

Legions of Superheroes

*Diversity, Multiplicity, and Collective Action against
Genocide in the Superhero Comic Book*

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What does it mean to act together when the conditions for acting together are devastated or falling away? Such an impasse can become the paradoxical condition of a form of social solidarity both mournful and joyful, a gathering enacted by bodies under duress or in the name of duress, where the gathering itself signifies persistence and resistance.
—Judith Butler, *Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*

Element Lad: You should know about the Legion [. . .] young people from radically *different* worlds [. . .] dedicated to protecting the universe as a whole [. . .] bound together by a *common dream*. [. . .] But this is all that's left of our dream—a handful of souls, as far away from home as it's possible to be. Not knowing if home even exists, anymore [. . .] if all that remains of me are these recordings, please . . . do what you can to help any of my comrades.

Shikari: “Comrades” . . . others . . . *lee-jon*.

—*Legion Lost*, no. 1, May 2000

We see a close-up of a white face, with striking blonde hair, at the center the white face's emerald eye, like a fractured crystal (see fig. 1). Six panels of a broken iris refract six radically different profiles, each separated from the next by jagged lines. We are caught between two looks: the searing glare of the crystalline eye and the shocked stares of the motley crew that it beholds, each bearing distinct expressions of rage, fear, confusion, and surprise at what they see, and perhaps at how they are being seen. A figure of singularity—white, blonde, green-eyed—stands opposite a mul-



Figure 1. Element Lad's crystalline eye on the cover to *Legion Lost*, no. 11 (March 2001). Art by Olivier Coipel and Andy Lanning

tiplicity: in the eye, we see figures who are male, female, or non-gender-specific, alien and humanoid, monstrous and cyborg. The image demands that we take in both perspectives at once. As viewers, we are decidedly aligned with the multiplicity, seeming to stand in their place, even as we clearly see what the singular eye takes in. One cannot help but ask, is this eye itself literally fractured or is its owner incapable of visually registering a collective? What kind of eye sees a group of disparate people as a broken mirror?

This image is the cover to the penultimate installment of the twelve-issue comic book miniseries *Legion Lost*, published in 2000–2001 by DC Comics.¹ The series tells the story of nine members of the Legion of Super-Heroes—America's longest-lived superhero team, first introduced in 1958 as a teenage intergalactic peacekeeping force in *Adventure Comics*, a science-fantasy serial—who find themselves stranded for a year in uncharted space. Thrown beyond the limits of the known universe after their ship falls through a transdimensional rift in space, the nine team-

mates traverse an unwelcoming stretch of cosmos relentlessly pursued by a genocidal species known as the Progeny. Among our castaways are two of the Legion's founding members, team leader Saturn Girl, a first-class telepath, and Live Wire, a living power conduit capable of generating and projecting electrical energy, as well as veteran members Chameleon, a shapeshifter; Ultra Boy, a superhuman gladiator; Umbra, a shadow warrior trained in manipulating a "dark field"; Apparition, an intangible matter phaser; Brainiac 5.1, a "twelfth-level" intelligence; Kid Quantum, a manipulator of atomic energy; and Monstress, a superstrong she-hulk. Along their journey, the lost members of the Legion encounter a range of menacing forces, including a world-eating monster, the Omniphagos, and the violent guardian of the planet Lorcas Prime, Singularity; gain two team members with extraordinary abilities—a warrior pathfinder, Shikari, and a pure energy being, Wildfire, a former teammate who had been thought permanently lost in space; and struggle to maintain cohesion as some suffer psychic breakdowns and others radically disagree about the appropriate course of action for survival.

In the series' eleventh issue, as the narrative nears its dramatic climax, the team is captured and taken to the murderous Progeny's god, the Progenitor. There, in his throne room, in what is arguably one of the most heartbreaking reveals in comic book history, the Legion come face to face with their former teammate and friend Jan Arrah, Element Lad, whom they had valiantly searched for across treacherous space. A legion of superheroes dedicated to protecting a federation of worlds in our galaxy against genocidal threats—fictionally known as the United Planets—discovers that one of their own has perpetrated the largest mass extinction of sentient beings in two known universes. Adrift in time for two billion years, while his teammates were merely lost in space, Element Lad, a manipulator of atomic matter, has evolved into a malevolent god, creating and destroying worlds at whim, losing his humanity, and incapable of recognizing the notion of collectivity, much less remembering his membership in the Legion of Super-Heroes. When his former confidant Kid Quantum implores Jan how he could have forgotten his closest friends, he explains: "I was part of the Legion for a few short years, thousands of star lifetimes ago. You try remembering something that happened for a few seconds during the first hour of your life." It is Jan's face on the cover of *Legion Lost*, no. 11, and it is his inability to comprehend the value of collective life we see symbolically reflected in his fractured eye.

Legion Lost provides an object lesson about the capacity of superhero comic books to creatively grapple with the problem of difference—not only that people are different from one another but also that they must substantively respond to and negotiate their differences to peacefully cohabit a heterogeneous world. By placing a team of superhuman peacekeepers

in conditions where every worldly basis for their bond and their ethical project has simply disappeared, the series asks, “What does it mean to act together when the conditions for acting together are devastated or falling away?”² Superhero comics are world-centered cultural products. They vividly dramatize the tension between exceptional ability, in the form of a superhuman power or capacity held by a single individual, and an ethical commitment to deploy such power in relation to others or, more accurately, a world of others. Within the generic conventions of the superhero story, this relationship to others is often framed as a guardianship of humanity or, more expansively, of all life in the cosmos. In this logic, superheroes are useful insofar as they do good for mankind variously construed. I am interested in what happens when the superhero becomes untethered from this imperative or no longer functions as an expedient means to an end (to protect the security of mankind). One possibility: the superhero’s worldly orientation, captured in the investment in acting in concert, becomes an end in itself, thereby rendering the superhero a figure through which to conceive collective action as its own good, a “gathering [that] signifies persistence and resistance” regardless of the specific outcome, most commonly figured as saving the world.³

Superhero team books, which narrate the exploits of diverse superheroes joining forces to combat threats to humanity and, by extension, life in the cosmos, raise the stakes of this problem by multiplying the players that can act in concert across a vast field of geographical and creative possibility. This includes cityscapes where vigilante heroes band together to disrupt organized crime in American metropolises, such as in the crime-busting exploits of the Justice Society of America in the 1940s; the planet Earth, as when the Justice League of America, including iconic superheroes like Batman, Green Lantern, and Wonder Woman, collaboratively combat extraterrestrial threats to global security in the 1960s; and the far reaches of our galaxy, such as in the intergalactic adventures of the Fantastic Four in the 1960s and the space operas of the X-Men franchise in the 1970s, where mutant outcasts save our universe from the machinations of malevolent cosmic beings; or in the case of *Legion Lost*, an entire uncharted universe beyond the limits of our reality. Because superhero team stories necessitate the narrative coming together of an array of characters, as well as the visual depiction of those characters acting in concert in relation to an infinitely varied wider world, they perform the concept of assembly in their very formal elaboration, consequently operating as one cultural fantasy “whose condition and aim is the reconstitution of plural forms of agency and social practices of resistances.”⁴ Superhero comics can be understood, then, to embody what Hannah Arendt has called “the space of appearance,” a material site where fictional characters and real-world readers assemble across differences to collaborate in producing a

shared ethical world, the former deploying superhuman abilities, the latter the human capacity for imagination.⁵

In this article, I intervene in the larger debate about representational diversity in mainstream comics production, which currently dominates discussions about the cultural and political impact of fictional world making in superhero comic books and their cinematic corollaries. This debate has focused almost exclusively on how American superhero comics can better respond to the affective needs of a heterogeneous readership, both domestically and globally, by narrating stories about superheroic characters who represent the gamut of minority subject positions, whether in the form of an African American Iron Man, gay members of the X-Men, a Muslim Ms. Marvel, or a female Thor: Goddess of Thunder, among countless others; often this naming of a handful of recently invented or transformed minority characters taking up roles traditionally inhabited by iconic white, male, putatively straight superheroes becomes a rhetorical shorthand for the more complex aspirations progressive fans and creators hold for what the superhero comic book can do for reimagining embodied and cultural differences. I seek to shift the frame of this dialogue away from a stress on the numerical expansion of minority representations, which measures the political progressivism of superhero comics by a quantitative accounting of the visual or narrative presence of minority characters, and their supposed “accuracy” in capturing the realities of particular minority experiences. Instead, I ask, what are the conceptual consequences of the collision of a distinct medium (the comic book) and a distinct genre (the superhero) when both are at their most multiplicitous? That is, what happens when the serial long-form comics series, unfolding across thousands of panels, pages, and issues, becomes the vehicle for articulating the superhero *team* story, which proliferates characters who collectively respond to large-scale threats to the flourishing of life across the cosmos?

