation rays during the testing of a "gamma bomb," the shy, gentle scientist Bruce Banner is unwittingly transformed into a giant green monster with mammoth strength and invulnerability. As the Incredible Hulk, Banner is a physical powerhouse of unparalleled magnitude, yet in mutated form, he recurrently loses control of his emotions, destroying everything in sight during bouts of uncontrollable rage. The Hulk was a material expression of Banner's repressed psyche, manifesting at moments of extreme emotional distress. The competing halves of Banner's identity would have public ramifications as well: as a respected scientist for the military-industrial complex, Banner is an asset to national security. Yet as the Incredible Hulk, he is a violent threat to the American people, making his alter ego a target for the U.S. military. In the Incredible Hulk comic book creators linked scientific interventions on the body to biological and psychic instability, depicting the superhero's body as a vulnerable, porous surface always on the verge of radical transformation and consequently threatening the very definition of citizenship as the mutual recognition between individual subjects and a governing state.

At the same time, just as Steve Rogers's transformation into Captain America was gendered masculine, his enhanced body expressing virility and strength, Banner's mutation was troubled by an excessive and unstable performance of gender. On the one hand, the Hulk's physical appearance as a muscled green giant and his outbursts of violent rage identified him as hypermasculine; on the other, Banner's vulnerability to science and his subsequent emotional struggles to control his unpredictable abilities indicated a newfound association between the superhero and those traits commonly associated with femininity, including fragility and emotionality. In figures like the Hulk, comic books presented what appeared to be physically masculine bodies failing to live up to the norms of proper gender and sexuality or else threatening the boundaries between male and female, invulnerability and vulnerability, human and inhuman. At every level these were figures in flux.

As the superhero evolved from a rigid representation of law and order to a dynamic figure of flux negotiating multiple identities and affiliations in the postwar period, it straddled overlapping, and often competing, commitments to liberal and radical political ideals. On the one hand,

superhero comics continued to espouse a liberal belief in individual freedom and political choice, remained committed to science and reason as avenues for human progress, and endorsed human rights discourse, which confers political recognition on the basis of a universally shared humanity among all people. In its increasingly radicalized form, however, the superhero comic book expanded who counted as legitimately “human” within liberal thought by valuing those bodies that were commonly excluded from liberal citizenship, including gender and sexual outlaws, racial minorities, and the disabled. It highlighted human (and nonhuman) difference as the defining feature of all social creatures rather than their universal sameness, while also suggesting the need for a political common ground that would bind people across multiple identities and loyalties. I identify this project as radical because it actively undermined the philosophical basis of liberal thought—namely the concept of a universally shared humanity underpinning each individual’s claim to political rights—while also promoting collective freedom above the securing of individual rights and privileges. The tension between these various political impulses—to endorse human rights while undermining the basis of the human, to value scientific discovery as the basis of progress while questioning the very idea of objectivity, to embrace cross-cultural solidarity while taking pleasure in difference—would form the conceptual ground upon which postwar superhero comic books would develop their greatest adventure stories.

In shifting the creative weight of superherofantasy from a focus on individual power and agency to bodily transformation and the question of collective belonging, postwar superhero comics contested and imagined alternatives to the cold war political logics of containment and integration. Recent scholarship in cold war cultural history has shown how containment—the political policy of halting the global spread of communism through economic and military coercion—existed alongside competing ideological formations. In *Cold War Orientalism*, Christina Klein has argued for a more complex reading of containment as a political policy and cultural ideology that worked in tandem with a policy of global *integration*, which saw Americans’ active engagement with foreign cultures as an avenue for promoting U.S. interests abroad. Like containment, the policy of integration worked through cultural formations such as Hollywood musicals, popular travel memoirs, and foreign aid campaigns to encourage Americans to see themselves as civilian ambassadors to the U.S. government and supporters of anti-communist ideals abroad.¹⁴

Alternatively scholars like Julia Mickenberg and Cynthia Young have shown how, for a variety of left-wing activists and intellectuals, culture became an avenue for performing radicalism during a period of intense political repression.¹⁵ In her cultural history of children's literature during the cold war, Mickenberg uncovers a diverse network of left-wing artists, intellectuals, and activists of the 1930s Popular Front era who rerouted their political energies toward the field of children's publishing after World War II. These Old Left writers, artists, editors, and librarians produced and circulated stories with egalitarian political messages for a new generation of American youth who would become the political activists of the New Left in the 1960s. Similarly Young narrates how an emergent Third World Left deployed a variety of cultural and intellectual forms—including film, literature, and scholarly research—to forge links between racial and class minorities in the United States and colonized peoples across the globe by identifying their shared experiences of poverty, social inequality, and political violence.

The New Mutants contributes to this body of work while focusing greater attention on the fantasy content of cold war popular culture. I seek to uncover the radical political possibilities contained in a fantasy form that was not produced by self-proclaimed left-wing activists or artists but rather emerged as the product of an ongoing negotiation between competing liberal and radical visions among creators and readers of comic book texts. To capture the cultural and political work of post-war superhero comics, I forward a model of world making that treats comic books “as a form of politics, as a means of reshaping individual and collective practice for specified interests.”¹⁶ World making describes instances when cultural products facilitate a space of public debate where dissenting voices can reshape the production and circulation of culture and, in turn, publicize counternarratives to dominant ideologies.¹⁷ I am drawn to the concept of world making because of its dual reference to the aesthetic production of imaginative worlds and political practices that join creative production with social transformation. Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant identify world making as a practice engaged by sexual minorities and other social outcasts to create forms of culture, as well as public spaces, that offer recognition to nonnormative social relations and hail audiences commonly ignored by mainstream mass-media forms. Warner and Berlant posit that the term “world . . . differs from community or group because it necessarily includes more people than can be identified, more spaces than can be mapped beyond a few reference points, modes of feeling that can be learned rather than experienced

as birthright.” They continue, “The queer world is a space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance, projected horizons . . . alternate routes, blockages, incommensurate geographies.”¹⁸ José Esteban Muñoz adds to this description social practices and performances that “have the ability to establish alternate views of the world” that function as “critiques of oppressive regimes of ‘truth’ that subjugate minoritarian people.”¹⁹ These definitions of world making underscore the importance of both social *and* creative practices in the construction of alternative ways of life for a variety of marginalized groups and point to the kinds of open-ended political projects that take flight in directions that are clearly incommensurate with, or actively resistant to, dominant social formations.

