Super Bodies and Secret Skins:

A Genealogy of Body Transformation

by

Scott Daniel Boras

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Graduate Supervisory Committee:

Kelly McDonald, Chair
H. L. Goodall, Jr.
Daniel Gilfillan

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the influential relationships between popular culture depictions of superheroes and the substantive, malleable, and real possibilities of human body transformation. Cultural discourses condition and constrain the ways in which identity and bodies are formed and expressed. This includes popular culture texts that, through their evocative narratives, provide guidance or solutions for dealing with real world problems. From the perspective of communication studies, this project involves examining ways people project and perform fantastic future versions of humanity in relation to popular culture artifacts, like superheroes, but also examines how such projections are borne out of and get expressed through our everyday, less than extraordinary experiences.

Key theoretical tensions regarding identity and culture are elucidated. These tensions are then developed discursively into a genealogy of body transcendence that features the historicizing of social functions to determine from where such tensions and changes manifest, and how they ultimately affect us. Several key artifacts are introduced to help inform the investigation, including eight specific superhero body types that provide an ideal perspective through which transformative power can be observed. The superhero discourse is particularly relevant because it offers a utopian/dystopian tension regarding how the splendor and seduction of the discourse materializes in both liberating and problematic ways. Another aspect of this embodied approach involves adopting the alternate superhero persona of Ethnography Man. By undertaking my own

identity transformations, I am better able to investigate spaces that encourage such identity slippage and play, such as the annual San Diego Comic Con International.

The once strongly held perception that our bodies are fixed and stable is fast disappearing. In bridging the body with culture through a genealogy, it becomes much more apparent how body transformations will continue to manifest in the future. Therefore, from the experiences and analysis contained herein, implications regarding powerful discursive conditions and constraints that influence our ability to change take form in revealing, problematic, and sometimes unexpected ways. More specifically, implications of who has power, how it is exercised, and the effects of power will materialize and indicate whether or not everyday humans have the potential to become superheroes.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

CHAPTER

1 SPLENDOR AND SEDUCTION.....1

Research Questions.....21

Genealogy as Anti-Method.....21

2 PROCESS AND POLITICS OF BECOMING 39

The Convention Floor.....41

Commodity Culture 48

Culture and Identity 57

Representation and Gender.....68

Masquerade.....78

Traversing Spaces 88

3 SUPER BODIES AND SECRET SKINS 100

The Fashionable Body 101

The Graphic Body.....108

The Patriotic Body.....125

The Armored Body 138

The Aerodynamic Body.....148

Page

CHAPTER

The Virile Body 157

The Mutant Body 169

The Paradoxical Body 179

The Postmodern Body 191

4 BODY, IDENTITY, AND TRANSFORMATION 206

Who has power? 213

How is it exercised? 223

What are its effects? 235

REFERENCES 246

Chapter One

Splendor and Seduction

The driver knows where I am going well before I step into his cab. Though it is only 7:50 in the morning, he has already transported ninjas, Ewoks, space aliens, and a Star Fleet Commander to the same destination. After a brief exchange regarding the anticipated weekend traffic and how hard it was for me to find a hotel, he asks me what I used to make my cape.

"It's just a curtain," I tell him. "I ran a bungee cord through where the rod goes." I pull down the collar of my t-shirt to show where I've clasped the cord together. He keeps his eyes on the road, unimpressed. It occurs to me that he has already encountered several homemade capes this morning, many of which are no doubt more elaborately constructed than my own. Anxiety settles in.

"I'll get you as close as I can to the convention center," he tells me. "It'll save time if you walk the last block or two because otherwise we're just sitting in traffic."

I decide to tip him well, perhaps because he saved me a dollar or two on the fare but more likely because I don't want to appear as cheap as my costume. In trying to retrieve money from my wallet, however, I realize that the dish gloves I'm wearing make it impossible to pull apart the bills. The driver patiently waits while I clumsily remove them. Once I've paid, he points me in the direction of the San Diego Convention Center.

The breeze that comes off the ocean does little to hide the fact that I'm sweating. Out in the open I feel vulnerable. I've never done anything like this

before, not in daylight, and certainly not when it wasn't Halloween. Though my costume affords some degree of anonymity, the feeling of being out in the open – on display – is nonetheless foreign and distressing. I dart between two buildings within a block of where I've been dropped off and contemplate ditching my costume. Disrobing in public, however, would expose me to a whole new host of problems and potentially amplify the public embarrassment I hope to avoid. I peer down the alley to see where it comes out on the other side. If this were *Star Wars* a glowing Obi-Wan Kenobi would appear behind the dumpster and tell me to *use the force* or *let go*. Instead, a cluster of four misshapen Stormtroopers with two unusually tall Jawas in handcuffs confidently march by.[1] In following them, I conceal my presence by varying my pace with occasional stops to pretend to check my phone.

Ahead of us are about a dozen statues lined up in rows that from a distance look like they could be victims of the Pompeii volcano, little figures frozen forever in time. As I get closer I realize that they are movie props, Samurai warriors from the most recent *Mummy* (Cohen, 2008) movie. I stop to gawk and take a picture just as a man in a Green Lantern jersey bumps me off the sidewalk. In every direction sporadic groups of convention attendees emerge out of what I can only imagine are hobbit holes hidden underneath the city pavement. They move en masse toward a colossal structure that rivals the size and stature of the

[1] The Jawas were more likely restrained by 'imperial binders' rather than what earthlings commonly refer to as handcuffs. Other galactic models include the 'stun-cuff' which emanates an electric shock when triggered by the guard or if the prisoner attempts to resist and/or escape.

battleships docked in the harbor down the street. Despite an air of excitement that hangs over the morning pilgrimage, a profound apprehension sits in the pit of my stomach. It has been a while since I've dressed as a superhero, and I can't be certain that what I am about to embark on is a worthwhile adventure or if I am caught in the tractor beam of a Death Star.

Along with my cheap cape and dish gloves I'm also wearing a custom designed superhero t-shirt. Using an old computer program, I removed the star from an emblem used by the U.S. Air Force and replaced it with the letter "E." I then added lightning bolts to the design and used iron-on transfer paper to burn the image to a dark blue shirt. Wearing it, I transform myself into Ethnography Man.

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Earlier that year, in a metropolis far far away, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City provided a unique conduit into the study of two seemingly distinct trajectories in popular culture: high fashion and superheroes. Conceptualized and assembled by Andrew Bolton, curator of the museum's Costume Institute, *Superheroes: Fashion and Fantasy* (2008) was comprised of costumes, comic books, movie props, photographs and posters, as well as visually stunning fashion ensembles from the world's top designers who went "beyond iconography to explore issues of identity, sexuality, and patriotism" as envisioned through the lineage of comic superheroes (Bolton, 2008, p. 7). The exhibition identifies various material and cultural attributes that distinguish superhero bodies from each other as a means to locate, categorize, and demonstrate the ways in

which the mythos of superheroes are (re)produced in fashion. In doing so, Bolton identifies eight specific superhero body types that reflect different aspects of a superhero's identity, abilities, social and political affiliations, and bodily features. They are:

- the graphic body
- patriotic body
- virile body
- paradoxical body
- armored body
- aerodynamic body
- mutant body
- postmodern body

For Bolton, superheroes evoke the transformative potential of the human body, as well as provide a catalyst for exploring key concepts pertaining to superheroism, such as power, morality, and physical splendor. Thus, the exhibition displays fashion designs that express and embody the dominant images and attributes associated with each superhero *form* in unexpected and meaningful ways.[2] Through the expressive act of costuming, super-bodies become an intriguing metaphor for the ways in which we 'fashion' our own bodies. Designer

[2] An example of this fusion is seen through Bolton's identification of the aerodynamic body, embodied in comic book characters such as the Flash. As an extension into the realm of fashion, Bolton offers Michael Phelps' Speedo race suit which has been engineered to function like a layer of sleek, smooth skin. Chapter three will offer detailed examples and analysis of each of Bolton's body types.

Giorgio Armani aptly locates the imperative bond that links the bodies of caped crusaders with runway fashionistas:

> The fashionable body and the superhero body [are] sites of splendor and seduction. The power of fashion, like the power of the superhero, lies in its ability to transcend the humdrum and commonplace. Fashion and the superhero are bound by whimsy and fantasy, and [Bolton's] exhibition, while a celebration of the fashionable body as well as the superhero body, is ultimately a celebration of the body fantastic. (in Bolton, 2008, p. 6)

Armani's identification of *transcendence* is a key shared feature of both superhero and fashion discourses. It highlights how each responds to and resists cultural trends, evokes desires through innovatively revealing and concealing the body, ultimately surpassing norms and expectations in order to come up with something *new*. "Popular fashion" functions as a means to specify and foreshadow clothing trends by displaying "the promise and the threat of the future, tempting the consumer with new identities that shift with the season and express the fragmented moralities of cultural diversity and social uncertainty" (Arnold, 2001, p. xiv). Additionally, because our clothing is more readily malleable and outwardly expressive than our otherwise naked bodies, we are inclined to experiment, identify, and hold in high regard the "promises and threats" that our fashion has to offer. Clothing is a social skin, an extension or "continuation of the body" wherein our perception of self and the possibilities of becoming are intricately linked to what we wear (Svendsen, 2006, p. 77).

The sense of transcendence made possible through clothing-the-body is figuratively played out through superhero narratives and the science-fiction genre as well. It is within these narratives that the boundaries and possibilities of humanity are (re)imagined or (re)fashioned in ways that exceed contemporary body/technology limitations, providing indications of what someday might be.[3] In developing technologies that improve or 'advance' our species, we tend to imagine the possibilities (both utopian and dystopian) of such techno/body integrations in fantasy genres and comic books. Though some sci-fi depictions of humanity's future seem vastly absurd, others are less distant and more tangible, and resonate strongly with everyday lived experiences. In this sense, superheroes and fashion share a unique aim: To go beyond our awareness of self, foretell fantastic futures, and express humanness in evocative ways that surpass what is immediately familiar or known.

This dissertation utilizes and extends poststructuralist theories of the self/body as well as project discursive possibilities for viewing contemporary ways in which people transform in relation to popular culture. More specifically, images of bodies represented in depictions of comic book superheroes have utility in the re-fashioning of the human form. Once thought of as relatively fixed and

[3] For example, four years following Steven Spielberg's *Minority Report* (2002) the Memphis Police Department in conjunction with IBM launched a predictive analytics software program which evaluates a wide range of social, political, environmental, and geographical factors in developing criminal profiles. These profiles are then used to predict the likelihood of an offense *before* it happens. Along with effective leadership, the technology has "played a significant part" in decreasing overall crime in the city by 30%, and violent crime by 15% (Heusner, 2010).

stable, the human body is now understood as malleable (Graham, 1999; Jordan, 2004; Negrin, 2002; Haraway, 1991), a result of rapidly advancing technologies that allows us to transform and seemingly *improve* our physical bodies. Likewise, once thought of as 'kid's junk' with the literary merit of birdcage liner, a burgeoning comic book culture has emerged in recent decades to proclaim a powerful socio-economic sway on consumers (Dubose, 2007; Hajdu, 2008; Nugent, 2008; Versaci, 2007). Since 1938, when Superman first appeared on newsstands, biblical and mythological renderings of lofty hopes, dreams, fears, and desires have been played out within word bubbles. Though traditionally marketed for younger audiences (a demographic perhaps less likely to imaginatively resist), these stories personify the spirit of science fiction and fantasy in envisioning the possibilities and limitations of the human condition – intellectually, socially, morally, politically, visually, corporeally.

In this study I seek to extend Bolton's work one step further and affirm that superhero body projections are not only functionally and aesthetically reflected in fashion, but are also corporeally inscribed on and within the human body. In other words, it is not just our clothing and fashion that reveals and reproduces the images and attributes of the superheroes, but rather our bodies hold the same potential. Throughout this dissertation I will examine pertinent discursive formations that constitute (and are constituted by) the intermingling relationships between superheroes, costuming/fashion, and technologies of the body. Ultimately, a *genealogy* (Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1980; Shiner, 1982; Hoy, 2004) of malleable body transformation and transcendence emerges out of the

analysis of various subject positions, material artifacts, and historical and social practices that influence (and are influenced by) key relations or 'flows of power,' providing the possibilities for change.