In this framework, genocide, the mass extermination of a population based on a perceived threatening difference, categorically works against the genre’s drive to proliferate ever more diverse characters, to expand fictional worlds by creative multiplication. When this happens, collectivity as an end in itself becomes the imperative of the superhero comic book, and we see most incandescently what the genre, in league with its primary medium, can do for expanding the ways we perceive and understand difference: not only along the traditional axes of race, gender, sexuality, and class but also along the seams of physical ability, spiritual world view, personal history, language, intellect, and even temperament. To approach the problem of difference thus is to question the tenaciously held assumption that a given superhero can, should, or will ever adequately represent a specific real-world identity category; instead, it stresses how any super-

hero can dramatize the problem of difference conceptually in a number of ways by virtue of existing in a medium formally based on the idea of visual multiplicity and a genre wedded to the idea or value of characterological multiplicity.⁶

I begin by tracking some of the guiding assumptions that drive the contemporary demand for greater representational diversity in comics. I argue that this demand—which, in part, takes the form of a plea that comics creators actively introduce more racially, gender, and sexually diverse characters into their creative worlds—potentially overvalues the psychic payoffs of recognition, at the risk of devaluing the capacity of comic book fantasy to innovate generative and surprising approaches to difference itself, that is, to figure multiplicity in ways not limited to “truthful” depictions of embodied and cultural difference. Next, I provide a close reading of *Legion Lost* attuned to multiplicity to show how the series deploys a vast range of visual and narrative devices that force its readers to repeatedly encounter the problem of difference from a kaleidoscopic array of vantage points; the series not only represents a genuinely diverse cast of characters struggling against a genocidal singularity (a genre convention of superhero storytelling) but also visually and narratively trains its readers to see, think, and feel like a Legion. I conclude by considering how Element Lad, a white, male, isolated godlike creator, can be read as a powerful allegory for the contemporary, mainstream superhero comic book creator, a fabricator of creative worlds vested by reading audiences with the power to make and destroy characters and fictional universes. I argue that the demand for representational diversity voiced by progressive left fans and critics often phantasmatically imbues contemporary creators with the power to make and unmake us as living subjects and readers; consequently, we cede too much power to those who might otherwise be our collaborative world builders rather than our omnipotent makers. What does it look like, I ask, to reclaim that power through a collective reframing of the demand itself, to articulate a desire to make worlds in concert rather than beg for the worlds of others to confirm our humanity?

From Diversity to Heterogeneity

It would not be an understatement to suggest that both popular and scholarly discussion of American comic books is currently dominated by debates about diversity: on blogs and internet forums and in national magazines, scholarly anthologies, and fan writing, readers, creators, and cultural critics are engaged in a heated dialogue about what role comics should play in responding to an increasingly heterogeneous audience and a globalized world. What diversity means in these varied conversations is a moving target, though it commonly appears in three forms: first, in the demand

for increased representational visibility of minority subjects, including the production of so-called positive representations of these subjects that might dispel negative stereotypes; second, in the demand for the diversification of creative labor in the comic book industry alongside an imperative to empower people from particular identity groups to narrate their own stories; and finally, in the demand for more “relevant” comics content that responds to real-world social issues and accurately portrays the lived experiences of underrepresented people.⁷

At their strongest, these arguments articulate the necessity for a wholesale transformation in every facet of comic book production, including demographic makeup of creative and editorial labor, diversification of the stories comic books tell, and expansion of the markets and audiences that comics cater to; at their weakest, these arguments aspire to a liberal multicultural ideal of representational diversity, often captured in the visible proliferation of minority characters on the comics page, that is seen as an improvement from a previous representational politics (associated with superhero comics from the 1960s through 1980s) that relied on metaphorical categories of differences, such as mutation, monstrosity, or superhumanity, to obliquely depict real-world differences by these fictionalized terms. Despite the variety of positions in this debate, it is the latter call for an increase in the number of minority characters in comics that often superficially stands in for the entire terrain of progressive perspectives on contemporary comics production.

I have argued elsewhere that this view of middle to late twentieth-century superhero comics as liberal paeans to difference that covered over pervasive racism in the comic book industry mischaracterizes the unprecedented attempt by creative producers in this period to reinvent the superhero as a social and species outcast akin to racial, gender, and sexual minorities.⁸ This project allowed the superhero to become a widely shared cultural fantasy of radical difference, whose embodied difference from humanity could offer a creative site for imagining a vast range of alliances between so-called inhuman, mutant, alien, and deviant or outcast others of all stripes. Rather than view the history of superhero comics as a clear telos from bad metaphorical representations to increasingly good authentic representations of difference (thereby reifying the worst aspects of liberal progress narratives), we might see these two modes as alternative strategies for articulating embodied and cultural difference in the realm of fantasy, each with its own possibilities and limits.

Metaphors for embodied difference, such as *mutation*—a category of genetic distinction developed in Marvel Comics’ *X-Men* series (1963) to describe a cadre of superhumans gifted with abilities due to an evolution in their biology—accomplish meaningful cultural work in the service of antiracism and antihomophobia that can too easily be dismissed by

claiming that such categories are ideological ruses that divert our attention from real-world differences. First, fictional metaphors for difference offer innovative terms for translating the qualities or experiences associated with one form of embodied difference to another, so that we can concretely see the overlaps and divergences between varied experiences of difference. For instance, superhero comics like the X-Men articulate the fictional experience of being a mutant outcast to the lived experience of bigotry that racial minorities endure in American society while simultaneously equating genetic deviance with various forms of sexual and gender nonconformity; rather than collapse mutation into these categories, the series deploys mutation as a potent but “imperfect analogy” that can make visible both the overlaps and distinctions between racial and sexual differences. As Brian Norman explains, the use of imperfect analogies to link various experiences of marginalization—for instance, to compare elements of the lived experience of blackness to the experience of being gay or gender nonconforming—reveals that no single identity can fully stand in for another, but neither are those identities wholly isolated or distinct, thereby producing opportunities for affinity and collectivity across difference.⁹ It is the flexibility and open-ended possibilities for affinity afforded by the potential, if flawed, analogy that makes the comparison valuable. Moreover, the X-Men often places mutation alongside lived categories of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability as a fictional identity that demands an intersectional approach to varied forms of social deviancy—particular mutants introduced throughout the franchise repeatedly find themselves experiencing distinct forms of oppression, depending on how their powers manifest (whether they are able to pass for human or not), their access to capital, their religious commitments, or their gender expression. As Judith Butler contends, “Obligations to those who are far away, as well as to those who are proximate, cross linguistic and national boundaries and are only possible by virtue of visual or linguistic translations, which include temporal and spatial dislocations.”¹⁰ Metaphors for difference offer a range of such visual or linguistic translations that can conceptually make us more proximate to those whose identities we may commonly think are unrelated to our own.

Second, such metaphors can galvanize our ability to conceive of identities and social affiliations in more labile or flexible ways, including encouraging cross-identifications with people who are unlike us or enabling us to envision a different set of communal bonds among unlike people to which we can aspire. Because a category like mutation is explicitly fictional, it is highly mutable and can be taken up as a term of solidarity between racial, sexual, and gender outcasts variously construed to imaginatively claim affiliation with others when the rigidity of real-world

terms of identity impede such alliances: “Mutant and Proud,” a common adage of X-Men fans, resonates with such classic political slogans as “Gay Is Good,” “Black Is Beautiful,” and “Black Lives Matter,” deploying the realm of fantasy to expand who can count as a legible subject in modern America without diminishing the political force of these latter calls.