Berlant and Warner’s description of the “queer world” as a “space of entrances, exits, unsystematized lines of acquaintance [and] projected horizons” beautifully captures both the aesthetic and symbolic thrust of post–World War II superhero comic books, whose visual elaboration of new heroic identities and alliances, lush fictional worlds, and enchanting phenomena would break the traditional aesthetic borders of the comic strip form, while offering readers “alternate routes” for imagining left-wing politics during the cold war and after. World making in postwar superhero comics involved a conceptual, narrative, and visual scaling upward of the superheroes’ orientation from the local frames of city life and national affiliation, toward an expansive idea of “the world” as the object *at stake* in a variety of superheroic endeavors. As political theorist Ella Myers elaborates, “To say . . . that the world is ‘at stake’ in politics means that although the specific motivations and sentiments that inspire collective democratic action vary widely and produce outcomes that are uncertain, an underlying impulse, the ‘wish to change the world,’ is shared by even the most divergent democratic actors.”²⁰ With the birth of a mutant generation of superheroes in the early 1960s, the formerly touted values of the superhero comic book, including law and order, nationalism, and virile masculinity, were increasingly sidelined in favor of producing imaginative fictional universes infused with a democratic political orientation toward the world. I call this ethos a “comic book cosmopolitics.”

Comic Book Cosmopolitics

I use the term *comic book cosmopolitics* to describe the world-making practices of postwar superhero comic books. Unlike the liberal spirit of

World War II comics, which championed individual freedom and the defense of a national community against outside threats, the cosmopolitan ethic of postwar superhero comic books valued the uncertainty of cross-cultural encounter and the possibilities afforded by abandoning claims of individualism in exchange for diverse group affiliations. This ethic was both an aesthetic and a social achievement. It was formed in the mutual transformation of the creative content of superhero comic books *and* the changing values of an emergent participatory reading public that actively conversed with comic book creators about the formal and political content of the fantasy worlds they produced.

By attaching the label of *cosmopolitanism* to the American comic book, a medium commonly associated with “nonrealist” juvenile entertainment, I aim to relocate a seemingly apolitical form of mass culture within a genealogy of American political and intellectual thought. Following David Hollinger, I understand cosmopolitanism as an ethos that “promotes broadly based, internally complex, multiple solidarities equipped to confront the large-scale dilemmas of a ‘globalizing’ epoch while attending to the endemic human need for intimate belonging.” Expanding on the ethical implications of Hollinger’s description, Amanda Anderson elaborates that cosmopolitanism “aims to articulate not simply intellectual programs but ethical ideals . . . for negotiating the experience of otherness. . . . Although cosmopolitanism has strongly individualist elements (in its advocacy of detachment from shared identities and its emphasis on affiliation as voluntary), it nonetheless often aims to foster reciprocal and transformative encounters between strangers variously construed.”²¹ Postwar superhero comics facilitated such “transformative encounters between strangers variously construed” on multiple levels. They depicted expanding casts of superhuman characters “negotiating the experience of otherness” within a vast cosmos, while fostering “ethical ideals” of democratic debate between creators and readers about the aesthetic and political content of superhero stories. These varied scales of engagement produced countless opportunities for developing multiple, “internally complex” solidarities—between and among comic book characters, readers, creators, and various political visions—that embodied a cosmopolitan willingness to be transformed by encounters with new worlds, bodies, ideas, and values.

Comic book cosmopolitics was cultivated in three ways. First, as the superhero came to embody a model of universal citizenship, the visual locus of superhero comic books dramatically expanded. Where once superhero comics focused on the happenings of local city life, depicting

the crime-fighting exploits of urban vigilantes, now they presented the superhero as a freewheeling adventurer within a vast web of relations between human and nonhuman actors across the cosmos. This expansion of the visual field of superhero comics took advantage of the comic book medium's vast representational capacities, captured in the conceit that *whatever can be drawn can be believed*. As a low-tech visual form requiring only pencil and paper, comics allow for the visual depiction of extraordinary scales of existence and embodiment without the need for costly technical special effects. With the advent of global satellite imaging technology, technical innovations in film and television media, and the emergence of new discourses of globalism in the 1950s and after (including postwar internationalism, cold war geopolitics, and environmentalism), comic book creators began to exploit the capacity of their medium to represent grand totalities in such figures as the world, the universe, and the cosmos.

Corollary to the expansion of comics' visual scale, editors at DC and Marvel Comics reconceptualized their individual publishing houses as overseers of distinct fictional "universes" inhabited by particular cadres of superhuman characters. They encouraged readers to see each of the company's superheroes as inhabiting the same unified social world rather than characters isolated in their own discreet stories. This diverged from the comic book publishing model of the 1930s and 1940s, in which complete, bounded stories were narrated in the space of a single issue so that on-again, off-again readers could follow the plot of a given serial regardless of which issue they purchased. By the late 1950s comic book publishers found themselves catering to a regular reading audience who wished to follow multi-issue story lines and see character development over time. The trademarking of distinct DC and Marvel universes boosted sales by luring readers with the promise of various character crossover stories. Yet it also expanded the "worldliness" of comic book content by encouraging creators to depict individual superheroes' unfolding interactions with countless other figures who populated their daily lives, interactions that now took place across vast geographical terrains on Earth and beyond.