Additionally, my undertaking as a researcher and popular culture enthusiast who uniquely filters and projects such experiences is also considered. For the reader, this trajectory unfolds through a series of narrative perspectives, juxtaposing the current voice with an embodied persona or 'second skin' (Ethnography Man) who takes the reader directly into scenes and spaces under investigation. Consequently, this research is intended to also reveal pragmatic possibilities regarding how identity/bodies emerge and/or transcend in relation to key cultural discourses and constraints in the lived world. They reveal the performed self we engage when transforming our social skin via clothing or costuming, and thus becomes a means to inform and problematize our understandings of the cultural products, practices, and images we so closely identify with.

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The crowd slows and thickens as I get closer get to the convention center. What was previously a smattering of early-risers has turned into a shoulder-to-shoulder mob anxiously waiting for the building to open. All around me are costumed convention-goers immersed amongst the throngs of casually dressed fans. I take a zoomed-in picture of a giant San Diego Comic Con banner that decorates the building before storing my camera in my utility belt, a fanny pack that I have decorated with glitter glue. The utility belt contains all the gadgets and

gizmos I anticipate Ethnography Man might need for this particular mission: Tape recorder, pens, note pad, chewing gum, phone, camera, wallet, Goldfish Crackers, and old clip-on cell phone cases that serve as juice box holsters.[4]

The crowd's collective enthusiasm absorbs my attention. I remain vaguely aware of why I have come here and worry that I might be missing opportunities to conduct interviews. I want to ask convention attendees about their costumes, about performing fanaticism with their favorite popular culture icons, and determine how they perceive their own sense of self in relation to the characters they pretend to be.[5] Nearby I notice a trio of Ghostbusters who look bored and detached from any ongoing conversations. But when I reach in my utility belt to retrieve the tape recorder, I see that my dish-gloved hands are shaking. I take a deep breath and wipe the sweat from my brow. I should know how to talk to these people – *these are my people*. Then I think that maybe my apprehension is more about not knowing how to explain myself than necessarily the awkwardness of approaching strangers.

The world of superheroes is familiar to me but the degree of immersion I have embarked on is not and necessitates a performance of its own, a careful

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[4] I'm packing three Hi-C's: Two Boppin Berry's and a Flashin' Fruit Punch.

[5] In doing so, I hope to identify (and experience) practices and performances wherein the boundaries of self become blurred with popular culture, and discover various ways in which we manage such identity boundaries, specifically through the performed/costumed embodiment of our most popular characters, icons, and celebrities. Ultimately, escapism, transformation, and transcendence emerge as ways body/identity changes occur in relation to popular culture (Chabon, 2008; Hajdu, 2008; Nugent, 2008; Nygard,1997). These key features will be offered as options for viewing the power dynamics that emerge from such embodied performances.

balance and negotiation between various familiar and unfamiliar sides of myself. I have read a lot of comics growing up, am well versed in the Marvel and DC universes, have suffered through many indignations of 'geekdom,' and invested a small fortune in comic books. Similar things can be said regarding my experiences with qualitative inquiry: I'm well read, got some lingo down, with much suffering and debt. Why then, in this moment of reckoning, do I feel like such an amateur?

This is not the first time I've dressed up as a superhero. When I was a kid my mom would buy me underwear with superheroes on them. For a while I had Spider-Man then Batman, and I think the Flash. The rule was, as long as I kept them clean she would periodically buy me a new pair. I remember the mornings most vividly. Putting on a new pair of Superman briefs was like slipping into costume. *Villains beware!* The front yard became Metropolis and I was invincible. I flew over the swing-set snaring evil henchmen. With my super strength I lifted heavy objects and threw them over the fence, and used my x-ray vision to defuse a bomb under my dad's station wagon. I ran laps around the house at full speed, circling the earth. Before long my mom would appear on the front porch and yell at me to come inside and put some pants on. There was always a kryptonite glint in her eyes. A quick spin-kick to the birdbath ensured the bad guys could never brainwash her again.

It wasn't long before I made my first public appearance as The Man of Steel. Each Halloween my preschool held an outdoor parade in the parking lot when it came time for parents to pick up their children. However, the real perk

was that students got to spend the entire day wearing their Halloween costume at school. My choice of costume was obvious, consisting mostly of Superman pajamas that I had owned for some time. My mom modified them by adding a cloth cape with safety pins and putting me in bright red rubber rain boots.[6]

That night I effortlessly became Superman. Standing in front of the mirror, I examined my body enthusiastically, flexing my muscles to show off my super strength then running a couple laps around the house before bedtime. My head hit the pillow that night firmly convinced that good always triumphed over evil. But the next morning was a different story. At school I was quickly confronted by a class bully who didn't appreciate the attention I was receiving from teachers and classmates who were all very impressed by my costume.

"Aren't those pajamas?" my arch-nemesis announced for the entire room to hear. The accusation blindsided me more powerfully than a locomotive. Everyone fell silent and waited for my response.

"No," was all I could offer, fully aware that they *were* in fact what I wore to bed almost every single night. I was instantaneously mortified and had no idea what to say. "They're *not* pajamas" I meekly declared, "My mom got me this … at the store."

[6] Twenty-five years later I find myself standing in our family kitchen watching my mom cut and hem the cape I will wear as Ethnography Man. Meanwhile, my dad works diligently on the computer to get the dimensions of the 'E' emblem to fit perfectly on my chest. In as much that Peter Parker or Clark Kent derive their strength and morality from those that cast them into the world, I am thankful for being so loved and supported, and apologize for the birdbath incident.

"Those *are* pajamas. I have the same ones at home!" he offered triumphantly. I don't remember the kid's name or if we ended up at the same grade school, but I do remember that he was dressed as a ninja (essentially wearing pajamas) and deserved to be vaporized should a real superhero with such capabilities happen upon the situation. "I knew it!" he said, and then to the entire class, "*Scott is wearing his pajamas at school!*"

I spend the entire day feeling ashamed and absolutely dreading the afternoon parade where I would be on display (in my pajamas, mind you) for all to see. I tried to be brave, force a smile for the pictures, but couldn't shake the sense of defeat that quickly infused itself into my core. In my head the humiliation was universally apparent – written all over my body. Not even the *s-curl* my mom attempted to gel into my hair that morning could make me feel heroic. I had been defeated, unmasked and stripped of my powers. I was no longer Superman.

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The connections that link what we read in a comic book and what is happening in the 'experienced' world may seem fantastic and far reaching. However, communication studies offer broad, interdisciplinary approaches for studying extensive and complex issues that function to constitute our social world and influence how we are situated within it. As such, we are afforded options for viewing culture, technology, bodies-in-transition, and human behavior in ways that bridge discursive trajectories, offer avenues for new meaning-making, and often point to problems or areas of critical contention. Critical/cultural studies in

communications specifically maintain that we attend to signifying practices within the world around us that call us into being (Sardar &Van Loon, 1999). Within this tradition, specifically regarding mass mediated communication and popular culture's influence on lived experience, Brummett (1984) forwards Burke's notion of the *representative anecdote* and *equipment for living* as ways to understand and "reveal the essence" of how mediated discourses provide humans with the wisdom and common sense needed to grapple with real-world problems, desires, and contingencies (p. 162). In doing so, we are called upon to critically attend to the various ways we come to (re)present the self in popular culture, which ultimately has direct and indirect influences on how bodies/identity are (re)shaped. Additionally, we are reminded that the stories we encounter in popular culture (and characters such as popular superheroes) should not be dismissed as mere fantasy or escapism, but rather always resonate in some way with themes and points of contention in our lives.

> Superheroes are scions of ancient mythological, literary, and historical characters, dating back to Gilgamesh in the seventh century B.C. and including the pantheons of Indian, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman gods, as well as Jesus Christ and the Lone Ranger. That superheroes are the products and embodiments of their cultures is an accepted, obvious truism. But if the values and ideals they signify vary across time and characters, taking stock of a society's superheroes-and supervillains at any given time thus can illuminate a particular cultural moment. (Shugart, 2009, p. 98)

Therefore, it is no coincidence that major political and social events in Western history symbolically reverberate in comic book narratives, and are inscribed/embodied in popular superhero characters, such as Captain America (U.S. entry and participation in World War II), the Incredible Hulk (atomic-age nuclear testing), and the Enigma (social confrontation with homosexuality). Accordingly, these discursive themes or 'historical moments' that bridge real world experiences with fictional comic narratives do not just randomly emerge. Rather, discursive relationships/tensions between texts and social practices inform the problems or phenomena under investigation (Brummett, 1984, p. 62-63). These anecdotal/discursive exchanges or 'confluences of power' indicate the directions that power and presence flows, and suggests that real-world constraints influence and are reflected in popular culture texts, which in-turn have direct bearings on how we understand and situate ourselves in the world, as well as the materiality of our bodies (Foucault, 1980, 1990; Hoy 2004). [7]

Poststructuralist scholars who attempt to trace and analyze these discursive relationships do so on a variety of macro, meso, and micro levels, which serve the ultimate aim of providing "insight regarding transformation and change" (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009, p. 1517). As such, *power* gives shape to systems of domination and oppression, which additionally comprise our available options for resistance and innovation (Foucault, 1977, 1980). As noted by Hoy

[7] Foucault's notion of 'bio-power' is alluded to here and will be reviewed more closely in the next chapter. The purpose of mentioning it here is to foreshadow theoretical links between popular culture discourses (comic book superheroes) and their influential relationship on our lived experiences.

(2004), inasmuch as we are *constrained* by power, one must be able to identify a discursive phenomenon's "injuries" and articulate its "grievances," not merely in the reactive sense but also proactively, so that the critique leads to an agentic form of action and engagement (p. 6). Such tensions regarding agency regularly emerge in superhero narratives wherein "transcend[ing] the humdrum and commonplace" is a widespread feature of the superhero and science fiction and fantasy genres (Armani in Bolton, 2008, p. 6). However, inasmuch as superheroes *project* what might be, they often materialize when there are oppressive discursive/political forces that must be resisted. These moments of resistance occur at global and local levels – such as with the X-Men's resistance to social and institutionalized discrimination, as well as resistances faced in the personal 'becoming' of Superman, an alien who is essentially a displaced immigrant. As such, superhero narratives chart potential courses for us to follow (albeit a problematic ones), indicating who we are, where we are potentially going, and the conditions that influence how we arrive there.

A specific application of these influential discursive relationships in popular culture can be seen in Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), a film within the sci-fi/horror genre that expresses and predicts the possibilities and pitfalls of the political, economic, and social climate in which it was produced. Broadly, the film is an allegory that problematizes Cold War paranoia (invader from within), societal evolution toward mindless consumption (literally, flesh-eating zombies), and the Civil Rights movement (African American protagonist/hero who is killed at the narrative's climax by an angry mob of white

men fearing the unknown 'Other' and mistaking him for a zombie).[8] Thus, the film offers a critique of real-world conditions and tensions that were immediately pertinent and weighing heavily on the collective consciousness of 1960's movie-going audiences.[9]

In looking at more contemporary examples, films such as *Gamer* (2009), *The Surrogates* (2009), and *Avatar* (2009) were all released in the same year, and each speaks to the notion of existing outside our bodies by means of technological innovations intended to *improve* us. They are timely and resonate with audiences because of the rampant abundance of 'virtually embodied' technologies, interactions, and transactions that flourish in our contemporary lived experiences.[10] These thematic conflicts in science fiction narratives keep audiences glued to their seats and are usually centered on the dystopian possibilities of technologies run-amuck. And thus we witness reoccurring tensions in our popular culture that specifically draw out the problems of the post-industrial age: Do the same technologies intended to improve humanity also pose a constant risk of destroying us? Or, in relation to comic books, at what point does

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[8] Post-apocalyptic spoiler alert.

[9] Brummett's (1984) uses the representative anecdote of Xeroxing to demonstrate how U.S. 1950's and 1970's themes of fear, paranoia, and invader within were expressed in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel, 1956; Kaufman, 1978).