In his recent work on black fantasy, Darieck Scott calls such practices *fantasy-acts*, a term he uses to describe a range of imaginative practices that allow us to cognitively apprehend the world otherwise and that refuse to be accountable to reigning notions of truth or realism as a prerequisite for visions of political transformation. He claims, “*Black* fantasy as I’m interested in it here *realizes the possible(s)* of blackness that reality declares *should not be*, transforming ‘irregular glimpses’ of a radical impossible that we know *should be*—and yet which, for the apparently exigent sake of ‘keeping it real,’ we refuse to know.”¹¹ In his articulation of an “unreal blackness freed from the shackles of political realism,” Scott identifies a third politically salient aspect of perceiving difference in metaphorical terms: put simply, it allows us to imagine, even if only provisionally, what it might be like to not be oppressed.¹²

Of course, explicit expressions of lived material difference also accomplish critical work: to posit a Muslim, queer, black, Latinx, Asian American, or disabled superhero gives particularity to that character and renders it a site of potential recognition for those readers who might identify with that subject position, whether as a self-proclaimed member of that group or through cultural or political affinity. Direct representation also attests to the inherent reality and value of nonwhite and nonnormative identities and experiences by dedicating visual and narrative space to underrepresented bodies, lives, perspectives, and social worlds (which, as comics writer G. Willow Wilson maintains, is an expression not of diversity but rather of authenticity and realism because such representational practices don’t describe an ideally diverse world but, rather, depict the world as it already stands).¹³ Perhaps most important, as andré carrington argues, in speculative genres where racial, gendered, and sexual minorities are underrepresented, their sudden visible presence itself, because commonly unaccounted for, becomes a form of speculation that can radically alter the meanings and outcomes of a given fantasy narrative, potentially in the service of expanding possibilities for the flourishing of minoritized life.¹⁴

Both of these representational strategies have existed in superhero comics since their origins, though unevenly.¹⁵ The last two decades have seen a pronounced shift in the balance of these strategies, namely, a movement away from fictionalized metaphors for difference, toward direct or authentic representations of minority subjects galvanized in part by read-

ers' demand for unmediated representations of underrepresented characters and their lifeworlds. This shift signals a crisis in representation in a highly productive and contested fantasy genre that offers a moment of both possibility and danger. The fact that the fantasy structure of difference as metaphor, despite all its utopian promise, seems to have failed a wide swathe of readers suggests that readers' systemic experiences of oppression and minoritization are so urgent that new strategies of representation must be innovated to ensure that fantasy remains a meaningful resource for their flourishing in spite of, and in vehement opposition to, entrenched racisms, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of social violence. And yet a turn to so-called realism or accurate portraits of difference often simply does not serve this purpose well; consider the example of Marvel Studios' *Black Panther* (2018), arguably the single most important cinematic achievement of modern superhero filmmaking, which has brought issues of representational diversity to the forefront of discussions about the cultural impact of comic book fantasy. Most tangibly, the political and affective force of *Black Panther* lies in the spectacular visibility of blackness at every scale of the film's production and circulation: in its extraordinarily diverse cast of black actors, in the display of countless African tribal fashions and visual arts, and in the overwhelming presence of black crew members at all levels of production. Fictionally speaking, the film's various fantasy-acts, which include imagining an economically and politically independent and technologically advanced African nation, projecting black womanhood into the realm of superheroic power, and imagining a black man as a superhero king, are nothing short of astonishing. Yet as critics have observed, when perceived in more realist terms, the film's narrative fails miserably: it presents a separatist black utopia in the place of actual diasporic black communities; it negatively allegorizes legitimate black rage against global racism in a psychopathic villain who dies at the hands of the protagonist; Wakanda's political structure is a male-dominated monarchy; and the Wakandans defeat a challenger to Black Panther's thrown by allying themselves with an imperialist CIA.¹⁶ *Black Panther's* conceptual success then, lies primarily in its ability to project blackness into new realms of aspirational fantasy rather than to offer an accurate rendering of a global black experience. Cultural critic Rahawa Haile presciently captures this paradox when she claims,

The beauty and tragedy of Wakanda . . . is that it exists in an intertidal zone: not always submerged in the fictional, as it owes much of its aesthetic to the Africa we know, but not entirely real either, as no such country exists on the African continent. . . . A film set in Africa—unable by its very nature to be *about* Africa—whose cosmology, woven from dozens of countries exploited by empire, consists of its joys. It is a star chart of majesties more than simulacra.¹⁷

In *Represent and Destroy*, her study of the rise of liberal multicultural literary canons in the post-WWII period, Jodi Melamed unpacks how the antiracist demands of midcentury social movements like civil rights and anticolonialism were absorbed and depoliticized by the US state through the dissemination of the values of liberal tolerance, inclusion, and diversity in university literature programs. As Melamed explains, “By privileging reading literature as a way for dominant classes to come to know racialized others intimately . . . liberal antiracisms have made it possible to disseminate highly ideological truths and information bits as authentic and substantive knowledge.”¹⁸ Roderick Ferguson calls this phenomenon a “process of archiving,” whereby the distinct knowledges and politics of underrepresented groups were absorbed by universities in the 1960s and after, which acceded to the development of critical race, ethnic, and women’s studies departments but also used those emergent fields to track and pacify the radical demands of these emergent knowledge formations, namely, by replacing systemic change with increased curricular representation of so-called authentic minority voices.¹⁹ Alongside these critical views, Paula Moya offers a more optimistic assessment of multicultural initiatives, stressing the continuing necessity of multicultural values in both literary studies and cultural politics more broadly, namely, the ideal of cross-cultural exchange, which facilitates the capacity to see from multiple points of view and develop an ethical relationship to difference. As she explains, “It is when we think of cultures as behavioral and moral laboratories that we can begin to understand how . . . other people’s preferred ways of living can provide us with models for other kinds of cultural practices . . . that may be more conducive to human flourishing than some of our own.”²⁰ Lisa Lowe extends this logic to the value of minority literatures when she states: “In response to the demand that the Asian American canon function as a supplement . . . to the ‘major’ tradition of Anglo-American literature, Asian American literary texts often reveal heterogeneity rather than reproducing regulated ideas about cultural identity or integration.”²¹ Both Lowe and Moya suggest that minority literary production can function not as a repository of information bits about distinct racialized groups but as conceptual experiments, or imaginative laboratories, for thinking about race anew or reanimating the reality of heterogeneity between and within identities. Taken together, Melamed, Ferguson, Moya, and Lowe articulate the necessity for minority subjects to demand their visibility and forward the inherent value of cultural differences for the maintenance of a democratic world, but to also be wary of the ways that a particular framing of that demand in the logic of recognition can create conditions in which minority subjects are fixed or archived by institutions of power.

Despite the increasing assimilation of comic book texts—particularly

independent graphic novels—to university curricula and bestseller lists, superhero comics remain a largely noncanonical repository of both fictional and real-world differences in the middle to late twentieth and twenty-first centuries, a site currently up for grabs in the frantic struggle to identify cultural forms of resistance to the neoliberal commodification of difference as a resource for corporate profit. Despite her critique of the canonization of multicultural literary formations, Melamed still maintains that “because literature . . . is a discourse with a bracketed truth imperative—literature may be seen as particularly well suited to challenging the adequacy of sanctioned anti-racist knowledges. The same lack of a truth imperative has allowed literary texts to figure (and sometimes prefigure) materialisms relatively unbound from historically dominant expressions of economic and political value.”²² This is precisely true of superhero comic books, a generic mode that, often more explicitly than other genres, brackets the truth imperative to challenge the adequacy of traditional ways of representing and knowing otherness variously construed and valuing bodies traditionally perceived of as existing outside the bounds of proper humanity. In this sense, we can conceive of superhero comics as their own kind of behavioral and moral laboratory, not identical to a real-world culture but emerging from the amalgamated fantasies of people tied to such cultures and standing productively alongside their experiences, consequently offering a range of fantastical modes of living and being against which they can test, refine, adjust, or wholly reimagine their own.

carrington has argued that the dissolving of material differences of race, gender, sexuality, or ability into the fictional categories of superhuman, mutant, alien, or monstrous others has often functioned in American popular culture to “relegate the critical questions these novel representations raise—precisely how to move from marginality to empowerment—to the realm of the impossible.”²³ My aim is not to absolve superhero comics of their history of underrepresenting minority subjects or to devalue the affective needs of readers (including myself) for whom direct representations of their ethnoracial, gendered, sexual, and other embodied differences can have an extraordinarily positive effect on their sense of self-worth and whose recognition by major comic book companies can have substantial effects on hiring practices and creative decision making. Rather, I want to recuperate what is equally valuable about superhero comics’ visual and narrative staging of difference as a labile metaphor that weaves between direct references to so-called real-world or experientially felt differences—the fact of an avowedly Muslim, indigenous, or queer superhuman character—and fictional categories of alterity that have the potential to deliver our differences back to us anew, projecting our most taken for granted understandings of cultural identities into new contexts where they might be transformed in unpredictable and gen-

erative ways. While the fictional diversity of the cast of *Legion Lost*, for instance, does not always match its attention to real-world categories of racial and sexual difference (only one character is visibly black, and none are explicitly queer, though a number are morphologically distinct from proper humanity and many are women), the series consistently highlights the life-or-death stakes of being marked as essentially different from an idealized racial, species, or cultural norm. What might it mean to take this gesture seriously as an authentic attempt, in the realm of cultural fantasy, to confront the genocidal realities that attend the unequal apportioning of human value, while also projecting the terms of such realities into new and illuminating imaginative contexts rather than into the realm of the impossible?