As these fictional worlds took shape, superhero comics became less about common crime fighting and more about the unpredictable encounters between an expanding cohort of superhumans, aliens, cosmic beings, and an array of fantastical objects and technologies. As a result, cross-cultural *encounter* rather than assimilation became the primary site of political world-making in the superhero comic book, offering an

alternative to the one-sided model of cultural tolerance promoted by the cold war logic of integration. If the goal of cold war integration was a stable postcommunist world dominated by American cultural and economic values, the open-ended serialized narratives of postwar comics, as well as the increasingly complex fictional worlds they produced, promised indefinite instability. Each new issue of a series offered creators an opportunity to critique, reimagine, or wholly transform the narrative and visual trajectory of previous stories so that narrative outcomes were always unpredictable and provisional. This fact was redoubled in the sequential character of comic book art, which became a formal tool for underscoring the transformative and unpredictable nature of the superhero's body.

In the post-World War II period, comic book creators began to underscore the serial visuality of comics—its use of sequential images unfolding across space to depict change over time—as a formal corollary to the superhero's unstable anatomy. They experimented with the visual layout of sequential images to depict bodily flux as a visual effect of transition between panels on a page. What would appear as an ordinary human body in one panel might appear in the next as a body in flight, as invisible, aflame, shape-shifting, encased in metal, or altogether *not there*. The visual instability of the superhero's body across time and space negated the figure's previous iconic status as a seemingly invulnerable masculine body by proliferating countless permutations of the superhero that refused to cohere into a unified image or physiology.²² Such bodily fluxing and its articulation to the cosmopolitan ideal of unpredictable, worldly encounter became both a central “problem” of superhero stories—requiring superheroes to negotiate their bodily transformations and encounters with similarly mutant, nonhuman, or hybrid beings—as well as a site of cultural and political investment for a new generation of comic book readers.

The emergence of a participatory reading public as a fixture of postwar comic book culture would form the second foundation of comic book cosmopolitics. In the late 1950s DC Comics editor Mort Weisinger began including a letters page at the end of the company's best-selling title, *Adventure Comics*. There Weisinger published short letters from readers across a wide demographic spectrum that commented on the company's creative productions, including praise and criticism of various story lines, the aesthetic details of specific issues, and suggestions for new characters. The popular response to these letters pages was so powerful that both DC and Marvel instituted regular letters pages in

all their best-selling comic book titles. By offering readers the possibility of greater interaction between characters and increasingly elaborate fictional worlds, creators put themselves in the position of having to respond to a growing audience demand for *more* innovations in comic book storytelling.

By the mid-1960s these print forums had produced an affective counterpublic (which included the institution of fan clubs and comic book conventions) where readers could voice their relationship to the characters and worlds they followed monthly while democratically debating the comics' content. Just as fictional superheroes were encountering a cosmos filled with alien life in a spirit of cosmopolitan engagement, so too the heterogeneous members of a growing postwar readership were using a popular media form to engage one another across race, class, gender, generation, and geographical space. As I show in chapter 3, while a majority of letters across titles focused on aesthetic concerns, some of the most acclaimed comic book series of the period, particularly *The Fantastic Four*, became famous for printing letters that directly addressed the relationship of superheroes to contemporary political concerns, including civil rights and race relations, the women's movement, and the Vietnam War. Consequently superhero comics became an evolving creative site for exploring questions of cultural difference, social inequality, and democratic action that would form the basis of a comic book cosmopolitics.

The alignment of a new reading generation's emergent political investments with the superhero's increasingly cosmopolitan outlook on the world was underwritten by a third, and final, transformation in comic book culture: the medium's resurgent investment in the liberal values of antiracism and antifascism alongside its absorption of the more radical politics of New Left social movements. Though few comic book creators voiced commitments to radical political ideals—many even politically conservative—the generation of writers, artists, and editors who helped forge the industry in the late 1930s was deeply invested in liberal egalitarian values. These primarily Jewish creative producers were shaped by the dual experiences of being second-generation immigrants as well as witnesses to, and sometimes active military participants in, the battle against Nazism. These experiences led them to espouse the ideals of religious and ethnoracial tolerance, as well a broader commitment to universal political freedom and equality. Writing in his monthly editorial, "Stan's Soapbox," in December 1968, Marvel Comics editor Stan Lee proclaimed:

Let's lay it right on the line. Bigotry and racism are among the deadliest social ills plaguing the world today. But, unlike a team of costumed supervillains, they can't be halted with a punch. . . . The only way to destroy them is to expose them—to reveal them for the insidious evils they really are. . . . Although anyone has the right to dislike another individual, it's totally irrational, patently insane to condemn an entire race—to despise an entire nation—to vilify an entire religion. . . . Sooner or later, if man is ever to be worthy of his destiny, we must fill our hearts with tolerance.²³

By the late-1960s this commitment to liberal tolerance had become a defining value of superhero comics. In its most progressive iterations, this antiracist and antifascist worldview intersected with and helped theorize an emergent radical sensibility among postwar youth that combined liberal ideals of political freedom with a powerful critique of the interlocking oppressions of race, class, and gender and the government institutions that underwrote the violent conflicts of a global cold war.

The young readers who galvanized this increased radicalism in comic book content were growing up in a world where the rhetoric of civil rights and anticolonialism was in ascendancy, offering a utopian political alternative to the cold war's rigidly antagonistic view of the world divided between a capitalist United States and a communist Russia. An increasingly international readership hailing from every major demographic welcomed the superhero comic book's expanded visual scope and its attendant ideal of universal human (and "inhuman") equality. Frustrated with the normalizing social expectations of 1950s America, these readers also valued the superhero's physiological nonconformity with proper humanity. Consequently they facilitated the invention of an array of new figurations of the superhero, including aliens, cyborgs, and mutants, while encouraging the demographic diversification of comic book characters.