[10] Crafting multiple 'selves' via social networking such as Facebook, Second Life, Twitter are the most obvious examples, but also things like first-person immersion video games such as the Call of Duty series, World of Warcraft, and The Sims not only offer a means to play out a second self, but also re-program our 'public memory' of historical events via revisionist history narratives/experiences (Hess, 2004).

the ‘splendid and seductive’ superhero (mind and body) forsaken humanness for something far more superior, problematic, or dangerous?

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Upon entering the convention center I’m given an identification badge and then herded back outside where I wait for an additional twenty minutes before they officially open the doors. By now the massive crowd fills the sidewalk and spills into the street. An anticipated 130,000 people will attend this year’s convention, and sprinkled throughout the crowd are thousands dressed in costume. All around me are crime fighters, robots, and GI Joe’s, many of whom have begun to ‘play,’ performing and exaggerating their adopted personas to the amusement of nearby spectators. At times the crowd will collectively divert their attention to gawk at an iconic character parading by, such as when a six-and-a-half foot tall Darth Vader complete with Imperial Guard passes. I instinctively summon the *Imperial March*[11] in my head, and no sooner am I two bars into it that I realize at least three people in the immediate area humming along with me. The moment is soon interrupted by a man dressed in a Wolverine costume positioned by a main entrance of the building where the crowd is the thickest and most rowdy. He takes elaborate swipes at the doors with his rubber claws, occasionally striking the convention volunteer ‘securing’ the entrance who then falls over pretending to be slashed across the chest. The goading crowd erupts in applause when the guard has been rendered incapacitated, which is immediately

[11] Composed by John Williams for *Star Wars: A New Hope* (Lucas, 1977).

followed by dozens of cameras being thrust into the air, fervent periscopes searching for an ideal angle through which to document the spectacle.

The abundance and proximity of so many costumed convention-goers is exciting and offers a temporary distraction from my anxiety. I become increasingly lost in the crowd and momentarily forget that I'm also dressed in costume. Though the majority of people are not dressed up, they still play an important role as spectators. Many have turned into amateur paparazzi, documenting the spectacle all around them with equally animated zeal. Though the majority of people in the immediate vicinity are expectedly male, there are nonetheless more female attendees than I had anticipated. It is impossible to do a specific head count, but by best estimation it appears as though at least 70% of the crowd consists of white males, maybe more.[12] As I am reminded later on, our proximity to Mexico and the overall diversity of southern California compared to

[12] Critical problems regarding gender, race, and representation will be provided in subsequent chapters, specifically conflated in the paradoxical and mutant body analysis. In the meantime, Callahan (2008) offers a vivid account of the presence of women and diversity at the convention which resonate with my own observations: "Comic-Con has a growing number of female attendees and an increasingly vocal gay/lesbian presence, but the Con is still territory dominated by straight men. The women who masquerade as popular culture characters often dress in a highly sexual manner, adding fetishistic touches to already sexualized characters. This last summer, a woman dressed as Ms. Marvel added thigh-high stockings with lace tops to the costume, replacing the plain, black leggings of the original design. Women dressed in this way often stop to take pictures with adoring male fans, who then post them to websites … It is easy to criticize this behavior as sexist, especially given the presence of super-heroine porn on the internet, much of which plays out elaborate rape fantasies. Yet, there is a sense in which these women at the Comic-Con occupy a position of power. The characters they poach and embody are often figures of strength; you will see many women dressed as 'bad-ass' characters such as Wonder Woman or Jean Grey and none dressed as Lois Lane or Mary Jane Parker."

the rest of the country may skew the generalizable presence of those present at the convention and invested in fandom. Additionally, not everyone is exclusively here to 'consume' comics or superheroes. There are so many different facets of popular entertainment offered at the convention that one might be there to seek out specific nuanced aspects of the Comic Con culture.

The jovial atmosphere and proximity of other caped crusaders provides a rush of confidence. I unhook my Batman mask attached to my utility belt and strap it over my face. I found the mask in the toy department of a Target and modified it by cutting off the distinguishing Batman ears. When the convention doors open the crowd is greeted with a blast of cold air that lifts my cape and sends it flapping erratically behind me. Blushing beneath my mask, I make a feeble attempt to hold it down in a not-so-heroic scene reminiscent of Marilyn Monroe's iconic display of modesty while standing over an open air vent in *The Seven Year Itch*. Of course, had Marilyn been a balding graduate student wearing a fanny pack and dish gloves, I doubt they'd still be selling posters of the image. I give up my efforts and let the cape flap wildly and unapologetically as I make my way into the convention center. There is no more room for modesty. My adventure has begun.

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For Foucault (1977, 1980), *power* exists as discursive constraints on what can be *known*. It is through the discursive world and accompanying social processes that the foundational means by which knowledge of the body (its possibilities and limitations) is discerned, and how our sense of subjectivity is

(trans)formed. In seeking to examine such transformations, I will attempt to see the self as neither fixed nor essential, but rather "as a product or an effect of competing, fragmentary, and contradictory discourses" (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005, p. 168).[13] Ergo, the selection of discursive trajectories (superheroes, costumes/fashion, and technology) is intended to inform the substantive malleability and possibilities of human body transcendence.

In the following chapter it will be necessary to review key perspectives of the self/body (and their formative technologies) to discern how these material transformations tend to fall in line with 'progress narratives' that seek to optimize the human body for the sake of growth, improvement, efficiency, supremacy, and longevity. Namely, I plan to examine the discursive power tensions between *utopian* and *dystopian* projections of technological progress, which manifest corporeally as *transhuman* and *inhuman* versions of emerging 'techno-bodies.' To do this, I will use Foucault's genealogy of power (Foucault, 1972, 1977, 1980;

[13] Tracy & Trethewey (2005) offer the notion of the "crystallized self" to demonstrate how the metaphor of a crystal can be used as a means to better conceptualize identity. Essentially, the authors claim that identity is often conceived and expressed as a "real self ↔ fake self" dichotomy, and that the way to break from this dichotomous thinking is to understand the self as having many sides and many shapes. These multiple views of the self are produced and are emergent depending on the "various discourses through which they are constructed and constrained" (p. 186). In its most basic form, the crystallized self can be thought of as both physical and temporal, local and multiple. If our identity is expressed through various "frames," each frame can be thought of as a window looking into a particular side of the crystallized self. Our ability to perceive and enact various sides of the self allows us to identify, empathize, and create altogether new personas that exist, at the very least at the level of performance, but also in ways that resonate with a deep sense of self.

Shiner, 1982; Hoy, 2004) as a means to theoretically ground core assumptions, as well as obtain a 'method' through which we can analyze and answer the following questions:

1) What are the primary discursive constraints that inform and influence the ways in which body malleability is regarded as utopian/dystopian? If we accept that superhero bodies are sites of splendor and seduction, how does this knowledge inform the human capacity to continually improve or change? Regarding utopian/dystopian bodies, what mechanisms of power privilege one perspective over others? More broadly, who has power?
2) In what ways are contemporary bodies transforming at local levels through lived experience? What critical problems emerge when our models and modes of transcendence are highly reflective of gendered, political, and hegemonic discourses, such as with superheroes? In other words, how is power exercised?
3) In what ways are the effects of super body transformations seemingly totalizing to the degree that certain aspects of humanity are potentially lost? Can human consciousness survive such radical (corporeal/identity) changes if this is in fact a direction we are headed? Who is not accounted for in such transformations?

Genealogy as an Anti-Method

Genealogy is a perspective/approach that is useful for investigating how power influences body transformation, as well as how discursive products and

practices (fashion and art, comic book superheroes, convention costuming, etc.) are written onto the body. As such, it is an appropriate method for investigating the constraints that evoke body transformation because it purposefully avoids the pitfalls contained in methods that claim to offer universal truths, as well as frees us from solely focusing on the progressive, seductive, and utopian determinism that permeates the vast majority of superhero discourse. Rather, we are also made to consider the dystopian and 'immaterial' effects of these power relationships as they flow in, out, and amongst constraining discourses.

The 'method' used to answer these research questions requires us to adopt perspectives regarding the nature of discourse that on their surface may seem antithetical to formulating systematic guidelines for analysis. In this way, Foucault's genealogy of power/knowledge must be first understood in relation to his theoretical assumptions before it can be made sense of as a viable tool for critical inquiry. The accompanying prescription for reading Foucault in this way is grounded in Shiner's (1982) consideration of genealogy as *anti*-method and Hoy's (2004) extension of Foucault's work that identifies genealogy as "the critical dimension of poststructuralism" (p. 8-10). Additionally, LeGreco and Tracy's (2009) work at systemizing discursive formations will inform the various locations or layers of analysis that will be undertaken. Once these unique relationships between theory and method have been established, I will then attempt to systematize a process on doing analysis that inherently resists systemization.

In order to conceive of genealogy-as-method, Shiner (1982) reminds us that there are political intentions/dimensions that underlie all of Foucault's work (p. 382). For Foucault, historical and philosophical questions collapse into each other in the sense that there are always political/ideological imperatives that accompany any investigation which seeks to understand *truth*. As such, Foucault makes distinctions between the role of the "universal" and "specific" intellectual in society as a means to establish exactly what the "professional" intellectual can feasibly claim to know (Foucault, 1980, p. 129). By "universal intellectual" Foucault refers to those who speak for everyone, from positions that claim to know the problems of humankind and identify injustices and abuses of power that impact us universally. Conversely, the *specific intellectual* includes those who do not maintain famous or highly regarded positions within the intellectual realm, but rather includes practitioners (found in every sort of occupation) whose expertise are derived from lived experiences wherein "discourse is a form of action; [and] *theory is practice*" (Shiner, p. 383; emphasis original). For these intellectuals, knowledge is not something applied to the problems of the material world, but rather comes to be known through experiences and the discursive constraints on those experiences.

Through his projection of the role of the intellectual in society, Foucault arrives at two key tasks that should comprise the core of intellectual pursuits. First, intellectuals should not be motivated by global visions or overarching leadership as in the tradition of the universal intellectual, but rather provides specific analysis of "mechanisms of power" (Foucault, 1980, p. 145). These

mechanisms provide the nexus through which contending parties ultimately ground their claims of knowledge at local and discursive levels. Foucault's historical undertaking of criminology and medicine/psychiatry serve this particular function by offering critiques of intellectual assumptions through which power becomes structured, thus influencing, maintaining, and controlling the lived experiences of those culturally deemed criminal or insane (Foucault, 1977).

The second task of the intellectual is to develop an analysis and critique of the political economies of truth, or particular systems of power through which 'mechanisms' function. He asks us to move more narrowly toward investigations that "reveal the regime of truth" (Foucault, 1980, p. 145). In other words, systems of power have the ability to validate and invalidate discourse via the continuous exertion and confluence of implicit rules, such as those that maintain the authority to articulate what is truth, the sanctions for determining what is true versus false, and techniques required to legitimize one's discourse so that it is seen as truth (Shiner, 1982, p. 383). These tasks force us to examine the arbitrary values we attribute to discursive relationships, question from where they derive their power, and 'unpack' the rhetorical work that goes into maintaining them. Ergo, those who occupy lower or marginalized positions within the power structure are still accounted for and recognized as contributing to the discursive formation (despite their 'presence' being more readily discounted, silenced, or rendered invisible).[14]

[14] It is worthwhile to note here some key limitations the genealogical approach, which will also be covered in subsequent chapters. The genealogy that emerges through this dissertation is inherently constrained by my unique experiences, paradigms, and assumptions. Despite efforts to avoid the pitfalls of the 'universal

As with Neitzsche, Foucault's project entails questioning philosophical foundations and displacing traditional quests for overarching methods. By rejecting the role of the universal intellectual (author/subject) as well as phenomenological and structuralist methods, he is able to focus on discursive constraints as core relationships under which the scope of intellectual pursuits are framed. Again, these constraints both establish and allocate how power flows and functions, determining what can ultimately be known. Because discursive systems profoundly influence what we think and claim to know, there is always a political dimension to the process of *regulating* discourses, such as with establishing methods (Shiner, p. 384). To extend this in a way that resonates with the current project, Foucault's search for *episteme* is as much a "parody of the search for method" in that the very idea of a systematized method implies that one must "de-politicize discourse," a gesture that counters his theoretical assumptions (p. 386).