Toward this end, in my following reading of *Legion Lost* I place the question of diversity into a framework of judgment rather than one of social justice or recognition secured through an expansion of diverse representations. This requires we conceive diversity not only as a political project to proliferate positive representations of minority subjects, though it may certainly include that, but also as an expansive conceptual problem of seeing from multiple points of view so that we might adequately make judgments about what differences matter and with what consequences. As political theorist Linda Zerilli states, quoting Hannah Arendt, “We should try to see from other perspectives because those perspectives open the world up to us; they give us more worldly reality. Judging involves neither becoming identical with you, nor for that matter with myself, but ‘thinking in my own identity where actually I am not.’”²⁴ The capacity to judge and develop substantive responses to differences is the signal feature of superhero storytelling, which produces countless fictional superhuman beings whose differences in origin, physiognomy, skill, identity, psychology, temperament, origin, and ethical philosophy become the basis for narrating heterogeneous engagements between, and eliciting identification with, aliens, mutants, freaks, and “inhumans” variously construed. If diversity describes a simple fact, the self-evident reality that people are different from one another, *heterogeneity* might be a term we repurpose to describe how people collaboratively respond to and negotiate their differences in public, collective ways.²⁵ This is fundamentally what superhero comics represent: not particular identities alone but collective actions undertaken by particular individuals working together.

Shifting the scales of conceptual emphasis in our analysis of comics from diversity to heterogeneity does not do away with the reality of difference or undermine the value of representing diverse actors but, rather, vastly expands the kinds of differences we can account for beyond the limits of traditionally perceived cultural and embodied identities. To study the actual formal composition of a superhero comic book page is necessar-

ily to study the fantastical production of particular kinds of subjects whose arrangement in and across comic book panels tells us something about the capacities of the comic book medium to represent the concatenation of varied, often radically divergent bodies in relation to one another. I do so in the hopes of offering an expanded sense of what we can demand from our most beloved fantasy stories—both adequate representation and fantasies that alter what counts as desirable representation—while underscoring the variety of already existing tools superhero comics offer to us for depicting a range of substantive differences, and our ability to build alliances across them.

The irony of the demand for representational diversity is that in its zeal for doing justice to those subjects excluded from fantasies of superheroic power, it often unwittingly aligns with the most monolithic readings of superheroes as purveyors of a singular (white, masculine, nationalist) ideal. The wish for greater representational diversity often, though not always, simply flips the ideal from a hypervirile white masculine body to an equally idealized, though perhaps more progressive, rendering of the minority body as visibly accounted for. How might we avoid this trap of merely reversing the poles of ideal representation and instead reclaim that capacity of superhero comics to account for, cultivate, and translate heterogeneity to vastly different audiences?

To Think like a Legion

Legion Lost responds to this question through a radical act of speculation: What if a group of superheroes became lost in a universe so far from their own that every coordinate for judging how to be ethical, who to be ethical toward, and to what end was simply gone? By stranding nine members of the Legion of Super-Heroes outside of the boundaries of the known universe, *Legion Lost* places the characters at two removes from our own world of material differences: first, the original members of the Legion are drawn from a vast range of planets in our galaxy, thereby confounding any easy ascription of earthly ethnoracial or national origin to their ranks (they are racially different from one another, but not by the terms we commonly use for ethnoracial belonging); but now, castaway in an uncharted realm, the very intentional community that forges their ethical bond, the Legion itself, no longer has a United Planets to protect, losing all identity grounded in distinct time and place. In issue 2, as the team becomes painfully aware of the mass genocide being perpetrated by the Progeny in this quadrant of space, Monstress laments: “We’re really lost, aren’t we? I [don’t] mean just geographically. Everything we value. Everything we believe in . . . I don’t think any of it will matter in this horrid place.” The Legion members discover that, absent a shared star system, common

home worlds, and an institutional framework for hero work, their own multiplicitous differences produce conditions for making critical decisions about how to proceed in concert: with no star to guide you, the only criteria left to base your actions on are other people. Consequently, the narrative becomes a space for visualizing and translating multiplicity, understood as the concatenation of numerous differences, and narrating the negotiation of those differences in the absence of preexisting coordinates for judgment.

Forms of multiplicity abound in *Legion Lost*, but three are central to the conceptual project of the series. First, every issue of the series is narrated in the voice of a different character. Across twelve installments, we encounter a kaleidoscopic view of the teammates, witnessing intimate portraits of their distinct outlooks, personal histories, temperaments, spiritual beliefs, and aspirations. We learn, for instance, that Saturn Girl, the Legion's team leader, harbors deep anxieties about being mistrusted by her teammates because of her telepathic abilities. "Back in the United Planets," she explains to the reader, "native Titans like me with telepathic powers were forced by law to display it [the Saturn symbol]. To show . . . no, to warn . . . those around us of our ability. Because people are afraid [. . .] of our minds"; we are told the story of Monstress's painful disfigurement as a young girl, which made her a social pariah on her home world of Xanthu and consequently fueled her commitment to avenging oppressed people as a member of the Legion; we become privy to the fears and anxieties different Legionnaires manage and, most important, learn what the teammates think about one another, from Saturn Girl's anxiety over Ultra Boy's chaotic temper to Monstress's suspicion of Brainiac's cold and calculating demeanor in the face of horrible atrocity.

The forms of narration are themselves multiplicitous: sometimes the team members seem to be speaking to themselves, as when Brainiac collates information in his exhaustive electronic journal; at other times they appear to speak directly to us as readers, as when Saturn Girl confides in the reader her marked status as a telepath. Consequently, the fusion of the narrative's serial unfolding to a kaleidoscopic array of character types and modes of address trains readers to see from the perspective of each team member and to understand the affective logics that guide their actions. We do not simply learn more about each character, nor does the series merely present us with obvious differences that can be numerically counted or retrieved as information bits about real-world others; rather, we gain the critical perspective to adjudicate how and when particular differences matter. Race, of course, matters centrally within the genocidal logics of the Progeny's extermination plans; to them, all of the Legion members are species "variants" who must be "deleted." But within the tight-knit network of relations that make up the lost Legion,

it is temperament—the teammates’ various responses to stress, isolation, and trauma—that appears to matter most, even as individual dispositions come to be linked to other categories of identity, like race or gender (as when Umbra labels Chameleon’s unruly temper an undesirable quality of his species, the Durlans, or when Saturn Girl’s statement that people are “afraid of her mind” explicitly names the culture’s misogynistic anxieties surrounding women’s intelligence).

Second, the series takes up a long-standing custom of the Legion of Super-Heroes series, the roll call, a tradition of naming the team members who appear in a given issue. In the context of a world without a Legion, the roll call becomes one of ways that the series accounts for multiplicity as it expands to include unexpected new allies that join the castaway crew. In a region of uncharted space where they are being hunted by a genocidal army, the stakes of the team’s survival are exceptionally high, so the roll call is freighted with meaning as the site not only where the team’s expansive multiplicity is registered but also where their potential deaths, the diminishment of that multiplicity, might be marked.