From the production side, the diversification of superhero comics through the introduction of racial minorities and women to previously white, male-centered superhero stories was ostensibly a *liberal* response to the traditional homogeneity of comic book content. It was also a transformation conditioned by economic demands to appeal to a more diverse readership. From the perspective of readers, however, the demand for greater representational diversity was less about the mere visibility of minorities in comics and more an appeal to creators to develop stories and worlds that explored the cultural politics of identity. As a generation

attuned to the emerging cosmopolitan visions of the New Left, and later black power, Third World movements, and women's and gay liberation, many readers and cultural critics of comics understood that *differences* (whether of race, class, sex, or gender, geographical location, ability, or religious orientation) were not only sites of political oppression but potent cultural resources for articulating new forms of social and political affiliation, questioning the limits of democratic inclusion, and developing new knowledge about the world from the position of the outcast and the marginalized. An increasingly politically minded readership took seriously the idea (presented by superhero comics themselves) that the internal heterogeneity of the fictional universes of Marvel and DC Comics could facilitate interactions between differently situated characters that might foment debates about the political possibilities, pleasures, and limits of cultural differences. The very fact that superhero comics were conceptually obsessed with phenotypic and physiological difference, expending vast narrative and visual space depicting new species, bodies, abilities, and identities, meant that the introduction of previously unrepresented differences (whether real-world ones like race or fictional categories like mutation) demanded a substantive recalibration of the social relations between characters, the visual depiction of new distinctions, and a language with which to discuss such differences.

This approach to difference dovetailed with the values of women of color feminism and other radical critiques of race in this period, which "were fundamentally organized around *difference*, the difference between and within racialized, gendered, sexualized collectivities."²⁴ As Roderick Ferguson and Grace Hong elaborate, "The definition of difference for women of color feminism . . . [was] not a multiculturalist celebration [or] an excuse for presuming a commonality among all racialized peoples, but a cleareyed appraisal of the dividing line between valued and devalued, which can cut within, as well as across, racial groupings."²⁵ Comic book readers were surprisingly adept at articulating these ideals in their own words. They demanded that creators value commonly devalued identities and bodies in comics (including women, people of color, and the working class) and that the fictional narratives of these characters honestly dramatize the uneven social value attributed to different kinds of superhumans within their distinct fantasy worlds based on the magnitude of their abilities, specific form of mutation, or level of social standing. Readers understood, for instance, that the introduction of an African female superhero, Ororo Monroe (Storm), in the pages of the popular *X-Men* (1974) series might force writers to address the

distinctions between African and African American experiences of race, *as well as* the gendered dynamics of a black woman superhero capable of controlling the elements working alongside predominantly white, male teammates whose powers were largely extensions of physical strength; similarly, when creators introduced the first African American superhero, Luke Cage, in his own series, *Luke Cage: Hero for Hire* (1972), as an economically struggling private detective, readers lauded the series for taking seriously the race and class implications of hero work (including the expense of costumes, travel, and headquarters space) especially for inner-city minorities. Readers' willingness to embrace the liberal project of representational inclusiveness in comics, then, was conditioned by a more radical investment in comic books as sites of political world-making where the presence of diverse actors in expansive fictional universes of encounter, conflict, and negotiation could provide substantive creative responses to social difference.²⁶

One of the most radical outcomes of this attentiveness to difference within a cosmopolitan frame was to facilitate the reinvention of the superhero as a distinctly "queer" figure. I invoke the term *queer* to describe how postwar superheroes' mutated bodies and alternative kinships thwarted the direction of heterosexual desire and life outcomes and cultivated an affective orientation toward otherness and difference that made so-called deviant forms of bodily expression, erotic attachment, and affiliation both desirable and ethical. The postwar superhero comic's embrace of indefinitely unfolding narratives with no predetermined outcome, its unraveling of the traditionally gendered physiology of the white, male superhero, and its centralizing of cross-cultural encounter and mutually transformative engagement popularized a mode of storytelling that was largely uninterested in traditional heterosexual reproduction, family forms, or gender norms. Even when comics told stories of superheroes getting married or having children, these narratives were shot through with contradictions about the supposed social normalcy of such practices. The weddings of superheroes were attended by motley crews of alien, mutant, and cyborg guests dressed not in formal wear but in flamboyant superhero costumes, and when superheroes looked forward to child rearing, they fretted over the queer potential of progeny born from nonhuman parents.²⁷ Instead of solidifying a "straight" future organized by the nuclear family and the promise of heterosexual reproduction, postwar superhero comics framed the proliferation of difference, its ceaseless alteration of the social world, and the pursuit of ever more complex forms of affiliation and collective action *across* all

manner of cultural and geographic divides as the goal of a comic book cosmopolitics.

Taken together, the expanding visual horizon of the superhero comic book, the emergence of a participatory reading public, and the alignment of comic book content with the egalitarian ideals of left-wing political projects constructed the parameters of comic book cosmopolitics. I locate the political productivity of comics—understood as their capacity to imaginatively innovate and make public aesthetic and social responses to the limits of contemporary political imaginaries—in the generative relationship between comic book producers, an emergent countercultural readership, and the expanding visual and narrative content of comic book texts. Yet I place my greatest analytical emphasis on the actual visual and narrative content of superhero comic book texts themselves. This content, and the broader cosmopolitan aspirations it articulated, was the common object of concern that brought creators and readers into dialogue in the first place; it was also the material outcome of their various engagements with each other and the wider cultural and political contexts within which they articulated their distinct positions. Taking a dual-pronged approach, I conceive of comics as historically constituted objects emerging from distinct social and material conditions—including shifting economic demands, the biographies of different creators, demographic transformations in readership, and new printing technologies—while also seeing their rich narrative and visual content as producing imaginative logics that offer ways of reconceiving, assessing, and responding to the world that are *not* reducible to any single historical factor. In other words, I never assume that the “meaning” of a given comic book text, story, character, or fictional event can be deduced from a single biographical element of a creator’s life, or by laying bare the economic conditions that encouraged a specific creative decision, or by making an abstract reference to a historical event that took place shortly before a story was scripted. Rather, following Foucault, I see the interpretive possibilities of texts (not their ultimate meaning, but what people *do* with them) as emerging within a field of dynamic interactions and antagonisms between competing actors who exercise power in different ways that ultimately shape and proliferate *multiple* meanings and interpretive possibilities around a text.²⁸ Consequently my method for analyzing comics involves a form of close reading that centralizes questions of literary scale to bridge the distances between the historical and the imaginative valences of comic book content.