From this we can discern several key problems that pervade traditional methods identified throughout Foucault's work and Shiner's extensions. They include the elevated notion that origins or starting points are essential and

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intellectual,' by using superhero and fashion discourses in identifying the flow of power to follow in a genealogy of body transcendence, I utilize hegemonic discursive filters through which to view and analyze human phenomena. Though a genealogy of body transcendence can be examined through any number of discursive formations, the current discourses nonetheless lend themselves nicely to our critical research *because of* the various tensions and problems of representation it presents. In recognizing the theoretical underpinnings of popular culture-as-equipment for living, it follows that a hegemonic society would have hegemonic popular culture, especially in genres and narratives crafted through male adolescent fantasies of escape and becoming. Again, these tensions are recognized and analyzed throughout the research, such as with Ethnography Man's forthcoming confrontations with representation as well as the dystopian aspects of Bolton's body types.

preferable, that what is happening in the present is irrelevant to the systemization of a method, and that methods are often granted objective continuity (Hoy, 2004, p. 36; Shiner, 1982, p. 387). Each of these concerns will be played out and contested in the following chapters.

With these core parameters of the perspective established, we can now begin to recognize this approach as a method. However, it should be emphasized that the *archaeology of knowledge* as well as the derived *genealogy of power* are critiques of conventional ideas, and as noted by Shiner (1982), perhaps not intended to be a method per se, as Foucault might instead be suggesting we replace traditional modes of systematized diagnostic analysis all together.

> Foucault seems to be saying: 'You think I am applying structuralist method? I'll show you a method.' And having shown us this 'method' without a starting point, he promptly goes off and forgets it … Foucault is not looking for a 'method' which will be superior to other methods in objectivity and comprehensiveness but is forging tools of analysis which take their starting point in the political-intellectual conflicts of the present. His method is an anti-method in the sense that it seeks to free us from the illusion that an apolitical method is possible. (Shiner, 1982, p.385-386)[15]

By forwarding genealogy as his anti-method as opposed to archeology,

[15] Again, to be as clear as possible, the 'political-intellectual conflict of the present' identified in this dissertation is intended to specifically focus on identity/body transformation as it constitutes and is constituted by popular culture discourses.

Foucault attempts to distance himself from the implication that archival history has an origin that can be known, is formulaic, and has inherent continuity. He derives the term from Nietzsche, who is also antagonistic to the traditional/institutional systemization of inquiry. In *The Genealogy of Morals* (2003) Nietzsche abandons "looking for a supernatural origin of evil" because he fears that his own a priori has otherwise caused him to "demand [a] precise solution" (p. 3). In staying true to his conception of what can be known, Nietzsche does not attempt to prove or establish that more than one solution can exist, but rather asks "Under what conditions did Man invent for himself those judgments of values, 'Good' and 'Evil'? *And what intrinsic value do they possess in themselves*?" (p. 3, emphasis original). Similarly, Foucault does not attempt to prove that everything is discontinuous, but rather seeks to understand why sudden shifts in continuity occur by specifically looking at how discursive formations function in relation to power (Foucault, 1980, p. 112). By selecting genealogy as a method we move away from totalizing theories and toward *lived practices* as moments wherein meaning making (and resistance) occurs.

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As a young scholar, I guardedly admit that I spend as much time reading comic books as I do academic journals. As a science fiction admirer and pop culture enthusiast I'm embarrassed to show off my meager collection of comic books and factory-packaged action figures to 'devoted' aficionados. At times, academia is a distraction that keeps me from fully immersing myself into the fictional worlds and evocative artifacts of comic book culture. Equally prevalent

is a feeling that all this 'junk' is keeping me from getting my *real* work done. At the very least, none of the comic narratives I encounter are nearly as fascinating without a critical eye through which to view them. Therefore, I often move in and out of spaces occupied by what is typically considered the realm of the 'comic geek' and scholarly academic. Though I never fully disembody myself from either psyche, to function in both worlds requires negotiation of time, space, and resources. In this sense, the participant-observation research I seek to undertake as Ethnography Man is not unlike Wharf infiltrating and living amongst the inhabitants of Kronos, a culture that makes up a core part of Wharf's sense of self but a home he is nonetheless distanced and distracted from. [16]

Less infiltration and more *immersion* and *interpretation*, the goal of the participant-observation research conducted at Comic Con is to identify lived experiences of participants within the costuming culture as a means to better understand the various processes and motivations that inform identity constraints – a process that will ideally reveal the transformative nature of identity/bodies when it comes to superheroes, performance, and fashion/costuming. More locally, I hope to encounter *real* experiences wherein costuming and performance have influence on how we come to know our sense of self. If we accept that the self and body are (trans)formed by culture through a confluence of discursive power relations, as well as acknowledge the assumptions of our anti-method, it becomes necessary to identify (and reflexively experience) the 'mechanisms of power' and 'regimes of truth' that give shape to the Comic Con space.

[16] Kronos is the home planet of Klingons.

What I hope to acquire is a better understanding of the various ways that convention costuming functions to both subvert and liberate us from conceptions of identity/bodies being relatively fixed and stable, and in examining these performative moments, discover potential limitations on *processes of becoming*. Perhaps equally important, this experience/perspective will examine how various 'sides of the self' are performed in what might be our closest contemporary rendering of *carnivalesque* spaces.[17] Beyond the proposed research questions, findings from this study will be valuable to our understanding of how public spaces function as sites for 'transformative play' or 'scenes of transgression' (Stalleybrass & White, 1986), as well our understanding of how individuals manage and articulate various sides of the self in a commercialized, power-laden world.

In interacting amongst participants, I recognize my privileged position as a researcher who must account for the political ramifications my presence has on what/whom I study. To account for this responsibility (yet resist formulaic predispositions), I model my ethnographic approach after Oakley's (1981) friendship model for conducting interviews, which was later expanded upon by Trethewey (1997)**.** Grounded in feminist theory, the approach is appropriate for two primary reasons. First, it allows me to fully engage with participants as a

[17] Carnivalesque spaces refer to Bakhtin's (1984) identification of a literary mode that transgresses styles and assumptions of dominant approaches in literature. When taken as a metaphor for social performance, carnivalesque subversion and liberation transpires in spaces considered *carnival*, locations wherein powerful creativity is expressed through costuming and play, ribald mimicry, the dismantling of social hierarchies, and the mingling of opposites (p. 829).

friend rather than viewing participants as subjects or data. Additionally, prepared questions are used to guide the conversations but not control them. The friendship model is highlighted by the free-flow and shared control of dialogue. Within these dialogues, I attempt to locate and interpret narratives that reveal how notions of identity are constructed, managed, perceived, and performed by those who identify as being actively involved in comic book or 'geek cultures.'[18] In this sense, my selection of how to conduct interviews underscore Chase's (2005) contention that such narratives should "highlight the 'identity work' that people engage in as they construct selves within specific institutional, organizational, discursive, and local cultural contexts" (p. 658).

I additionally recognize the role I embody as a filter/constraint of the ethnographic and genealogical experiences under investigation, and the potential pitfalls of narcissistic, self-fulfilling scholarship. Oakley's (1981) method for conducting interviews asks that I reflexively account for my position as a researcher, as a 'friend,' and as a privileged participant. As such, my perspective is limited in that I fit the stereotype of someone whom the comic book industry tends to accommodate. I am a young white male, well-educated but lacking some very basic social skills, with a limited but moderate disposable income. The findings from this experience would be markedly different from an alternate

[18] Nugent's (2008) *American Nerd* chronicles the development and implications of a burgeoning nerd/geek culture. Additionally, Jones' (2004) *Men of Tomorrow: Geeks, Gangsters, and the Birth of the Comic Book* provide a focused look at how 'geek culture' has emerged through the various discourses of comic books and popular entertainment.

perspective that more immediately contends with notions of gender, privilege, ability, and ethnicity. Nonetheless, such tensions and problems will emerge throughout this study at social, political, and personal levels, and will be specifically attended to through Bolton's paradoxical, mutant, virile, and post bodies, and throughout chapter four.[19]

Finally, in regard to style and content, sections of this study that are specifically derived from the Comic Con experience are intended to be accessible to multiple audiences, including the participants involved in the study. My findings draw on field notes, informal interviews, researcher reflexivity, and participant observations that I have gathered through attending the San Diego Comic Con International at the end of July in 2008 and 2010. The research comprises roughly thirty-seven hours of observations and approximately 45 informal interviews, with periodic breaks for eating, resting, and snagging autographs.[20]

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[19] The forum section of the spring, 2009 issue of *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* offers a variety of such questions. Again, the majority of these concerns/questions will reveal themselves throughout the genealogy, and will be addressed in the analysis section of this study.

[20] Though loosely structured, many of the informal interviews occur organically on the convention floor, where multiple participants interact within a single discussion. Therefore, certain interviews took the form of 'impromptu focus groups,' involving multiple participants, sometimes coming and going as they please. Additionally, engagement on the convention floor generally takes a very informal form. With hundreds of media outlets interviewing and recording participants for entertainment and news purposes, most convention attendees are happy to grant brief interviews. In fact, in all my time at Comic Con, only two people have ever declined to talk to me; one person was simply not interested in talking, and the other was running late for a panel presentation.

The humiliation I experienced dressed as Superman in preschool was a tension that figuratively and subconsciously followed me through much of my childhood and adolescence. I was an obese kid, an overly critical loner distrustful of those who tried to get close to me and socially stunted by pressures to fit in. I was always begrudgingly picked last for games in school, would sometimes fake an injury to get out of running during gym class, or purposefully skip locker-room showers to avoid exposing my body to the other boys. I also avoided neighborhood birthday parties for fear that my social and physical awkwardness would embarrass me. As such, my social circle consisted of a small, select smattering of semi-loyal acquaintances, none of whom I keep in contact with today. I never attended a prom, let alone a high school dance. Despite my physical enormity I considered myself invisible in the eyes of girls, and wouldn't have known how to act around them even if they *had* noticed me, which they didn't.

Yet despite the awkwardness of my youth, I never thought of my experiences as anything unique or too distressing. Additionally, I was never fully aware of how unwittingly I closed myself off to people and experiences, but rather saw myself as a potential annoyance or burden on those around me. As far as I was concerned, I had a loving and supportive family, was privileged and well provided for compared to the majority of people in the world, and had been set on a path to make a great life for myself. I was by no means unhappy, but also never fully satisfied. Any emotions that felt too disconcerting to address could be easily defeated by the satisfaction of eating, isolation, or escaping into a comic book.

Throughout these years I amassed a modest collection of comics. There were long stretches where I religiously collected a few titles, but then there were also prolonged absences wherein baseball cards or action figures became primary objects of fantasy. Perhaps not so surprising, as soon as I was exposed to comic characters other than superheroes, I quickly abandoned them. I first gave up on Superman, and soon to follow out the door were Spider-Man, Flash, and Green Lantern. Though most kids read these stories for the evocative ways superheroes allow them to fantasize something *beyond* themselves, I learned early on that I could never be a superhero, and would be torn down by those around me if I ever tried. Even Batman, despite the burden of his humanness, seemed too fantastical and mechanically enhanced for me to fully empathize with. What was the point in pretending to be a superhero if it was completely implausible that you could ever become one?

Consequently, my favorite character to read growing up became the Punisher (Conway & Romita, 1974), which is the story of an unmasked vigilante and former cop on a one-man-mission to avenge the mob execution of his family. The Punisher is a 1980's postmodern hero with no super powers, but rather born out of Vietnam, hell-bent on violent and militaristic revenge, meticulously cleansing the streets of New York City of gang and mob aggression. He kills bad guys indiscriminately and makes no distinction between henchmen and super-villains. As far as the Punisher is concerned, they're all bad, each contributing to the degradation of society and therefore must be executed. The Punisher is bitter, isolated, damaged, overcome with guilt and remorse, and ultimately burdened by

his own existence. He constantly puts himself in the line of fire, almost hoping for a bullet to hit a vital spot, but it never does. Instead he toils away at his one-man-war; forever an outcast and always a criminal in the eyes of more 'moral' superheroes who refuse to kill at any cost. But the Punisher is still very much a hero, and does live by a moral code. Thus, I saw more of myself in the Punisher than I could ever find in something as ridiculous and juvenilely utopian as Superman.