Finally, there is a discursive proliferation of the meanings that attach to the series’ title terms *Legion* and *lost*. To be lost designates a geographical dislocation in space but also the condition of becoming untethered from one’s values and communal bonds. For some, it also describes the literal deaths, or mysterious disappearance of loved ones or kin who are “lost” to the Progeny. To be Legion, on the other hand, is to be a member of a particular team of heroes brought together by a common goal to maintain peace among the United Planets; yet in uncharted territory, the Legion becomes more a loose collection of values shared among superhumans variously construed. Throughout the series, different team members find themselves rearticulating the definition of the Legion, its values, and its history in distinct contexts. When Shikari first discovers the lost Legion in suspended animation aboard their battered ship, she activates a holographic recording left by Element Lad in which he states: “It’s been so lonely. [. . .] You should know about the Legion. [. . .] We are—individuals from planets all across the galaxy, bound together by a common dream. The dream was so beautiful . . . But this is all that’s left of our dream—a handful of souls. As far away from home as it’s possible to be.” Here, the Legion is framed as a counterforce to loneliness and isolation in the cosmos, a multitude bound by shared commitments that materialize through collective action. Later, Monstress explains to Shikari, “That’s what the Legion is all about: tolerance, compassion, justice.” In this iteration, the Legion comes to describe a clearly stated set of values that guide ethical action, the term becoming synonymous with liberal humanism. Finally, when the Legion is captured by the Progeny near the series’ conclusion, Wildfire laments, “We’ve come apart. [. . .] Not a team. [. . .] Not a whole.

Not a Legion. Somewhere, we may be counted as super-heroes. . . . But out here [. . .] we've become a bunch of [. . .] clashing elements. . . . Without the unity that being the Legion of Super-Heroes used to give us." The irony of Wildfire's claim is that *legion* literally means "many," a term that describes multiplicity, not unity. When Wildfire states that "somewhere, we may be counted as super-heroes," he underscores the reality that to be counted as any singular thing—a superhero, a member of a race, species, or team, or a particular kind of gender or sexuality—is always a contingent fact, shifting in relation to our context, so that we are always necessarily plural or multiple in our being depending on where we stand. The phrase *legion lost*, then, simultaneously comes to signify the vertiginous dislocation of the Legion and its values in uncharted space, the legions of lives lost to genocide, and the many versions of the Legion itself that can proliferate under new and unexpected conditions.

In these forms of multiplicity, *Legion Lost* trains its readers to deftly toggle between differences, to see how they relate, and to adjudicate what differences matter most in varied contexts. This is potently captured in the opening narration to issue 5, which focuses on Brainiac 5.1. Cascading down the page in a series of green text boxes, we read Brainiac's frantic dictation into his electronic journal:

Problems to solve (ongoing): Finding a way home. Finding *where* home is. Possibly finding *when* home is. Lack of navigational data [. . .] Shortage of usable transuits. Progeny threat. Finding Element Lad [. . .] finding renewable sources of food and power [. . .] finding— Self-note #3457: I believe none of our problems are insoluble *individually*. Nothing should be beyond my twelfth-level cognitive faculties. And I've multi-tasked before. But now . . . now *everything* is a *priority*. I'm having to solve everything *simultaneously*. Concept: devise new problem-solving strategies to address themed and prioritized *problem groups*.

Brainiac lists a range of problems that exceed any single criterion of organization: there are logistical issues, issues of personnel management, issues of survival, even issues of conceptual approach. The multiplicity of problems poses the necessity of producing an entirely new frame of reference for solving this magnitude of concerns, which involves a cognitive shift from perceiving problems "individually" to seeing them as "grouped," much like a team of disparate but interrelated Legionnaires. This moment provides a potent metaphor for an intersectional approach to differences, as interlocking problems that must be taken together as part of a critical practice of plurality, which involves accounting for other points of view. Brainiac's list describes the synthesis of various crises that create the condition of the Legion members' lives as multiply marked minorities within the genocidal logics of the Progeny, conditions of life-threatening

danger that require the ability to “devise new problem-solving strategies.” Brainiac is essentially describing what we, as readers, must do to manage the numerous variables that *Legion Lost* places before us—to think like a Legion.

It is fitting that, in a terrifying uncharted cosmos where the Legionnaires are more castaways than recognized heroes, the first issue of the series would begin from the perspective of an outsider to the team who must learn to make sense of their collective. *Legion Lost* opens with the introduction of an unfamiliar character, a pathfinder Shikari who belongs to a species called the Kwai. The Kwai are winged comet-hunters who have extraordinary abilities to intuit “the way” or a direction through uncharted space to find home. In the opening sequence, Shikari dashes through space with her kinmates, only to be hunted down by the Progeny. Watching all her friends die, she uses her ability to evade her captors and is led, presciently, to the Legion Outpost. Her intuition leads her to find kin among strangers, so that belonging for Shikari becomes, quite literally, “the very house of difference.”²⁶ Shikari’s powers, which seem more like magic than science, exceed anything the Legion have ever seen in another superpowered being, and she confounds any of their traditional identity categories. She in turn repeatedly forgets or mischaracterizes the teammates’ given names, as well as their code names, often identifying team members by seemingly essential identity markers, like their skin color or their personality traits (she calls Ultra Boy “Bold Legion,” Kid Quantum “Brown Legion,” and Umbra “Dark Legion”). These misperceptions are initially taken as slights—and indeed, by our standards they recall offensive racial and gendered markers—but the Legionnaires soon realize that Shikari’s idiosyncratic labels both distinguish what is particular about different team members yet simultaneously underscore what they share: despite all their differences, to Shikari they are each also Legion—both internally multiplicitous *and* members of a distinct coalition. These somewhat clunky, amalgamated categories of identification, then, become a way of seeing the differences between the Legion members anew, from the perspective of someone who would not know their planets of origin. Consequently, Shikari becomes the coordinate by which we find “a way” into the Legion, functioning as a conceptual pathfinder for new readers, who become stand-ins for Shikari herself, taking in and making sense of new names, characters, abilities, allegiances, and personalities. She in turn achieves a position on the roll call by negotiating her relationship to the team (code-switching, e.g., from “Brown Legion” to “Jasmin Legion” when Kid Quantum expresses discomfort being reduced to the color of her skin), learning about their values, and articulating her shared commitments to stopping the Progeny.



Figure 2. Saturn Girl materializes a psychic projection of her teammates on the cover to *Legion Lost*, no. 9 (January 2001). Art by Olivier Coipel and Andy Lanning

If the Legion is narratively and visually depicted as a multiplicity that generates heterogeneity, or the necessity of negotiating and translating differences, that multiplicity is not merely made visible in the external distinctions between the team members but also underscored as a fundamental quality of each characters' internal psychic life. Perhaps no image captures this relationship between external material differences and interior psychological multiplicity more than the cover to issue 9, which depicts a close-up of Saturn Girl's face lined with strain as she materializes a psychic projection of her teammates' profiles in a pink halo around her head (fig. 2). Unlike the cover image of issue 11, in which Element Lad's crystalline stare perceives the Legionnaires as a fractured collection of alien others, here Saturn Girl cognizes her teammates as an interconnected set of actors fluidly joined together in a single psychic projection. The image suggests an individual team member's difficult labor to account for, and be accountable to, her companions. In this issue, Saturn Girl must confront her teammates after they discover that she has

psychically projected their teammate Apparition for the duration of their travails as a way of offering succor to her fellow Legionnaires. When, under extreme stress, Saturn Girl's projection fails, Apparition vanishes into thin air, leaving the teammates traumatized both by the permanent loss of one of their companions and by the reality that every interaction and shared confidence with Apparition was in reality an exchange with their team leader. Saturn Girl's strained face on the cover to issue 9 visualizes her struggle to account for this betrayal, to see her interior affective bonds to each team member as a question of public concern requiring redress. In light of the shocking revelation about Saturn Girl's illusion, we come to realize that, across the arc of the miniseries, we narratively experience Saturn Girl from two distinct perspectives: in Apparition's narration in issue 4, we see a story about Saturn Girl's desire to be trusted and embraced by her teammates, as she inhabits the role of a team member that other Legionnaires commonly confided in; however, from Saturn Girl's direct perspective in issue 9 we see that her decision to produce the illusion of Apparition was a critical judgment to protect the team from Ultra Boy's potential meltdown at the loss of his wife. When the teammates awake from stasis at the beginning of the series, Ultra Boy nearly explodes into a violent rage, potentially harming his colleagues, when he suspects that Apparition, his wife, is not among the castaway crew. We learn that Saturn girl's seemingly duplicitous act was, in fact, an attempt to protect her teammates from a kind of toxic masculinity that could literally rend their ship in two. This dual perspective allows us to see Saturn Girl, a founding member of the Legion, anew, to understand the psychic logics that animate her leadership and her interpersonal attachments as themselves multiplicitous.