In her essay “The Scale of World Literature,” Nirvana Tanoukhi conceptualizes scale as “the social condition of a landscape’s utility.” By

“landscape” Tanoukhi means the field of social and aesthetic relations that surrounds the production of and composes the creative content internal to a given literary text. Tanoukhi theorizes scale not merely as geographical or historical distance but as the *conceptual distance* that must be traversed by a reader in order for a particular element of a text (including characters, themes, tropes, or literary and visual techniques) to have meaning or use to them in varied contexts.²⁹ This understanding of scale allows us to consider, for instance, what conditions enabled readers to take up the visual depiction of the mutant (or genetically outcast) superhero as a figure for Third World politics or internationalism or any number of cosmopolitan political projects attuned to the relationship between marginalized identities and broader scales of affiliation beyond the nation. From this perspective the categories of world making (as a creative practice) and comic book cosmopolitics (as an ethos) can be understood as tools or *metrics of scale*. Each offers a framework for analyzing how a local, material, worldly object like the superhero comic book aspired to broad scales of conceptual and political experience, what I am labeling a cosmopolitics, through both shifting conditions of production and innovative aesthetic practices. To analyze superhero comic books this way is, in a sense, to aspire to the world-making possibilities of comics themselves, but with critical attention to how those possibilities were historically produced and articulated, taken up by various actors, and revised over time. The basic fact that so many readers and cultural critics were able to make political meaning out of the fantasy content of superhero comic books suggests the capacity of these texts to elicit imaginative acts of scale-making from its audiences, ones specifically oriented toward a cosmopolitan ethos, *despite* the numerous economic, social, and political constraints on the production of comics themselves.

A variety of business histories of both Marvel and DC Comics have shown how, since the 1960s, economic demands to maintain operating budgets, pay salaries, make profits, and increase market share have placed incredible pressure on creators and editorial management to produce salable comic book content.³⁰ While taking into account the economic pressures that mediated the relationship between creators and readers, I narrate a different story that explores how the social conditions of comic book production and circulation from the 1960s onward helped produce figures and stories that often exceeded, contested, or altogether repudiated the mandates of profitability at both Marvel and DC Comics. The postwar superhero’s fluxability was one such figure, an imaginative tool for thinking outside the framework of economic profitability that also

encouraged the sale of comics. The fluxible superhero was not innocent of economic interests, but neither were his meanings reducible to them.

Because comic book production in the 1960s was less constrained by corporate demands and underpinned by the basic need of creators to make a living wage, I approach this period as one of relatively unrestrained creative innovation when the economic interests of creators dovetailed with the political radicalization of a growing countercultural audience. By the mid-1970s and early 1980s, Marvel and DC would become fully corporate ventures (owned by Cadence Industries and Warner Communications, respectively) with increasing investments in making comic books profitable to publishers, CEOs, and shareholders. This transformation attenuated open-ended dialogue and creative experimentation between readers and creators but also heightened tensions between a new generation of creative talents and their corporate employers. Rather than reducing all comic book content to corporate pandering, then, these constraints added another dynamic variable to superhero comics' production that encouraged innovative creative responses to corporate economic pressures. Because of this, in later chapters I analyze how the political and visual content of superhero comics since the mid-1970s became an index of the shifting scales of negotiation among creators, fans, and a newly appointed corporate management within an increasingly profit-driven industry. As I discuss in chapter 5, this included a bold critique of corporate capital lobbied by writers and artists in the pages of mainstream comics as a response to the economic devaluation of their artistic labor in the 1970s. Simultaneously the aesthetic innovations that creators used to articulate their economic frustrations—including recasting the superhero as an icon of working-class virility—provided readers with a new set of conceptual tools for scaling downward from the cosmic worldviews they had become accustomed to and addressing the daily living conditions of racial minorities, the working class, and the homeless. Both a product of dynamic dialogue and contestation *and* a figure mediated by the vicissitudes of the mass entertainment market, the comic book superhero would come to articulate a variety of potential solutions to the impasses of contemporary social politics within the constraints of industry realignments.

If bridging the conceptual distances between the fictional world of superhero comics and the political world was the central project of a comic book cosmopolitics, then the vehicle for this work was undoubtedly fantasy. The capacity to invent and depict a near-limitless range of fantasy figures, scenarios, and worlds was an imaginative skill that

creators and readers both exercised but that comic book texts visually manifested and circulated to mass audiences. It was fantasy that made the scale-making aspirations of superhero comics both possible *and* pleasurable, displaying the worlds that might unfold from a cosmopolitan view of life, while imbuing those worlds with endless desire.

The Cultural Politics of Popular Fantasy

Fantasy is distinguished from other modes of communication by its use of figures, tropes, and scenarios that are impossible or inexplicable by scientific means. It is a particular kind of fiction making, which invents or describes things that do not actually exist with the hope of expanding what is imaginable at a given historical moment.³¹ A variety of intellectual traditions have theorized fantasy and its cultural operations by defining it as a psychic mechanism, a narrative genre, or a utopian political longing. Psychoanalytic theory views fantasy (or “phantasy”) as a psychic well-spring of desires expressed in imagined narratives or scenarios that would potentially fulfill unconsummated wishes, while genre studies examines fantasy as a mode of storytelling that destabilizes traditional conceptions of reality by making that which is assumed impossible appear possible or imminent. A third approach, Marxist theory, has explained fantasy through the concept of “utopia,” or the idea that fantasy allows one to produce maps of alternate worlds that resist the limits of the present, especially those imposed by class hierarchy; the ability to imagine or invent a world without money or class distinctions, for instance, is the central idea of Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1560), which set the standard for utopian fantasy as an alternative mode of rethinking the present relations of production.³² This open-ended quality of fantasy, however, is usually set against the more classical Marxist understanding of fantasy as false consciousness, or an ideology that actively mystifies the real conditions of social and economic hierarchy. Marxism, then, traditionally locates fantasy in a dialectic of ideology and utopia, with its radical potential related to whether or not it can function as a legitimate critique of capitalism. All three approaches imply a subversive potential in fantasy that can work as an imaginative resource for resisting and potentially altering a given set of norms that constrain one’s world—whether those be gender and sexual norms, class expectations, or the demands of “good” citizenship. Despite their distinctive locating of fantasy in various sites (unconscious desires, narrative, or ideology), all see fantasy as a definable structure whose outcomes can be clearly predicted and described.