But I did not grow up and become the Punisher. During my years as an undergraduate, I don't think I ever opened a single comic book. College was less a time for escape and more about discovery for me. Then in graduate school, on a whim, I bought a recent copy of the Punisher and had a cathartic experience. I had a hard time identifying with the character and immediately started questioning my childhood attraction to him. In college I had found my voice, my confidence, and my ability to see beyond the social pressures that made adolescence so difficult. I was a much happier person. Despite being closely tied to the Punisher's persona, I was able to recognize that he is an ugly character who, even by his own admission, is filled with more hatred than good. The Punisher nonetheless serves a purpose. Luckily for me, I found awareness and forgiveness to be a much more effective coping mechanism for overcoming adolescent angst than tactical and violent revenge. Though I still carry some of the frustrations of the Punisher around with me, they no longer have such a strong bearing on how I see myself in the world.

The following month I returned to the comic book store to purchase the next installment of the Punisher, but also picked up a few superhero titles that I had long ignored. The juxtaposition of narratives/personas became abruptly apparent to me. Would I be a different person today had my sense of self, society, morality, and justice been filtered through a more utopian perspective? If my transcendence into adulthood is constrained by such stories, what does that mean for my future? Is it too late for me to 'become' a superhero?

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The content that follows helps to more fully reveal key issues that emerge throughout the genealogy. Chapter two reviews key literature allowing us to arrive at the subsequent overview (chapter three) and analysis (chapter four) of Bolton's eight super-bodies. First, a theoretical overview of tensions regarding our contemporary understanding of popular culture will be reviewed. From there, the discussion leads into a review of 'post' perspectives regarding identity, bodies and technology. These perspectives will ground key insights regarding body transformation, frame relevant utopian/dystopian findings drawn from the analysis of Bolton's super-bodies, and foreshadow various implications and critical areas of contention alluded to in the research questions. Additionally, the adventures of Ethnography Man will continue to be offered as lived examples of theory in action, as a means to demonstrate the ways in which power relations constitute and constrain possibilities for transformation and transcendence.

Chapter three provides an overview of Bolton's eight superhero body types. It highlights the discursive formations that have influenced the emergence

of the super body categories and how they are granted various aspects of power. For the sake of clarity and efficiency (and to minimize some the 'messiness' of this work) at times I will refer to the body types as pairings because they share key features or conveniently comment on each other. The first set of pairs looks at super bodies that are inscribed externally and typically projected as utopian, which includes graphic and patriotic bodies as well as armored and aerodynamic bodies. The second set of body types are those that are 'post' or typically considered dystopian, and include virile and mutant bodies as well as paradoxical and post bodies. Within each body type explanation I will extend and apply the findings to our lived bodies in order to examine the possibilities and limitations of actually becoming a superhero. To accomplish this task, I will frame the findings to include how such utopian and dystopian transformations play out on lived, corporeal bodies.

Additionally, notably absent from this chapter are the exploits of Ethnography Man. This is largely because of the way these lived experiences played out, but also to help streamline the information provided in the overview of the body types. However, Ethnography Man will return in chapter four as he also returns to Comic Con to take on an altogether new and more grandiose challenge. As such, many of the tensions that emerge from his initial encounter with Comic Con are confronted and resolved upon his return in the sequel.

Chapter four addresses critical concerns that emerge out of the analysis that will allow us to specifically answer the posited research question. In this chapter I will specifically ask, *Who has power? How is it exercised? What are its*

effects? These findings ultimately reveal the emancipatory and co-opted potential of body transcendence as provided through popular culture discourses, fashion, and technologies of the body. Again, in this chapter we will also revisit to the adventures of Ethnography Man as he returns to Comic Con to complete some unfinished business.

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In developing the idea of Ethnography Man, the very notion of becoming a superhero researcher seemed antithetical to my orientations as a critical scholar. I had spent my entire life as a vigilante, more divisive and distrusting than cooperative and law-abiding. As such, I am forced to question by what constraints I have been subjected to see ethnography as a particularly noble enterprise that I would associate it with utopian superheroes. Similarly, the development of Ethnography Man has coincided with my transition from student to instructor. I had always thought of myself as more pupil than prophet, and was now saddled with the responsibility of producing evocative, contestable, worthwhile scholarship. Therefore, Ethnography Man represents an uncharted endeavor that I have invested a lot of time and resources learning. And as much as one does not know what it feels like to be a teacher or researcher until they're in the front of a classroom or embedded in the scene – the only way I can know if I have it in me to be a superhero is to don a mask and cape and do what I assume real-life adult superheroes do (i.e. attend comic book conventions).

As such, the following experiences are filtered through my unique voice and body. Despite a resolute and willful recognition of the problems the presence of authorship has on scholarly meaning-making, I also recognize that my personal journey of becoming is both paramount and insignificant for understanding exactly how the particularly identified aspects of transcendence materially manifest, and becomes a material subject through which I intend to demonstrate that we have the potential to become (flawlessly imperfect) superheroes.

Chapter Two

The Process and Politics of Becoming

Superman fractured his spine on May 27, 1995 when the horse he was riding refused to jump a three foot fence at the Commonwealth Park equestrian center in Culpeper, Virginia. Some witnesses claimed that a rabbit spooked his experienced steed. Others claimed that shadows played a part. At any rate, Superman clutched so strongly onto the reins that the bridle and bit snapped right off the horse and accompanied him head-first into the ground. The mass of Superman's body driving considerable force directly onto his skull resulted in shattered first and second vertebrae, instantaneously paralyzing him from the neck down. Superman laid broken, not breathing for a full three minutes before other heroes arrived on the scene and flew him, via helicopter, to the University of Virginia Medical Center.

But Superman did not die. He recovered and rehabilitated to the point that he could breathe and speak with the aid of respiratory machines, as well as move his wheelchair via a breathing tube. He then went on a tireless mission to not only extend and improve his own quality of life, but advocate for spinal cord research and support for those afflicted with spinal injuries.[21] Steadfast and true to his name, Superman refused to be constrained by his condition as long as science and

[21] The foundation he established with his family, the Christopher and Dana Reeve Foundation, has since risen over $70 million and can be accessed at http://www.christopherreeve.org/. Sadly, Dana Reeve died of lung cancer in 2006. The foundation is currently overseen by family members, including their son.

technology offered potential solutions. He was determined, and believed whole-heartedly, that he would walk again; and even set aside fighting for truth, justice, and the American way when confronted with the United States and Bush Administration's continual refusal to open funding for embryonic stem cell research. He instead went to Israel, where restrictions were more lenient. While there he took experimental drugs that almost killed him, all in the hope to walk again.

Though it wasn't the first time his heart stopped beating, Superman eventually suffered cardiac arrest, fell into a coma, and died on October 10, 2004. His body is believed to have had an adverse reaction to an antibiotic used to treat an otherwise ordinary pressure wound infection. There were no traces of kryptonite found in Superman's system when he died. He was 52 years old. For more than nine of those years, the *Man of Steel* was kept alive by machines.

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The preceding chapter offered *genealogy* as both theory and method to help identify key discourses in relation to power, locate critical areas of concern as fissures or disruptions in discursive flow, and provide a means of inquiry intended to analyze identity/bodily transcendence. This chapter reviews key literatures regarding popular culture, identity, technologies of the body and transcendence, ultimately arriving at an understanding of the body in culture as being "a product or an effect of competing, fragmentary, and contradictory discourses" (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005, p. 168). The contributions reviewed in this chapter are intended to inform the investigation into Bolton's eight superhero

body types, foreshadow subsequent analysis of emerging transformations of the body, as well as utopian/dystopian forms of transcendence. Such paradigmatic awareness allows this project to more readily point to key disruptions in the flow of power, as well as indicate the parameters or boundaries (what gets included or excluded) in the subsequent analysis of the body types in chapter three and extensions to the lived body in chapter four.

In addition, Ethnography Man's observations and interactions at Comic Con will also be woven into the scholarship as a means to demonstrate real world examples and tensions highlighted in the reviewed literature. The trajectory of these experiences will take up through his first encounter with Comic Con wherein our hero discovers the paradoxical aspects of playing out identity at Comic Con, but leaves somewhat dissatisfied. These interviews, narratives, and reflections are intended to inform and complicate theoretical assumptions and catalogue what the specific intellectual can feasibly claim to know.

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The Convention Floor

Walking onto the convention floor for the first time is not unlike *Willy Wonka* revealing the Chocolate Room to *Charlie* and his eager cohort, only with *Wookies*. There is a moment of awestruck wonderment at the sheer size and spectacle of the space quickly followed by a mad dash for all the free giveaways. Within the 525,701 square feet of floor space are thousands of booths and exhibits. Fantasy literature, toys, movies, collectable statues, trading cards, comics, video games, and original artwork are all for sale. What started off in

1970 as a convention for comic book gurus and saw an attendance of just 300 people is now a megalopolis of mass commerce, a pop culture orgy of international media and entertainment.[22]

Just moving around on the convention floor is a labor-intensive enterprise. In addition to not knowing where I'm going, standing still to gather one's bearings is not really an option. Thus, Ethnography Man must adapt quickly to the unforeseen circumstances and does so by engaging in the 'pinball technique' for navigating through massive crowds. The strategy involves leaning into nearby patrons and using their hurried momentum to bounce from one person to the next trekking in a similar direction, thus creating a pinball effect with our combined centrifugal forces. Doing so conserves energy otherwise lost on balancing and walking, and is non-intrusive in that people are usually so intent on wherever they're going that they never even notice you're doing it. The method works best

[22] In 1998, with an attendance of 40,000 people, the San Diego Comic Con International was the largest comic book convention in the world. Over the past decade the attendance has over tripled, yet the floor space has only expanded twice as much, insuring "more comic book geeks per square inch than anywhere on earth" (Callahan, 2008). Unique to the San Diego convention is not only its sprawling size and record-setting attendance, but also its massive appeal to Hollywood and entertainment industry promoters. In this sense, the San Diego Comic Con is as much about *all* forms and incantations of popular culture as it is geared toward superheroes and comic books specifically. For example, the 2008 convention saw a radical increase of teenaged female attendees, a demographic invested in seeing the celebrities from the *Twilight* film series, though they may have had little or no interest in other aspects of the convention or in comic books. Television and film producers will often feature writers, directors, and celebrities on their convention panels, and show exclusive footage/material to fans that can only be obtained by attending the convention. Industry producers and promoters treat it as a publicity tour hot-spot and giant focus group, indicating what trends fans will follow and which may fall to the wayside.

in large, fast moving crowds, especially for aimless ethnographers who don't mind getting lost in space.

I pinball my way into a fast moving current that cuts through the length of the convention floor. From this entry point the convention can safely navigate me through a guideless tour of what Comic Con has to offer. In every direction convention attendees scurry into long lines so that they are not left without whatever promotional give-away is being dangled before their outstretched fingers. Their task is wrought with a sense of frenzied desperation, goaded by the scarcity of 'limited edition' or 'Comic Con Exclusive' branding that turns a worthless piece of plastic into a highly coveted, rather expensive piece of plastic (so long as it is still in the original packaging).

Along with the swap-meet-melee, I'm immediately struck by how grandiose, visual, and colorfully branded everything is. Each booth or exhibit displays extravagant props, statues/figures, larger-than-life banners, or scenery that seems colossal in comparison to their depictions on television, in comic books, or as action figures I had as a kid. Visually, Comic Con is the Las Vegas of promotional conventions. Capitalizing off the massive gathering of niche audiences with inexhaustible tastes and obsessive consumption habits, entertainment industry promoters have optimized the most effective visual, corporeal, exaggerated, and memory inducing selling strategies at their disposal. As such, the crowds, costumes, and production-value extravagance of the space makes if feel somewhat like a theme park, only instead of waiting in freakishly long lines to go on rides, people are waiting to buy things.