Against these forms of multiplicity unfolding from the interactions of eleven divergent subjects, *Legion Lost* presents a violent form of singularity in the figure of the Progenitor, the former Legionnaire Jan Arrah, Element Lad, now turned genocidal god. Jan's transformation from gentle peacekeeper to maniacal world destroyer becomes the event that galvanizes a rearticulation of the meaning of the Legion on the far side of the universe and lays the groundwork for the team's most important collective judgments regarding how to act in the face of potential extinction.

"Out of Their Element!"

Legion Lost reaches its explosive conclusion in the Legion's terrifying confrontation with their former teammate and friend Jan Arrah, once the benevolent legionnaire Element Lad but now the Progenitor, a genocidal god. As issue 11 opens, the team takes in the shocking sight of their lost comrade. For the first time, the roll call is presented not as a list but as a

series of panels fanning out across the page, each carrying the image of a different Legionnaire as they don varied expressions of horror, confusion, and elation. By this point we have entered the psyche of nearly every team member, navigating their individual dispositions, world views, and motivations but also gaining an understanding of how they relate and work as a collective. The text acknowledges our insight by presenting the team as an aggregate group yet individuated by distinct reactions. Element Lad is presented as both part of the team and separate from it. He is the last to be named and receives his own splash page, a visual juxtaposition that reminds us he has history with the team but no longer exists within its network of relations (figs. 3 and 4).

I want to read the final confrontation between Element Lad and his former teammates allegorically as a powerful meditation on the relationship between the comics creator and their diverse readership, one that produces contradictions that are formally registered on the comics page. Consequently, we can understand the conflict that unfolds from this encounter as an object lesson in the power of the comics creator to invent, shape, and obliterate creative worlds at will, and the varied efforts of readers (here analogous to the Legionnaires) to reign in that power by grounding stories in their own conditions of existence. To read in this way is to revivify figures from the comics' past as resources for collaboratively reshaping our shared cultural fantasies, rather than relegating them to the dust bin of "bad" representational history; consequently, characters like Element Lad and the members of the Legion can return to us as figures of critique whose stories confront unequal structures of creative power to adjudicate which lives are valued and which are disposable in our cultural imagination. Lisa Lowe's understanding of the critical function of Asian American literature is instructive here: "[Asian American] literature expresses heterogeneity not merely in the constituency it is construed to 'represent' but also . . . as an aesthetic product that cannot suppress the material inequalities of its conditions of production; its aesthetic is defined by contradiction, not sublimation."²⁷ Like minority literary formations, superhero comics express heterogeneity not only in the diverse identities of the characters that populate their stories but also in the way they formally "put into relief the conditions of [their] own production." In these two opening images, for instance, the conceptual juxtaposition of the Legion's collectivity set against the Progenitor's megalomaniacal singularity is rendered as a formal division between the visual multiplicity of proliferating panels on one page and a subsequent splash panel, which by definition annexes an entire page, much as Jan Arrah has annexed this quadrant of space. The comic book then formally figures the struggle between these forces as a battle over the very structure of the comic book page, how it will render stories, and who it will represent.



Figure 3. The Legionnaires each react differently to the sight of their lost teammate Element Lad. *Legion Lost*, no. 11. Written by Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning, art by Olivier Coipel and Andy Lanning

In the pages that follow, Element Lad narrates his harrowing journey to save his fellow Legionnaires, his careening out of the bounds of space-time, and his subsequent two-billion-year rise to godhood. Reveling in his captive audience, Jan explains: “I was outside creation, looking in. What I saw gave me a unique perspective. [. . .] I was alone. A billion years of solitude . . . a billion more. [. . .] I spent lifetimes roaming newborn worlds. [. . .] I longed for other living forms to interact with. [. . .] So I decided to . . . lend a hand.” Hearing these last words, Brainiac explodes: “Grife, no . . . please tell us you’re making this up, Jan!” To which Jan replies, ““Making it up?”



Figure 4. Element Lad greets his former teammates as the godlike Progenitor. *Legion Lost*, no. 11. Written by Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning, art by Olivier Coipel and Andy Lanning

Not in the way you mean. I made worlds up. Species. Cultures. I made a galaxy up, to keep me company. It was quite liberating.” Here, Element Lad describes his attainment of an enlarged perspective, gained from seeing the universe outside its known limits, yet this perspective is the opposite of the kind we have accessed through the Legion’s multiplicity. It is a perverse narcissism born from loneliness, from the lack of interlocutors, that involves the fundamental misperception that one can take in the entirety of a universe in a single frame. Element Lad is the classic figure of the author as solitary genius, who imagines that his ability to make up



Figure 5. The Progenitor wistfully looks upon his many creations. *Legion Lost*, no. 11. Written by Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning, art by Olivier Coipel and Andy Lanning

worlds is self-generating—consequently, his version of freedom is license, the ability to act upon the world unfettered by rules, laws, or ethical constraints, rather than a democratic capacity to act in concert.

Because Element Lad has had only himself as an equal interlocutor for two billion years, he perceives all of his creations as rational extensions of himself, seeing them as useful only insofar as they reflect back at him his own perfection. As he narrates his tale, he wistfully looks upon a holographic image of some of his creations, which he projects in the palm of his hand (fig. 5). Among the figures that appear in his display is a member of the Kwai, Shikari's species. Shikari, of course, is a figure invented by creators Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning for our own narrative pleasure.

Yet unlike the Progenitor, Abnett and Lanning have developed a character whose richness derives from her existence as a fully rounded imaginative actor who evolved in relation to a range of Legion members with elaborate narrative histories. Here, Abnett and Lanning provide a metafictional critique of their own subject position as creative world builders and, by extension, of a particular form of artistic production in which characters are seen as mere extensions of a writer's or artist's personal whims. When species grow and evolve unpredictably, the Progenitor deems them "variant" and has them "deleted," a convenient euphemism for murder. This language of undesirable variation and violent deletion not only indexes xenophobic violence but also references the rigid obsession with continuity in comic book world making.

Continuity refers to the perceived sequence of narrative events and character development in a given comic book series or fictional universe. Defenders of continuity often see creative deviations from long-standing plot lines and character histories as aberrations that must be recontained or written out of particular fictional timelines. For conservative creators and fans concerned with narrative continuity in the Legion of Super-Heroes, Shikari would be just such an aberration—a character who never appeared in the series' original iterations—to be "deleted" in subsequent issues in the same way the Progenitor deletes variant species. In the context of current debates around diversity, the introduction of minority superheroes into long-running superhero comics series is often viciously critiqued by conservative creators and fans who claim that such characters disorganize the logical unfolding of established narrative continuity. In this way, seemingly abstract defenses of narrative coherence end up masking deep-rooted racism and xenophobia in comic book production. In the figure of the Progenitor, *Legion Lost* makes conceptual links between the totalitarian dictator and the single-minded, isolated creator invested in maintaining the narrative status quo. "Define godhood," the Progenitor opines. "I have a lifespan commensurate with the universe! I have created life and founded cultures that have worshiped me! What else can you call me?" This chilling line describes one version of the superhero comic book creator, whose legacy of producing lifetime-spanning narrative arcs for complex networks of superhuman characters, and founding fictional cultures for readers to engage, has also led them to be worshipped by fans as godlike world makers.

After hearing the Progenitor's shocking tale, the team is sent to an antechamber, where they explode into furious debate. It is arguably the most important dialogue of the entire series, as each team member debates from his or her point of view, while knowing they must make a momentous decision about how to act in concert. Each of the characters provides alternative criteria for judging Jan's actions: some wish to base their deci-

sion on Jan's former heroic acts in the name of the Legion, others see Jan's genocidal crimes in the present as nullifying his previous claim to membership in the Legion, and yet others simply believe that his sheer power alone identifies him as a threat to both universes. Much like comic book readers who engage in elaborate dialogues about the meaning of the stories they invest in that undermine the seemingly omnipotent imaginative control wielded by comic book creators, the teammates' divergent interpretations of their circumstances offer a dialectical critique of the very terms by which their lives are being circumscribed and narrated by a figure of white masculine power. Brainiac productively offers a unique framework for understanding the stakes of their crisis: "[Jan] had a blank slate here, and look what he's done. He's created species to keep him company, designed and guided civilizations . . . then had his progeny delete them when they no longer pleased him [. . .] He's not cruel. Certainly not evil as we understand it. He's just working to a . . . bigger scale. Life is just ephemeral to him. Brief things that exist around him and need no mourning when they're gone. And that includes us." Here, Brainiac reminds those teammates sympathetic to Element Lad's plight that no matter the approach by which they assert their humanity to the Progenitor, his very frame of reference is so wide-reaching that it simply cannot register them as legible subjects (he is explaining that, indeed, within the terms of their captivity, the subaltern cannot speak).