In *The New Mutants*, I treat fantasy as a dynamic aesthetic and social phenomenon, a mode of communication deployed as a tool of world making rather than a psychic mechanism, genre, or dialectic whose meanings are determined in advance. I posit a new analytical category I call “popular fantasy” as an alternative to traditional genre analysis and ideology critique. Popular fantasy describes the variety of ways that the tropes and figures of literary fantasy (magic, superhuman ability, time travel, alternate universes, among others) come to organize real-world social and political relations. On the one hand, I take fantasy on its own terms as a mode of communicating that invokes impossible, magical, or enchanted phenomena; on the other, I consider the social and public dimensions of fantasy, including how it is taken up in the production of collective narratives of political possibility and desire. Comic book cosmopolitics was an exemplary twentieth-century popular fantasy, a set of aesthetic and social practices oriented toward the invention of a cosmopolitan ethos through the unfolding of elaborate fantasy worlds.

In *The Anatomy of National Fantasy*, Berlant develops the concept of “national fantasy” as a mechanism by which local, atomized individuals come to see themselves as citizens of a national community. In this view, fantasy is neither a discreet psychic structure nor a literary genre but a social and cognitive practice of scale-making that involves projecting oneself into broader registers of existence.³³ National fantasy circulates discourses of national belonging (including the promise of democratic inclusion or the shared status of citizenship) in fiction, political rhetoric, and folklore to provide people with conceptual tools to enact a cognitive leap, or *fantasy*, of imagining themselves as an organic part of a collectively shared national identity. Berlant’s approach retains the imaginative qualities of fantasy, its capacity to encourage cognitive creativity, while assessing how those qualities can be understood as a *social* process that produces political realities, including shared affective attachments to the nation. Despite her attention to the heterogeneity of national fantasy, however, Berlant describes it as a consolidating project that produces a relatively unified and durable national subject. She claims that the fantasy of “national identity provides . . . a translation of the historical subject into an ‘Imaginary’ realm of ideality and wholeness . . . by being reconstituted as a collective subject, or citizen.” Because this experience of “wholeness” is predicated on individuals having to strategically “forget” the local realities of national citizenship—including racism and sexism, the institution of slavery, and class hierarchy—national fantasy appears as an ideological project that produces citizens through a willful covering over of real historical conditions.³⁴

My conception of popular fantasy builds on Berlant's understanding of fantasy as a collective social practice of scale-making, while exploring its unique ability to destabilize, alter, or altogether unravel existing frameworks in order to present new ways of perceiving the world. Specifically I use the term *popular fantasy* to identify expressions of fantasy that suture together current social and political realities with impossible happenings to produce figures that describe and legitimate nascent cultural desires and modes of social belonging that appear impossible or simply out of reach within the terms of dominant political imaginaries. The fantastical or seemingly impossible character of popular fantasies signals the continued "otherness" of the potential social relations they seek to describe, while making that otherness desirable as an alternative to normative social aspirations. The entertainment value of popular fantasy—its ability to induce pleasure in witnessing impossible phenomena or experiencing lifeworlds that have no everyday corollary, or else unevenly map onto reality—signals its embeddedness in commodity culture but also highlights its capacity to inaugurate or invent new political desires, new worlds, through modes of enchantment and wonder. This experience of wonderment is galvanized by the production of impossible figures that surprise and exhilarate because of their seemingly miraculous or fantastical qualities.

Superhumans, mutants, aliens, cyborgs, and "companion species" of all kinds enchant us. These figures capture the imagination, spark pleasure and wonder, and offer new ways of seeing the interrelations between bodies, objects, and worlds. This fact is so obvious as to go unspoken, but without it we misunderstand the diverse pleasures and political possibilities that audiences have derived from superheroic fantasy in the twentieth century. If, as I have been arguing, fantasy describes a form of communication that encompasses a set of tropes, figures, and narratives of the impossible and imagined, then enchantment describes the *affective experience* of witnessing or encountering fantasy in its varied forms.³⁵ Enchantment captures a constellation of emotions that might include wonder, exuberance, excitement, pleasure, and a host of ambivalent feelings that necessarily come with a "surprising encounter" with the unknown, including fear, uneasiness, and confusion. Yet, as Jane Bennett argues, "the overall effect of enchantment is a mood of fullness, plenitude, or liveliness, a sense of having had one's nerves or circulation or concentration power tuned up or recharged." For Bennett the enchanted quality of fantasy figures—including any number of hybrid, monstrous, and magical creatures from art and literature—derives from

their seemingly unlimited capacity for transformation. Mobile, mutating, and morphing, these figures “enact the very possibility of change; their presence carries with it the trace of dangerous but also exciting and exhilarating migrations.”³⁶

The complex and knotted set of affective states that make up enchantment might also just be called *fun*, which is the experience most people have with fantasy. That sense of fun or exuberance or desire for the impossible is often disregarded as a minor entertainment effect of mass culture, or worse, an ideological ruse that blinds audiences to the underlying politics of the fantasies they consume. Yet, as a number of theorists of enchantment have shown, the affective pull of enchantment is not only capable of underpinning progressive politics but might be a necessary prerequisite for ethics. According to Bennett, to be enchanted can also involve a feeling of attachment or care for the miraculous phenomena before you and, by extension, an attachment to the world that houses and proliferates such wonders.³⁷

A progressive ethical orientation to the world is not a necessary outcome of enchantment, but enchantment can be a potent tool for cultivating it. This fact is most obvious when one seeks out enchantment in places where we usually do not expect to find it, namely the realm of politics and social activism, which is commonly associated with hard-headed realism and grounded strategies and tactics. Describing the political affects that drive and sustain social movements, the sociologist Deborah Gould writes, “I would venture that social movements sustain themselves at the level of desire. A movement milieu . . . expresses desire for different forms of social relations, different ways of being, a different world. In doing so, a movement allows participants to feel their own perhaps squelched desires or to develop new ones that through articulation can become contagious, flooding others’ imaginations and drawing them into the movement. In articulating and enacting what previously might have been unimaginable, a movement offers a scene and future possibilities that surprise, entice, exhilarate, and electrify.”³⁸