The pinball current quickly becomes clogged. I have to hit the brakes and trudge my way through the thick of memorabilia leaches like Humphrey Bogart guiding the African Queen into deeper waters. The pavilion occupying everyone's attention is throwing t-shirts, posters, and trading cards into the crowd. No one seems to know what they depict, only that there are far more outstretched arms than shrink-wrapped goodies to give away. As I pass, one of the workers sets a large box onto the floor, right in front of the booth. My brain is instantly reduced to jelly. In unison with those around me, we stretch out our arms and divert our bodies toward the box, clawing at backpack barriers, shuffling our feet inch-by-inch, delightfully moaning at the prospect of devouring something new. The sense of communal play I saw on the sidewalk prior to this seems to have been overrun with the seduction of supply and demand. Whereas the 'performances' I had previously witnessed felt open and organic, the impetus that drives convention-goers inside the convention space seems more so generated around a desire to occupy and consume.

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Contemporary understandings of popular culture are rooted in perspectives that establish mass or mediated culture as a distinct facet of the general field of cultural studies. As such, early attempts to conflate that which is *popular* and that which is *culture* tend to revolve around two major shifts in the development of human experience. First, the mass production of goods by means of the industrial revolution had a significant impact on the population's exposure, awareness, and access to mass produced commodities and subsequent entertainment. Second, the

mass mobility and (post)colonizing of peoples, ideas, and cultural goods exposed previously isolated groups to new experiences and systems of value, belief, and behavior that influence, usurp, and sometimes forcibly replace traditional, authentic, or natural modes of being (Leiss et al., 2005; Storey, 2006).[23]

Despite not necessarily being readily defined as "popular culture," facets of these tensions can be seen in the works of early critical/cultural scholars. As such, we can identify aspects of popular culture as an effect of production, materialized as 'false consciousness' (Marx & Engels, 1973; Eagleton, 1991), as being imposed on the unwitting masses by the hegemonic ruling class (Bennett, 2006), as an operation of ideology (Barthes, 1977), as an outlet to escape reality (Hoggart, 1990); and as a means to resist the oppressive conditions of the ruling class (Hoy, 2004).[24] Recognizing these changes as disruptions in traditional society, early critical/cultural scholars often theorized these changes as a *threat*. Many feared that what it means to be a human was becoming less a culmination

[23] It is no coincidence that our primary exemplar for contemporary utopian superheroes, Superman, is created at the outset of these tensions. As such, our very projection and understanding of where superheroes come from is a reaction to key aspects of industrial culture and the subsequent mobility and dispersion of people and ideas.

[24] In highlighting discourse as our primary mode of understanding, the 'means of production' function as a key mechanism of power that drives industry and mass commerce. As such, these critical perspectives regarding culture are grounded in Marx and Engels, who see it as a way to politicize and police prevailing dominant ideologies and power structures. The effect is a spellbound 'consumer culture,' wherein the seductive 'escape' of popular culture manipulated by the superstructure embeds and influences social values and ideological structures into the public consciousness as a means to manage it and maintain the status quo (Eagleton, 1991; Leiss, et. al, 2005).

of our lived customs and heritage, and more so crafted out of what we purchase and the perceived status such goods provide (Baudrillard, 1994; Postman, 1985).

Arnold (2006) sees these disruptions as 'anarchy,' a political and social disruption through class difference and the influence the populace has on aristocracy. For him, culture should be "a study of perfection … perfection which consists in becoming something rather than having something, in an inward condition of the mind and spirit, not in an outward set of circumstances" (p. 48). Arnold's 'study of perfection,' does not refer to utopian projections of humanity we might see in comic book superheroes, rather he calls for a refinement of culture centered on active engagement of the mind and spirit over passive consumption. For him, the key pursuit of human endeavors should entail transcendence toward completing the intellectual project of the Enlightenment. Anarchy, through the guise of popular culture, demonstrates how the unintelligent are easily duped by less than adequate knowledge and experiences. *Popular* culture is therefore seen as a discursive constraint that stifles or inhibits our propensity to intellectually achieve and transform.

Leavis (1933) builds off Arnold's perception of this tension in identifying what he sees as a cultural crisis of the 1930's. He ultimately fears that "uneducated and semi-educated" masses present a real and viable threat to traditional intellectual supremacy, wherein "'civilization' and 'culture' are coming to be antithetical terms … not merely that the power and the sense of authority are now divorced from culture, but that some of the most disinterested

solicitude for civilization is apt to be, consciously or unconsciously, inimical to culture" (Leavis & Thompson, 1977, p. 26).

As such, Levis calls for better policing of culture by what is seen as an absent or irresponsible authority. In an attempt to eradicate the threat of popular/consumer culture, he wants us to develop new schools of training to help educate the intellectually elite to oppose and resist mass culture, and revive genuine and responsible thinking to civilization. To do so, we must not only resist the temptation of subservient gratification, but also challenge institutions like the popular press that capitalize off such degradations with "unremitting, pervasive, masturbatory manipulations." Seen this way, the popular press exists as "the most powerful and pervasive de-educator of the public mind" (Leavis & Thompson, 1977, p. 139).

Somewhat conversely, Hoggart (1990) recognizes that all of this cultural *junk* is as much produced by the masses as it is willed upon them by the hegemonic and industrial elite, and is thus a means through which the working class also *escapes* from the toils of lived hardships. Though he is confident that mass culture is equipped with the intelligence to resist junk culture (though the young are particularly vulnerable), he is fearful that the totalitarian elite will capitalize off our obsession with popular culture and use it for social control. And thus he provides a warning regarding the threat popular culture poses to our refined sense of taste, as well as indicates how these deceptive 'good times' (the joys of mass consumption) become ritualized and naturalized:

> ‘Having a good time’ may be made to seem so important as to override almost all other claims; yet when it has been allowed to do so, having a good time becomes largely a matter of routine. The strongest argument against modern mass entertainments is not that they debase taste – debasement can be alive and active – but that they over excite it, eventually dull it, and finally kill it. (Hoggart, 1990, p. 196-197)

Taken together, the preceding perspectives lay the groundwork for investigating key *tensions* in popular culture, namely, the arbitrary yet highly contentious distinctions made between elitist, intellectual, and superior ‘high culture’ and that which is merely junk or ‘low culture.’ They also foreshadow the imperative role media will play in disseminating and naturalizing material commodities as popular culture. Finally, these tensions highlight the discursive influence consumption, popular culture, and identities have on each other, providing a means to chart the flow of power and control. Through these introspections (or intellectual assaults) on commodity culture, we are forced to confront the dilemma of how we craft, assign, regulate and attempt to constrain cultural values and behavioral practices in relation to personal taste, commodities, and consumption.

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Commodity Culture

I dislodge myself from a pinball current and latch on to a horde of nearby elves who allow me to follow them as they make their way through the throngs of convention-goers. Though the four of them wear typical *elfin* garb, their

mismatched hair color and dark eyeliner give them an edgier punk-like appearance, somewhat uncharacteristic of contemporary *Middle-Earth* fashion trends.

"Grab as much promo stuff as you can," the senior elf tells me, who is likely no older than twenty. "If you don't want it later on, you can always unload it on Ebay."

Our first order of business is to locate the Warner Bros. booth which provides enormous Wonder Woman and Watchmen shoulder bags (collector items in their own right) for storing the abundance of promotional materials given away by the vendors and media outlets.[25] Experienced convention-goers know exactly where to find the most valuable items. Like my elfin companions, many have devised strategies to obtain the highest priority items as quickly and efficiently as possible. This is the horde's third year attending the convention. I ask them what it is they hope to snag.

"We all have our own thing we like to collect," he informs me. "I try to get all the exclusive Hasbro [action figure] exclusives, but I'm mainly here for autographs ... Once the panels get going, there will be a bunch of writers and artists down here to sign stuff."

"But can't you do all that without dressing up?"

[25] In subsequent years the giant "nerd bags," as I've heard them called, are handed out to every attendee at registration, further ensuring and encouraging the act of consumption.

“It’s not just about buying things. We’re all genuine fans and dressing up is a big part of the Con,” he says, but later admits that the group put their costumes together “last minute.”

“Does it get expensive?” I ask.

“A lot of autographs are free unless you want to buy original art or something commissioned. But sometimes you can convince them to draw you something on the spot, no charge,” he tells me. I notice that the fingertips of his gloves have been cut off and I’m reminded of the similarly gloved hands of the pickpockets I once saw in a production of *Oliver!* “I’ll drop at least $500 this weekend plus the hotel and parking,” he adds.

By time I get around to specifically asking about their costumes, they’re already off in different directions, positioning themselves in long lines at various nearby booths. The action figures enamored by my companions are not familiar to me; one of the many Japanese anime characters adapted for U.S. audiences. This isn’t surprising considering the 8-10 year age gap between us, but that’s not to say there aren’t plenty of other familiar objects to capture my attention. Though the space is filled with the latest toys, games, and hot-topic gizmos, equally present are action figures from my youth, along with nostalgic memorabilia from every decade of the industrial age. In fact, despite an overwhelming youth presence at the convention, I feel just as likely to bump into people my own age or older. The appeal toward pop culture commodities is cross-generational, informed by icons, images, and narratives that hearken to Baby Boomers and beyond.

He-Man action figures fill the display cases in my immediate vicinity, of which I owned dozens in my youth. However, these 'Masters of the Universe' look like they've been genetically modified and radically weaponized since our early encounters two and a half decades prior. Not only has He-Man been using steroids, it looks as though he may have had a facelift and pectoral implants. Additionally, these action figures look (and cost) more like miniature sculptures or works of art than any *toy* I'd hand to a child to play with. The craftsmanship and detail that goes into their wardrobe, weapons, and bodies is evocative of what I remember, but is now infinitely more detailed and precise. As far as their collectable appeal, any tampering with the packaging diminishes their monetary value. I think of how cool it would be to collect them all over again but doubt that I would have the will power to keep them preserved in their plastic prisons. [26]

"Time to hit up Hasbro," the senior elf informs me and pats his bulging Wonder Woman bag. Half the horde is ready to move on and the rest are stuck in a line that wraps itself around the Mattel merchandise counter at least three times. They make plans to meet up at a panel taking place later in the afternoon but will likely spend the next couple hours waiting in lines to buy more toys and collectables. They ask if I'd like to join them, but also attempt to negotiate how

[26] For 'collectors,' the monetary value of the toys overrides the nostalgic appeal that otherwise implores us to open and handle them. Likewise, there are also plenty of collectors who will keep their toys in original packaging but have no intention of ever selling them. Thus we see a potential behavioral tension that derives from the sense of self and fandom we achieve through material consumption: Do we allow ourselves to regress to a childhood state by actually acting out and 'playing' with the toys, or do we keep them framed in their packages like a snapshot of childhood preserved on the mantle but never re-embodied?

they might profit off my accompaniment. Because most toy exclusives have 'limit-per-costumer' stipulations, my companions ask if I will sell them any additional action figures I obtain while following the horde, "for a fair price."

I politely decline their invitation and instead offer them all the free memorabilia (about an armful-worth of posters, trading cards, and kids masks) that I've thus far been able to obtain whilst pin-balling the convention floor. "For Ebay," I say. They take the toys and wish me luck with my research. I thank them for their time and input before I adjust my mask and bid the horde good tidings.

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Sweeping changes in industry and technology, as well as the mobility of people, practices, and ideas, are foundational factors that bring about what Baudrillard calls *commodity culture* (1994, p. 75-78). For him, individuals in society no longer identify with personal needs and desires because these core desires are now almost entirely constructed for us by the media. Whereas we once sought to establish our sense of self through family, community, heritage, and inheritance, we now seek fulfillment, purpose, and sense of who we are through obtaining material objects, made ever more so seductive by the media (Postman, 1985). Thus, the rituals of consumption (naturalized by the media, government, and industry) become the primary means by which we come to *know* culture and the self.[27]

[27] Liess et. al (2005) chart the evolution of mediated advertisements from the 18th Century to today. In doing so, they demonstrate how early American advertisements focused on the quality and functionality of the goods being sold, whereas contemporary advertisements tend to focus on who the consumer is in

Despite early 'warnings' regarding the dulling and mystifying effects of commodity culture, the economic model that nevertheless drove Western commerce post World War II (and became a viable tool in fighting the Cold War) involved the mass production and purchasing or 'popular goods' as a means to *out-consume* foreign competitors, thus establishing financial superiority and political power. The strategic move to use consumption as a political weapon and ultimate socializing mechanism is most famously articulated in retail analyst and U.S. political advisor Victor Lebow's (1955) projection of the 'real meaning' of how consumer culture should function:

> Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfactions, our ego satisfactions, in consumption. The measure of social status, of social acceptance, of prestige, is now to be found in our consumptive patterns. The very meaning and significance of our lives today expressed in consumptive terms. The greater the pressures upon the individual to conform to safe and accepted social standards, the more does he tend to express his aspirations and his individuality in terms of what he wears, drives, eats-his home, his car, his pattern of food serving, his hobbies … These commodities and services must be offered to the consumer with a special

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relation to the product, or how the product will 'shape' them differently (p. 225-228). Additionally, the form that the advertisements take also changes from text-centric or typographic descriptions of products to the visual, fissured, truncated, and ambiguous messages we see dominate advertisements today.