Following the team's debate, Monstress, Chameleon, and Saturn Girl confront Element Lad, seeking confirmation of his intentions. Monstress tries to see from Jan's perspective (fig. 6). She implores:

Monstress: "I-I know dear. It must be hard . . . being a god. So . . . what will you do? When we get back to United Planets space?"

Element Lad: "Make it better. Like I made this portion of the universe better. I'm tired of this, you know? This place. I've done all I can. I'm so happy I found that Omniphagos thing [the world-eater]. . . . Once I've gone through the doorway, I'll slip its leash and it can eat up all the [. . .] garbage I've left behind here."

Monstress: "Please . . . tell me you don't mean that, Jan . . ."

Element Lad: "Okay. I don't. You're a strange one. I don't remember making you."

Monstress: "Y-you didn't."

Element Lad: "Oh well. Whatever. . . . variant."

With these last words Element Lad obliterates his former friend, her body evaporating into bone and ash. In this horrifying scene, Monstress pleads with Element Lad to recognize their former bond. She attempts to inhabit his perspective as though they are equals, despite the fact that they simply do not share the same frame of reference. What Monstress understands as



Figure 6. The Progenitor murders Monstress. *Legion Lost*, no. 11. Written by Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning, art by Olivier Coipel and Andy Lanning

a demand for recognition from a peer, the Progenitor can only hear as a plea for representation by a godlike creator. In her desire to be recognized by Jan, then, to have her existence reaffirmed by the godlike creature he has become, Monstress unwittingly grants him the power to destroy her. Monstress's appeal for recognition is structurally identical to the demand for representational diversity: both stem from an affective sense of woundedness or trauma in the face of marginalization (of having been essentially forgotten). Yet this woundedness leads us, in Wendy Brown's words, to "install [our] pain over [our] unredeemed history in the very foundation of [our] political claim, in its demand for recognition as identity."²⁸ Such demands often leave us susceptible to being archived by power, in this case the corporate structures of mainstream comic book production, so that our distinct histories, identities, and aspirations can be recognized only by those who believe they have created us. In the fantasy world of

Legion Lost, but perhaps no less in our real world, the result of this plea is nothing short of annihilation.

Monstress's death is telepathically broadcast to the other members of the Legion via Saturn Girl's psychic link. In this moment, the demand to be recognized is completely overshadowed by the necessity for direct action, and indeed, the entire team valiantly rallies against the Progenitor. In a series of terrifying panels, Chameleon takes on his former teammate, shapeshifting at light speed in an attempt to strike a deathblow before Jan can react (fig. 7). Chameleon's ingenious shapeshifting and combat skills are formidable, but he is no match for Jan, who constantly alters the material environment to test Chameleon's skill before attempting to snuff him out. Chameleon's rapid-fire transformations visually represent a willful resistance to the Progenitor's relentless attempts to archive a species he has never encountered, to capture, fix, and "delete" Chameleon's identity.

The dialectical struggle between Chameleon's shapeshifting and the Progenitor's archiving of Chameleon's transformations is rendered visually in the oscillation between different kinds of panels: whenever Chameleon shapeshifts into a new form—now a giant spider, next a mollusk, finally an enormous wasp—his body radically alters the shape of, or wholly dissolves, the square form of a traditional comic panel, yet each time the Progenitor outwits Chameleon—"But can you fly in a hard vacuum?" "Can you crawl in an inferno?"—his shapeshifting form is recontained in a rigid square. Here, the narrative explicitly associates the Progenitor with the comics creator as every expression of his powers literally gives shape to, and contains, the fictional struggle unfolding on the page. Like the comics creator who fabricates countless obstacles and crises for the superheroic characters whose plots they weave, Jan understands adaptation not as a collective practice of negotiating differences but as a creative effect of isolated experimentation with various life forms. In this world view, to subject characters to violence or death is merely a narrative exercise rather than a real-world atrocity—to demand representation within this frame is to give oneself over to execution.

Saturn Girl vehemently intervenes against this logic by striking Jan with a ferocious telepathic assault: "Your mind's your weak spot, isn't it, Jan!" she seethes. Not seeking recognition from, or empathizing with, the maniacal power fantasies of a Godlike creator, Saturn Girl psychically interrupts the very thought process by which the Progenitor operates—a pernicious logic of archiving and pacifying differences. This short-circuiting of the Progenitor's logic is rendered formally in Saturn Girl's powerful reclaiming of the space of the comic book page: her psionic blast explodes all conventional square frames, taking up the entire visual horizon of the page and, by extension, dismantling the rigid borders within which the



Figure 7. Chameleon valiantly fights to stop the Progenitor's genocidal plans. *Legion Lost*, no. 12 (April 2001). Written by Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning, art by Olivier Coipel and Andy Lanning

Progenitor repeatedly entrapped Chameleon (fig. 8). It is her body, and her power, that literally shoves the Progenitor's form out of the visual field, releasing Chameleon from the physical and conceptual chokehold of the Progenitor's grasp. In short order, the rest of the team joins her. As they attack in tandem, the invulnerable Ultra Boy striking the first blow, the Progenitor screams: "How dare you strike me, variant?! Invulnerability?"



Figure 8. Saturn Girl attacks the Progenitor with a psychic assault to protect her team. *Legion Lost*, no. 12. Written by Dan Abnett and Andy Lanning, art by Olivier Coipel and Andy Lanning

Hah! How do you measure that against a God?” To which Wildfire retorts: “We don’t. We only have one standard, you squaj: the *Legion*.” Both in their material assembly and in Wildfire’s articulation of the Legion as an ethical orientation for hero work, the team performatively reconstitute a shared standard of judgment in the Legion itself, not simply figured as their historical legacy of collective action, though certainly that, but also understood as their manifold differences, which both separate and bind them, in other words, a standard of judgment grounded in the “Legion,” the many.

As Judith Butler states of the performative function of assembly: “No matter what the protest is about, it is also, implicitly, a demand to be able to gather, to assemble, and to do so freely without fear of . . . violence. . . . So . . . it is also the body that is on the line, exhibiting its value and its freedom in the demonstration itself.”²⁹ In light of this statement, it is fitting that the last issue of the series is narrated by one of the founding members of the Legion of Super-Heroes, Live Wire. Against the notion that Element Lad is their creator, throughout this final issue we receive Live Wire’s personal rendition of the Legion’s history as a team that was forged through an act of collective assembly: “I remember when we became the Legion. Me, Saturn Girl, and Cosmic Boy. So idealistic, so dedicated to [. . .] a dream of planets and species, united in peace and cooperation. We’ve come a long way since then. Right across the universe. [. . .] We’re stranded in [. . .] a hostile galaxy ruled by violence, oppression and terror. Species diversity is a crime, and eugenic extermination is the punishment. It’s the antithesis of everything we stand for. [. . .] This sort of thing is why

we were founded in the first place.” In uttering these words, *Live Wire* reminds us that the very founding of the Legion of Super-Heroes itself, not merely within the fictional terms of the comic book universe they inhabit but also in the real-world invention of these superhuman figures by comic book creators in the late 1950s, constitutes an “embodied form of gathering [that makes] a claim on the political.”³⁰ After all, the literal gathering of creators, readers, and fictional characters in countless material venues makes the production of cultural fantasy—including what bodies, ethics, and collectivities we imaginatively value—a question of public concern. This is beautifully captured in a letter published in *Legion Lost*, no. 5, by Sephora Abdell of New York City: “Handled correctly, The Legion of Super-Heroes is a franchise of unlimited potential: science-fiction, superheroics, teenage angst, interpersonal relationships and the resultant dramatics, a self-contained setting and continuity, and a diversity of races, species, powers, genders and philosophies unmatched by any other title, *ever*. In short, the Legion is a unique and unorthodox genre unto itself, like its audience, and this should always be celebrated and not watered down.” As though to confirm this reading, *Live Wire*’s narration in this concluding issue reminds us that the members of the team are one another’s polestars; in their bond, we see an intentional community, with a distinct history that braids together multiplicitous characters in a long, interwoven arc of interactions, struggles, and triumphs regardless of their geographical location in space.