One can substitute the term *popular fantasies* for *social movements* in each of Gould’s sentences and the statement still rings true. Cultural fantasies like comic book cosmopolitics can operate in ways similar to modes of political action, using creative figures to “offer a scene of future possibilities that surprise, entice, exhilarate, and electrify” or, as the cultural historian Robin Kelley claims, “to take us to another place, envision a different way of seeing, perhaps a different way of feeling.”³⁹ Disparate thinkers like Bennett, Gould, and Kelley remind us that no

form of ethics or political action can be motivated without an attendant vision of the world one wishes to forge through such ethical and political commitments. Just as a social movement's desires for a different world can "flood others' imaginations," so too popular fantasy enchants its potential audience by presenting a vision of a different world and offering encounters with figures of radical otherness that provide tools to subvert dominant systems of power and reorient one's ethical investments toward bodies, objects, and worldviews formerly dismissed as alien to the self.

The radical transformation of identity in the service of producing new standards for ethical action is a central project of popular fantasy, and the postwar superhero in particular. From the late 1950s onward, a new generation of comic book mutants, aliens, and cyborgs encouraged audiences to form deep attachments to figures of deviancy, monstrosity, and marginalization. These fantasy figures spoke "to people at the level of desire" by identifying bodies, worldviews, and behaviors commonly denigrated by American public culture as both pleasurable and desirable.⁴⁰ Such attachments, when woven into the fabric of contemporary political concerns, forged a new ethics based on the dream of a world where difference and nonconformity might be valued as necessary components of social justice and collective well-being. This articulation of enchantment to political ethics was brilliantly modeled for readers in the 1961 origin story of the Marvel Comics superhero team the Fantastic Four, whose intergalactic exploits would become the best-selling comic book stories of the decade.

After being bombarded by cosmic rays from outer space, four anti-communist space adventurers—Reed Richards, Ben Grimm, and Sue and Johnny Storm—experience monstrous bodily mutations. Each initially reacts with terror and confusion at their "freakish" transformations, none more so than Johnny, whose body spontaneously bursts into flame (figure I.1). When Johnny realizes that he can survive the flame, however, even using his body's radiant energy to fly, his horror turns into exuberance as he gleefully takes to the skies. Witnessing Johnny's extraordinary flight, his three companions are jolted from their initial panic, now enchanted by his superhuman skill. In response to the transformations they have witnessed in each other, the four think in unison: "We've changed! All of us! We're *more* than just human!" Clasp hands in a gesture of solidarity, they vow to deploy their newfound powers to "help mankind."⁴¹ In the transformations of these figures, Marvel



FIGURE I.1. The birth of the Fantastic Four. Stan Lee (writer) and Jack Kirby (penciller), "The Fantastic Four!," *Fantastic Four* #1, November 1961, Marvel Comics, reprinted in *Fantastic Four Omnibus Vol. 1* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2005), 21.

Comics visually modeled how enchantment might reorient ethical commitments and political attachments. Following their physical evolution, the four are compelled to redirect their previous anticommunism toward a more egalitarian interest in protecting mankind from violence and injustice; this ethics is materialized by the physical contact of visibly mutated bodies whose touch invokes new bonds between unlikely partners as they struggle to come to terms with their fantastic, yet monstrous, superhuman abilities.

Such abilities and the novel solidarities they facilitated figured the Fantastic Four as part of a new, *queer* generation of American superheroes, bound together by attachments that exceeded the dictates of heterosexuality, traditional family life, and national loyalties. To theorize the superhero as a distinctly queer figure of twentieth-century popular culture, I approach popular fantasy and its political affects from the perspective of queer theory. Queer theory is a body of knowledge that concerns itself with the ways queer or nonnormative figures generate alternative desires, bring into view unexpected objects of passionate attachment, and facilitate the production of novel forms of kinship and affiliation. It is a sustained attempt to theorize the social relations of desire, linking the heterogeneity of local, intimate, erotic attachments to the broader scales of political desire, aspiration, and affiliation in public life.

Within this framework a number of theorists have used *queerness* to describe a utopian horizon or way of being in the world that imbues social relationships with the hope and possibility of nonnormative social and sexual relations. For Eve Sedgwick queerness “can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically. The . . . adventures attaching to the very many of us who may at times be moved to describe ourselves as (among many other possibilities) pushy femmes, radical faeries, fantasists, drags, clones, leather folk, ladies in tuxedos, feminist women or feminist men, masturbators, bulldaggers, divas, Snap! Queens, butch bottoms . . . transsexuals . . . or people able to relish, learn from, or identify with such.”⁴² Sedgwick’s understanding of queerness is expansive and elastic, an orientation from which to articulate numerous identities and desires that do not fit into the schema of heterosexual normativity, yet it is also committed to endless specificity and distinction within a broad frame of reference, attending to the fact “that people are different from each other.”⁴³ This aspiration

for queerness to be broadly inclusive *and* attentive to difference, while creating an alternative world for an endless variety of people to inhabit, is similarly captured in Muñoz's conception of queerness as "a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present."⁴⁴

Superhero comic books provide a remarkable example of a queerly inflected, "educated mode of desiring" in late twentieth-century American culture. The developing imaginative worlds of superhero narratives visually and affectively oriented readers toward an expanding array of queer figures, worldviews, and social relationships while engaging innovative experiments in the organization of the comic book page to articulate the "gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances" of social identity to the *formal* gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances of comic book visuality. Sedgwick's freewheeling, open-ended list of queer identifications uncannily echoes any similar inventory of the fantasy figures who came to populate the Marvel Comics universe: mutants, Asgardians, Eternals, Atlantians, Inhumans, Avengers, allies, Morlocks, alpha and omega levels, Celestials, Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., Hellions, Shi'ar Guardsmen, time travelers, Black Queens, teammates, or just simply "all in the family." Readers came to "relish, learn from, or identify with" this expansive collection of queer beings, and they developed sophisticated ways of aligning their own feelings of dislocation and alienation from the dominant ideologies of cold war America with the creative practice of imagining, depicting, and critically assessing the efficacy of a variety of alternative modes of queer belonging. One way readers did this was to engage with progressive and radical politics as activists, allies, or simply sympathetic observers; another was to read, respond to, and collaborate in the production of superhero comic books. Both were forms of political world-making, though in different registers. Consequently in each of the following chapters I narrate the emergence of a new kind of figure, trope, or narrative mode in superhero storytelling as a form of political theorizing that sought to overcome the impasses of various left-wing political projects at moments when the ideals of a cosmopolitan left appeared to fracture from internal conflict or external backlash.