> urgency. We require not only 'forced draft' consumption, but 'expensive' consumption as well. We need things consumed, burned up, worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever increasing pace. We need to have people eat, drink, dress, ride, live, with ever more complicated and, therefore, constantly more expensive consumption. (p. 3)

Several key observations regarding evolving Western consumption practices became readily apparent following the Lebow's projection for the 1950's and beyond. First, the pleasures of consumption increasingly functioned as a socializing mechanism, as he projected, wherein core symbolic cultural meanings are expressed and maintained within the material buying, selling, and owning of goods.[28] Second, when given a choice, the vast majority of people preferred (in terms of consumption) the so-called *low cultural* texts over canonized texts/artifacts. As such, early attempts to eradicate the threat of commodity culture began to seemingly fall to the wayside by the 1960's, though there were temporary successes along the way that often took the form of censorship.[29] Nevertheless, pulp fiction (dime novels and comic books) greatly

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[28] Family vacations that once involved sitting around a campfire and telling stories were just as likely replaced with waiting in lines at theme parks. Restaurants began to say as much about the patronage's social status as much as the quality of food being served. And a car could just as effectively communicate a particular lifestyle as much as it could get you from point A to point B. In other words, the value traditionally placed on the functionality and craftsmanship of material goods was usurped by their symbolic associations to the self, status, and power.

[29] One need only look at the effects of 'McCarthyism' of the 1950's to see how institutional/social paranoia impacted the entertainment industry (and comics). The Red Scare helped fuel an innate distrust of anything that disrupted the status

out-sold and increasingly replaced that which was considered *canonized* literature.[30]

Additionally highlighted in Lebow's projection is the call for industrial planned and perceived obsolescence. Planned obsolescence refers to the idea that goods are manufactured with the intent that they will soon break down and need to be replaced in order to function, or that a key component of the devise will eventually fail to work and thus the entire product must be updated. Perceived obsolescence refers to the consumer's propensity (made possible by the seductive effects of media and advertising) to see their products as quickly outdated, out of style, and in need of replacement (even though they function perfectly fine). Prior to the industrial age, high quality long-lasting material products were preferred because to produce and replace specialty items was time consuming and expensive. Products were meaningful because they were often hand-crafted by artisans and passed down from generation to generation. Furniture, appliances, and toys carried personal meaning and provided as a way by which 'heritage' was materially and symbolically handed down. However, in a consumption-obsessed society wherein products must be "worn out, replaced, and discarded at an ever

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quo, and thus even Superman was accused of being a fascist. In Chapter Four I will specifically address these historical tensions in relation to dystopian/utopian projections of superheroes.

[30] In Hajdu (2008): "In 1948, the 80 million to 100 million comic books purchased in America every month generated annual revenue for the industry of at least $72 million. (The usual cover price was ten cents, although some digest-format books sold for five cents apiece.) Hardcover book publishing, by comparison, brought in about $285 million –about seven times more, though books [were] priced more than twenty times higher" (p. 112-113).

increasing pace," the personal/familial values products carry, and our dependence on *inheritance* to maintain a familial lineage, social and economic status, as well as a personal, or a cultural identity diminishes significantly.

Finally, through the industrial 'homogenizing' of mass culture, goods and products are made to seem complimentary, uniform, and necessary in relation to each other, insuring that people will keep buying the next great thing.[31] Once the commodity culture is made uniform, the industrial elite are able to manage consumption trends and anticipate people's purchasing patterns. Homogenization and predictability coupled with planned and perceived obsolescence are the 'mechanism of power' through which the industrial elite wield the greatest control the masses.

In the first chapter, the relationship between the self and culture was framed by Brummett (1984) forwarding Burke's proposition that popular culture discourses provide representative anecdotes that 'equip us for living.' Again, homogeneity and predictability in this sense become mechanisms through which institutions exert power and control over masses, thus signifying and giving value to whatever 'problems' we will equip ourselves to solve. With a better

[31] Industrial homogenizing of goods is often seen as means by which the industrial elite control the unwitting masses (Storey, 2006, p. 50). For example, whereas mass marketed magazines geared toward women (*Cosmo*, *Glamour*) often offer 'sex tips' on how women can satisfy their man in bed, the corresponding men's magazines (*Maxim*, *FHM*) often depict images of women that are pornographic in nature and seemingly offer men projections of what they should *expect* women to look and act like sexually. Thus the products are homogenized around gender, equipping men to have unrealistic expectations regarding the appearance and behavior of women, and reinforcing power hierarchies that cast women as sexually subservient to men.

understanding of the ways in which commodity culture encompasses the human experience, we can now review perspectives that theorize the self in culture, and investigate the degree of agency we can claim in such social/cultural formations. What will eventually follow is an exploration into various perspectives of how identity forms, functions, submits to, and resists popular discourses that equip us to live.

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Culture and Identity

I notice a large group of people gathered in an area filled with Star Wars memorabilia. A family of four (mom, dad, and two boys) get down on their knees and arrange themselves in defensive positions as Stormtroopers brandishing blasters to the backs of their heads pose for pictures. The family is from Colorado and this is their first time at Comic Con. None of them are dressed up with the exception of a Star Wars mask haphazardly worn by the youngest boy, which he likely picked up from one of the nearby booths. Their convention passes are only good for the day, and they plan to spend the rest of their vacation at the beach. Nonetheless, Comic Con is the primary reason why they selected San Diego for their summer vacation.

"It's pretty overwhelming," the mom, Sharron, informs me.[32] "We've seen coverage of past conventions on the news. With all the celebrities and fanfare they

[32] Sharon is not her real name. I have resisted using superhero specific pseudonyms, though the thought did cross my mind.

have here, we decided we had to check it out. Our boys were pretty excited to hear we got tickets."

Though the family has budgeted to spend money at the convention, none of them had anything in particular that they're hoping to purchase other than picking up something to read or perhaps a game they can play while at the beach. Nonetheless, each of the boys has multiple action figures tucked away in their bags and it is still pretty early in the day.

"We came for the experience," the dad, David, informs me. "I was raised on *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* so I'm just as into all this stuff … I like looking at all the statues and props but you've also got to take something home with you, just to prove you were here."

David is attracted to the nostalgic pieces on display, but notes that his sons prefer all the toys. He calls it a "generational thing," wherein contemporary children "have so much more [toys and collectables] than I had growing up." For his kids, it is probably the coolest shopping mall they'll ever step foot in, but for him, it is a metaphysical museum that combines a nostalgic past with an otherworldly presence.

Sharon agrees, and adds that "It feels like stepping into another world. Maybe we'll dress up if we ever come back" she says and takes in the scenery around her. "We have Scooby-Doo costumes at home. That might be fun."

A Stormtrooper interrupts our conversation by directing us and nearby loiterers away from the area, asking that we "Move along," then with a wave of his or her blaster, "these aren't the droids you're looking for."

I thank the vacationers for their input then follow the Stormtrooper's instructions by making my way to the far end of the convention center which is occupied by private vendors, independent writers and artists, and thus more sparsely populated. On the way I happen upon a 34 year-old named Chris who is dressed in a skin-tight superhero leotard that completely exposes his well-rounded figure. The character he is portraying is the modestly obese Mr. Incredible, from the animated film *The Incredibles* (2004).

"I'm normally a pretty self conscious guy," he tells me. "You'll usually see me trying to hide my gut, but what can I say, its part of my character."

I empathize with his apprehension and ask if he can speak more about how his personal confidence changes when dressed up, occupying this space.

"It's nerve-wracking at first, but it's also exciting. Then you get used to people taking your picture, all for fun … Everyone loves Mr. Incredible. I'll soak up all the attention while it lasts.

For Chris, his body becomes a point of pride (rather than humiliation) when on display in this context. "I feel like a celebrity with everyone taking my picture," he reveals, and in many ways he is. During our brief conversation (which doesn't last more than a couple minutes) at least three people begin hovering around us, waiting to have their pictures taken with him. Though they look at me quizzically, perhaps trying to place the 'character' I'm portraying, they are more so invested in documenting one of their favorite animated characters come to life.

Further along the way is Janice, a 40 year old mother of three who works at a pet store franchise in southern California. Today she is her favorite character from *Sailor Moon*, a popular anime cartoon. She left her family at home and drove to San Diego just for the day.

"I'm here because I like to dress up. It's a unique opportunity, especially if you're a fan." She is wearing an ornate red kimono with black and white ribbons that hang from her sleeves. Following behind her, one might mistake her for a rhythm gymnast.

"Why didn't you bring your kids?" I ask her.

"They're just not as into it! I've got a list of stuff to pick up for them though."

"Why wouldn't they want to come?"

"They might be embarrassed to be seen with me," she laughs, then acknowledges the extravagance of her costume by flailing her arms in circles. "They've been before and didn't like having to stand in all the long lines … But I didn't have any of this when I was a kid so I think I appreciate it more."

I ask if she is referring to the abundance toys and collectibles, or the four day fan-fest wherein you get to pretend you're somebody else.

"Both," she says, "I had a pretty repressed childhood. Now I'm a bit of a geek." She goes on to say that Comic Con turns introverts into extroverts, and then offers some information about the character she is dressed as and how much she likes the Sailor Moon series. It reminds her of how "there is something special and powerful inside each of us that will always be there when we need it."

“I’ve heard people argue that an adult who is into this kind of stuff reverting back into childish things,” I observe. “You seem proud of it.”

“I’ve heard that too, but I’m not at all concerned with what those people think. Too bad they’re missing out. Besides, strength in numbers, right?” she replies, then asks, “Who are *you* dressed as?”

I am suddenly reminded that I’m also wearing a costume, a fact that has been easy to forget since I’m not constantly looking at myself in a mirror. “I’m Ethnography Man, which is a superhero researcher,” I inform her.

“Does that mean you research superheroes or that you’re a superhero researcher who studies other thing?” she asks.

“A bit of both, I guess,” I respond, not having fully appreciated the immersion I’ve achieved until that moment. “I guess that makes me a super-geek in every sense of the word. Through ethnography I seek to participate as one of the people I am studying, but since I’m already a comic book geek I’m also just being myself. Well, actually I am conflating two different aspects of myself that don’t normally intermingle: my academic self and a geeky comic book self.”

Janice looks confused, detached, and ready for an escape route. I quickly summarize the thinking behind my costume and thank her for her contributions. Upon taking my leave, I notice that the glitter glue lettering on my utility belt is starting to peel off. Additionally, the mask I’m wearing was made for a child and is too small for my face. Along with the clasp from the bungee cord, it pinches into my flesh and becomes increasingly irritating the more I’m aware of it. Janice’s questions also have me somewhat rattled. I think about the identity

boarders that I manage in this space and conclude that I am not enough of a fan boy to be here if it were not for the research impetus that first motivated me to come to San Diego. Likewise, I doubt I would necessarily be 'out in the field' had it not been for my personal interest in what superheroes mean to us. Again, I think back to my humiliating preschool parade and wonder why it has taken so long for me to fully embrace the world of superheroes, and if this is somehow a personal form of therapy.

I contemplate ditching my wardrobe for the second time but instead become distracted by a booth that looks as if it was transported directly from a medieval strip mall. It specializes in fantasy themed weaponry and apparel, and it is here that I encounter Eddie, a high school math teacher in his late twenties. Eddie's hair is long and spills over a rustic frock draped over his shoulders. Though his shoes and jeans are nothing unique, the shirt he is wearing is probably best described as a 'pirate blouse' with fabric that furls at the sleeves and collar. Eddie enjoys Comic Con because it's a place where he can "pretend in public." He has a personal collection of ten full length swords, and by the end of the weekend he intends to have an even dozen. He tells me that they typically range in price from 40 dollars to up in the thousands.