As their battle with Jan reaches its zenith, the Legionnaires locate their battered ship and devise a last-ditch plan to fly through a transdimensional gateway back to their reality. As they fly toward the gateway, the Progenitor, now transmuted into a planet-sized monster with a gaping maw, seeks to consume them whole. In a heartbreaking moment of critical judgment, *Live Wire* makes a shocking decision: “Legion rules. I hereby tender my resignation from the Legion of Super-Heroes. We just got everyone working as a team again. I’m not gonna tarnish that by breaking the rules. We can save our galaxy by closing the doorway, but what about this one? We have to stop Jan . . . the Omniphagos . . . whatever they’ve become. I have to. [. . .] Get home safe Legion.” Opening the ship’s hatch to bare space, *Live Wire* leaps into the gargantuan mouth of his former teammate and friend, delivering an electric charge so powerful it creates a planetary scale heart attack—it is an epic death of the author. As he fades into oblivion and the Legion Outpost flies headlong into the portal, *Live Wire*’s voice concludes this epic: “I remember when we became the Legion of Super-Heroes. I’m glad I was there when we became it again. Because we weren’t lost at all, were we? Not where it counted. Inside.”

Legion Lost is a superhero comic book that radically resists being read in the frame of identity politics, wounded attachment, or the politics

of recognition. It produces multiplicity at every narrative and visual turn, demanding that we adjudicate how we will respond to differences and make meaning and build worlds out of them. It does not imply that the demand for representational diversity is always a mistake, but perhaps that it is mistaken more often than we would like to think. Moreover, *Legion Lost* asks us not to assume that such diversity is always an obvious good but, rather, to thoughtfully identify and cultivate those moments when heterogeneity becomes a productive consequence of particular narrative and visual projects. In so doing the series puts necessary pressure on some of the most urgent queries of our time: Should we perceive mainstream comics creators as our “friends” and see their creative output as a kind of shared history that binds us together, or must we recognize their imbrication in a corporate structure, the comic book industry, that cannot mourn us when we are gone? If the latter, how do we produce the conditions under which they might become our genuine interlocutors and not our omnipotent makers? This might involve a radical material transformation in the labor demographics of comics production, but perhaps also a shift in the framing of our demand: a movement away from a plea for recognition toward a demand for an altogether different world, including different criteria for self-making and collective action.

If it is easy to dismiss works like *Legion Lost* for their reliance on the power of metaphors—of species distinction, superhuman power, and interplanetary struggles—to stand in for materially lived embodied and cultural differences in the realm of fantasy, we should not lose sight of the fact that the text offers one of the most unflinching diagnoses of power relations in modern comics. Read through an interpretative frame of multiplicity, the text tells us that representational freedom for minority subjects involves nothing short of the symbolic death of white male power and authority to make and destroy fictional worlds—not merely pernicious forms of that power, as in the figure of the Progenitor, but also the most seemingly benevolent versions of it, like Live Wire, who must literally kill his own subject position, thereby abdicating his privileged place as founder or creator of the Legion of Super-Heroes in order to simply become Legion. In so doing, *Legion Lost* encourages us to ask for more from our most cherished creative worlds and to find new frameworks within which we might deliver those claims. Ultimately, *Legion Lost* is about cultivating the capacity for critical imagination, to be able to see and “[think] in my own identity where actually I am not,” not to simply be represented but to think representatively. As Hannah Arendt claims: “Imagination alone enables us to see things from their proper perspective, to put that which is too close at a certain distance so that we can see and understand it without bias and prejudice, to bridge abysses of remoteness until we can see and understand everything that is too far away from us

as though it were our own affair. This ‘distancing’ of some things and bridging the abysses to others is part of the dialogue of understanding.”³¹ By granting us the imaginative distance of an entire uncharted universe of possibilities, *Legion Lost* allows us to gain at least one crucial understanding: if it has always been the case that we are Legion among one another, then we have also always been Legion where it counts, on the inside.

Notes

This article was first presented as a keynote address at the 2017 Canadian American Studies Association Conference and the International Comics Art Forum. I am grateful to Ross Daniel Bullen and José Alaniz for providing me the opportunity to develop and present this work in these respective venues. My endless gratitude goes out to Cindy Cheng and Michael Anthony D’Agostino, who were extraordinary interlocutors throughout the writing and revision process and are steadfast members of my legion of superheroes; this essay is lovingly dedicated to them for their intellectual generosity and unconditional friendship.

1. All further references to *Legion Lost* are from the collected edition: Abnett and Lanning, *Legion Lost*. Dialogue in *Legion Lost* includes frequent ellipses; those in quotations are from the original unless they are enclosed in brackets, in which case they indicate that text has been elided.

2. Butler, *Performative Theory of Assembly*, 3.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, 9.

5. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 198–99.

6. One way I accomplish this is by deracinating a largely unanalyzed superhero comic book text, *Legion Lost*, from its original publication context at the turn of the millennium and placing it squarely in our present. Another essay might dedicate itself to unearthing the complex cultural history of the Legion of Super-Heroes, using as evidence the fact that it was one of the first comic books to print selected letters from its fans in the late 1950s and 1960s, that the series boasted the most gender-diverse cast of superheroes in modern comics and introduced one of the first Asian superheroes in mainstream comics publishing in 1966, or that the Legion Fan Club was one of the longest-running fan associations in comics history. All of these historical facts could contribute to a reading of *Legion Lost* in the context of the larger arc of the DC Comics universe, but they would be largely meaningless to readers who encountered the miniseries outside of these contexts as new fans unfamiliar with Legion continuity, including those who picked up *Legion Lost* as a collected trade book in 2011. My mode of analysis shows how superhero comics can accrue unpredictable meanings as they move across time, through many readerly hands, and in new print and digital formats far beyond the immediate audiences they were originally intended for.

7. A sampling of some articles in this debate includes Gustens, “She’s Mighty, Muslim and Leaping Off the Page”; Alonso, “Alonso Responds to Marvel’s Hip-Hop Variant Cover Criticism”; Hudson, “It’s Time to Get Real About Racial Diversity in Comics”; Ampikaipakan, “That Oxymoron, the Asian Comic Superhero”; Wilson, “About That Whole Thing”; Talentino, “The Writer Behind a Muslim Marvel Superhero on Her Faith in Comics”; Reisman, “Pushing Diversity Is a Tough Business for Four Indie-Comics Publishers”; Haile, “How Black Panther Asks Us to Examine Who We Are to Each Other.”

8. Fawaz, *New Mutants*.
9. Norman, "Consciousness-Raising Document," 45–46.
10. Butler, *Performative Theory of Assembly*, 103.
11. Scott, "Fantastic Bullets," 28.
12. Ibid.
13. Wilson, "About That Whole Thing."
14. carrington, *Speculative Blackness*, 21–22.
15. One need only think of Superman's fictional difference from humanity as an orphaned alien from the planet Krypton (whose alien origins have often been understood as a metaphor for immigrant identity) or the explicit framing of Wonder Woman as the first female superhero in comics in 1941. These heroes respectively modeled the strategies of metaphorical difference versus representational diversity as early as 1938 with the advent of the first superhero, Superman.
16. For a trenchant critique of the film's political imagination, see Lebron, "*Black Panther* Is Not the Movie We Deserve."
17. See Haile, "How *Black Panther*."
18. Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 16–17.
19. Ferguson, *Reorder of Things*, 29.
20. Moya, *Learning from Experience*, 129.
21. Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 43.
22. Melamed, *Represent and Destroy*, 49.
23. carrington, *Speculative Blackness*, 92.
24. Zerilli, "Feminist Theory of Judgement," 20.
25. Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, 104.
26. Lorde, *Zami*, 138.
27. Lowe, *Immigrant Acts*, 44.
28. Brown, "Wounded Attachments," 406.
29. Butler, *Performative Theory of Assembly*, 17–18.
30. Ibid., 18.
31. Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, 323.

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