In chapter 1 I explore how the creative reinvention of the "superhero team" as an intergalactic peacekeeping force in DC Comics' *Justice League of America* (1960) recast the superhero as a global citizen whose ethical purview was not limited by national affiliation. Chapters 2 and 3 extend my analysis of the superhero team in a two-part case study of Marvel Comics' *The Fantastic Four* (1961). Chapter 2 analyzes how the

series framed its four heroes' newfound powers as expressions of deviant gender and sexuality, thereby recasting the superhero's mutating body as a site for enacting an array of queer modes of identity against the rigid sexual politics of cold war America. Chapter 3 elaborates on how the deviant bodies of the *Fantastic Four* oriented them toward numerous encounters with other similarly nonhuman or "inhuman" figures; these encounters and their narrative consequences were directly shaped by the ongoing dialogues between creators and readers about the cosmopolitan values of the series in the age of civil rights and anticolonial movements. This chapter analyzes written correspondence between fans and creators alongside specific *Fantastic Four* storylines to show how the former galvanized an extended visual meditation on questions of racial and species belonging in the late 1960s. Chapters 4 and 5 narrate the evolution of the superhero in two genres that came to dominate comic book storytelling in the 1970s: the science fiction space opera and the urban folktale. Chapter 4 conducts a pair of case studies of Marvel Comics' *The Silver Surfer* (1968) and *The X-Men* (1974) that track the evolution of the space opera from a melodramatic narrative of lament for the moral degradation of mankind in the late 1960s to a cosmopolitan story of interspecies encounter in the mid-1970s. I identify *The X-Men* as a paragon of the cosmopolitan space opera and argue that the series provided the most nuanced conception of superhuman difference in modern comics by imbuing its narrative with the visual and cultural politics of women's and gay liberation. Chapter 5 explores the concurrent return of space-faring superheroes to poverty-stricken and racially segregated inner cities in DC Comics' *Green Lantern/Green Arrow* (1970) and Marvel's *Captain America and the Falcon* (1974). Through a comparative case study of these series, I argue that the urban folktale positioned itself against cosmopolitan projects like those depicted in *The X-Men* by identifying the remasculinization of iconic male heroes, including their "hard-nosed" return to the gritty conditions of America's inner cities, as the solution to racial conflict and economic inequality in the post-civil rights era. Chapter 6 documents the emergence of the trope of demonic possession in the superhero comics of the 1980s, which depicted formerly benevolent superheroes overtaken by malevolent otherworldly forces that would unleash their most violent psychosexual fantasies. I focus on *The X-Men*'s "Dark Phoenix Saga" (1980) and *Spider-Man*'s "Venom Saga" (1984–89) as paradigmatic examples of demonic possession, showing how both texts linked the superhero's loss of self-possession and rapacious desire for power with an equivalent loss of control over one's sexual and gender

identity. I suggest that these texts exhibited an increasing ambivalence among comics creators about the efficacy of 1960s and 1970s liberation movements in the context of neoliberal capitalism, where the oppositional identities of the previous decades were now commoditized and exploited for profit in the global marketplace. Chapter 7 develops a sustained analysis of Marvel Comics' *The New Mutants* (1982), an offshoot of the *X-Men* series. Against the utopian identity politics of *The X-Men* a decade before, *The New Mutants* presented a cadre of teenage mutants who no longer perceive themselves as bound by a shared mutant identity or ethical imperative to save the world; in the absence of a predetermined heroic identity, *The New Mutants* offered a novel conception of the superhero not as crime fighter or icon of identity politics but as a vehicle for forging political alliances across multiple axes of difference and diverse spiritual and ethical worldviews. Taken together, these case studies coalesce an archive of "new mutants," a powerful collection of figures, tropes, and genres of deviant and queer fantasy that proliferated in the pages of American comic books.

In June 1965 the noted literary critic and public intellectual Leslie Fiedler delivered a talk at Rutgers University titled "The New Mutants." In it he argued that the countercultural youth of the late 1950s and 1960s—most visible in the Beatniks and hippies but also apparent in political groups like the student movement and civil rights activists—represented a "new mutant" generation defined by a rebellious disengagement from the traditions of liberal humanism.⁴⁵ This included turning away from the values of human reason and progress and embracing "anti-rational" aesthetics, or forms of art and literature that parody the supposedly foundational institutions and narratives of American social life, including the family, romantic love, and upward mobility. Fiedler associated this new sensibility with the willful relinquishing of attachments to traditional masculinity and an increasing identification among American youth with the outcast elements of American society: racial minorities, the homeless, and women. He claimed, "To become new men, these children of the future seem to feel, they must not only become more Black than White but more female than male. . . . Literary critics have talked a good deal during the past couple of decades about the conversion of the literary hero into the non-hero or the anti-hero; but they have in general failed to notice his simultaneous conversion into the non- or anti-male."⁴⁶ Amassing a wide array of literary and cultural examples—from Beat poets to suburban literature, from experimental fiction to postmodern cinema—alongside his own ambivalent homophobia and illiberalism,

Fiedler attempted to prove that this shift in values and desires signaled the collapse of genuine ethical commitments to progressive social transformation while undermining the importance of art and literature in transmitting meaningful cultural ideals. Fortunately for us, there were also superhero comic books.