When I inform him that I'm a graduate student doing research, he quickly proclaims that "Science fiction is full of education opportunities," then adds that it's not just in math and science, but life lessons too.

"It equips us for contending with real world problems," I offer, forgoing the citation.

Eddie begins to list every sci-fi show he can think of with a life lesson in it, half of which I've never heard of, so I interrupt him because that's what a friend would do.

"If everything you ever need to know about life can be taught through science fiction, do you ever teach your classes dressed like this? Bring embodiment into the classroom?" I ask him.

"If it was socially acceptable, you better believe I would," he laughs, and then adds, "I've dressed like this to play WoW, and we've had LAN parties where everyone will dress up. I'll wear my character costume if we do something like that, but it's only happened twice and once was Halloween."[33]

The very mentioning of Halloween right now causes my anxiety to surge. Eddie has unwittingly served me a kryptonite cocktail which I'm trying not to choke on. My disheveled costume slowly falling apart and I wonder if it will even make it throughout the day. Even when compared to Eddie, my costume appears very haphazardly put together.

I ask him how he came to construct his particular costume, and why he selected the sword currently in its sheath over all the other options at home.

"It's a broadsword and most similar to the one I wear in WoW," he casually reveals. "But I'll wear a different one tomorrow. I've got them all at the hotel."

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[33] "WoW" is *World of Warcraft*, a popular first-person immersion role-playing computer game featuring wizards, warlocks, and warriors. A "LAN party" is when people gather with their computers and set up a Local Area Network, usually in order to play multi-player games on several interconnected computers.

“You didn’t fly with them, did you?”

“I drove,” he says. “Even so, I drove carefully. It would be hard to explain to a cop.”

“You’re a true fanatic. Maybe a little compulsive too?” I ask.

“It’s no more of a big deal than if I brought another change of clothes. I’ve got a different sword for each day of the convention. It’s a four day Halloween!”

I hear *Halloween* again and black out for I don’t know how long. When I regain my senses, I notice that Eddie has not stopped talking, and is currently explaining that you don’t really need to dress up every day to play out a fantasy characters because we have toys (e.g. technologies) that do it for you, like video games. “Today’s games are so life-like that you don’t need to go out and dress up to pretend anymore, it’s all done for you right there on the screen.”

He notices that I am a little flush in the face and offers and chalice of a cool liquid that I naturally assume is concentrated dragon’s tears. After I decline he downs the liquid with three big gulps. It is then that I notice that his coat of arms depicts the Apple logo and a Nintendo game controller.

“Sometimes I feel like I was born in the wrong dimension,” he says, then checks the grip on a battle axe.

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Contemporary understandings of the subject in culture viewed through critical/cultural perspectives typically fall on a continuum marked by two extremes. First, certain paradigms see the subject as fixed, relatively stable, and self-aware (such as post-positivism or psychoanalysis; as with Lacan equating the

subject with language). On the other end of the spectrum are post-structural and postmodern formulations of identity that take 'anti-subjective' positions wherein identity is largely viewed as a product of power and discourse (Foucault 1977, 1980), and therefore must be theorized as fissured, incomplete, or cast adrift in a sea of disparate images (Baudrillard, 1994).

Kenneth Burke provides a means to think about the relationship between culture and identity by offering a definition of humans. For him, the need to identify with each other arises out of *division*, a desire to connect despite our *biological uniqueness* from each other (1969, p. 21). Humans occupy positions that are both separate and distinct as well as 'consubstantial,' meaning we attempt to overcome feelings of guilt that arise out of division in order to make such connections. Nietzsche also emphasizes the corporeal significance in subject formation by breaking from Kantian/Hegelian formulations of rational self-consciousness. He regards the body as the central component of identity formation (Hoy, 2004, p. 13). However, because the self can only *resist* structures in discourse, *difference* is always stressed, while a beguiled sense of unity is typically produced (Barthes, 1977). Nietzsche's move to conceptualize the subject as embodied in this way has two key effects. First, it forces us to recognize the influence of culture and discourse on identity formation, but not to the degree that we naturally or immediately think of ourselves as consciously liberated. Second, the relationship suggests that identity is not necessarily 'multiple' or dually located (in mind and body) in the Hegelian sense, but rather the corporeal self is

always an essential and irreplaceable component in the *process of being*, or as Foucault would put it, a *constraint*.

Nietzsche's critique of subjectivity leads us to see consciousness as not the causal indicator of experience but instead, more of an "experiential by-product" (Hoy, p. 47). Therefore, what little agency we have, our 'will to power,' is *reactive* in nature. For him, the body is best understood as a series of various drives that co-exist and function in relation to each other, but also continually change. Therefore, Nietzsche only really gives us an illusion of agency, or at the very least he does not allow us to move beyond the ignorance of our own actions/conditions. Nietzsche's projection of the illusion of agency resonates with the current proliferation of industry (commodity culture), technological innovations, medicine, information exchange, mobility, entertainment, politics, and education, which have had drastic repercussions in the conditioning of how we come to know ourselves. Through these 'mechanisms' that control and give authority to power, *technologies* of power function as a means for the state to constrain the corporeality of what it means to be human, exerting a value-laded 'regime of truth.' Through this "bio-power" Foucault (1990) demonstrates how power/knowledge is materially produced on and through the body via political/consumption practices maintained by those in dominant positions (p. 140-141).

In congruence with Foucault's anti-method, this view suggests that the subject (if existing at all) is cultural theory *in process*, a product of the interactive and performative aspects of how humans corporeally engage with (and are

engaged by) the world around them. For him, a genealogical undertaking of the subject will expose "a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's destruction of the body" (Rainbow, 1984, p. 83).[34] Thus, the body can be seen as a resistive and emancipatory force only if it is both a productive and subjective body. Otherwise, we must view these forms of resistance as co-opted, or agentic moves that serve the ultimate purpose of reifying the status quo (Hoy, 2004, p. 5).

Because we cannot divorce the "political technology of the body" from any authentic sense of being, any act of will must be thought of as a *tension* (what Foucault calls a "strategy;" 1977, p. 26). Butler (2004b) notes how Foucault negates the possessive power of constraints on the body to offer options toward agency. However, because of the all-encompassing presence of power as a discursive constraint on what can be known, we must "disjoin the thinking of agency if we look at Foucault's theory of power as presupposing the subject" (p. 184). As much as power has a grip on people, it also invests them, and is transmitted by and through them in what might be seen as force, resistance, or agency (Foucault, 1977). Thus, Foucault's version of bodily agency is itself a negation: "power is neither possessed nor not possessed by a subject," (thus a tension), and so we are left with a body that is both invested by power, as well as struggles to resist it (Butler, 2004b, p. 184).

[34] Theorists such as Bourdieu (2005) are more so concerned with the *consistency* and *continuity* of the subject, rather than Foucault's emphasis on the body's discontinuity as it passes through time (Hoy, 2004, p. 63).

Butler (1990) and Lyotard (1985) ask us to view the subject as *performative*, in the sense that we engage the world as a repetition of stylized acts, gestures, and articulations that over time are ritualized and homogenized as part of the social system. The activity of 'strategy' then, is an activation of materiality, "on and through, and in tension with, the materiality of the body" (Butler, 2004b, p. 187). Performed diversions from arbitrary norms established by 'regimes of truth,' are therefore often considered abnormal, taboo, and even 'criminal.' As such, when occupying (and being occupied by) hegemonic spaces such as Comic Con, the cultural codes that influence performed behavior are both confining and liberating.[35]

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Representation and Gender

One of the most popular costumes at the convention is the 'Slave Leia' bikini from *Return of the Jedi*. The outfit is almost as iconic as the character herself, having been referenced in an array of popular culture moments, such as on popular sitcoms like *Friends* or *The Big Bang Theory*, but always as an objectified projection of male sexual fantasy. Several things stand out about women wearing this costume at the convention. First, whenever I encounter a Slave Leia on the convention floor, she's almost always accompanied by another woman dressed in the exact same costume, or similarly sexual attire. Additionally,

[35] In chapter four I will discuss the how Comic Con is a space that encourages performative transgressions from the social norm, but in doing so subjects bodies into hegemonic that problematically constrain how we perform gender, ethnicity, and various representations of the transitioning self.

I never really get a chance to talk with any of them because they are *always* being mobbed and ogled by fans and tend to be far too busy posing for pictures, or trying to rush off somewhere, to stand around and chat. But in posing and performing sexuality, most all of the women appear incredibly comfortable and confident with being occupied by the male gaze. The pose seductively for the cameras, much like a celebrity would on the red carpet by exposing a leg or arching the back. Regardless, the multiplicity of Slave Leia's only amplifies the sexual fantasy at play for many of the men. Once again I fall in line with those around me and join the pack of drooling voyeurs, snapping a quick photo or two before they rush off, leaving dozens adolescent fantasies revitalized in their wake.

Later in the afternoon I talk with Kami who is dressed as Emma Frost from the X-Men series. Her costume consists of a white bustier with a long white robe that covers her back, but leaves plenty of flesh exposed in the front. Other than her white thigh-high boots, she is essentially wearing lingerie (garnished with weapons). I ask her about her choice of costume and if she feels at all comfortable and/or objectified in wearing it.

"Whenever you go someplace public and dress like this, you've got to expect to be the center of attention," she offers. "I don't have much sympathy for girls who then complain about perverts or how exhausting it is."

"With so many fanboys around, you're like a celebrity walking around down here. How many people do you suppose have taken your picture today?"

"Yeah, I posed for tons of pictures today. But I also can take a break whenever I want by just telling people 'no' or that I need to get somewhere else.

Then you just have to find a good hiding place!" She tells me how some girls will wear different costumes on different days, or will often spend an entire day not dressed up at all because it so very draining, which are similar responses I hear from male attendees whose costumes are unique and impressive enough to launch them into costume celebrity status.

"When did you start reading comics?" I ask.

"Outside X-Men and Wolverine I don't really read a whole lot, but I know I started soon after the movie series launched. So I didn't really grow up with them, but yeah, I became somewhat obsessed because inside I've always been a secret geek."

Kami shrugs off my suggestion that such overtly sexual images potentially send conflicting messages, perhaps unrealistic body expectations to young girls consuming these characters.

"Just turn on the TV or walk by a billboard and you're going to see the same thing," she informs me. "You've got to realize that it's all about entertainment. You give up part of your [Comic Con] experience when you wear something this provocative, but that's also exciting in a whole different way. You start to feel what it would be like to be a model or celebrity, but when the weekend is over I get to go back to just being me."

"But do you ever feel uncomfortable?" I ask. "Has anyone ever freaked you out?"

"Oh sure, but most everyone is very respectful. People just want their picture taken with you and only ever get bummed when I tell them I have to get

going. But that doesn't last because there is always another pretty girl right around the corner … If there's ever another hot girl around, we'll always get asked to pose together. I was standing in this one area for a long time with a group of girls, and everyone who walked by stopped to take our picture. And this one guy asked us to turn around so he could photograph our backsides, which we did. And then he asked us to bend over!"

She flashes me what I imagine was the exact same glare she gave the man who made the request, and then adds, "No thank you! *Show's over*! At that point I know exactly what [that guy] is going to go home to do with those pictures!" she says emphatically with a smile and waves a finger at me in a scolding manner.

Though Kami recognizes that she is being sexually objectified by essentially wearing lingerie as a costume, she also sees it as a form of empowerment. Despite the recognition of the objectifying male gaze, many of the women view their Comic Con performances as a *confident* display of sexuality, which places them at the apex of masculine desire, a seemingly powerful position.[36] Several people also note how it is not only women's bodies which are sexually objectified, but through the splendor and seduction of crafting utopian bodies, men are also often exposed and portrayed in overtly sexual ways.[37] As one

[36] This position, of course, will be further challenged and problematized when we examine Bolton's paradoxical body in the following chapter.

[37] Nonetheless, whereas female superhero costumes tend to leave a lot of flesh exposed, men's costumes overwhelmingly tend to cover and conceal the body. Indeed, the utopian masculine super body is also overtly sexual, but the preponderance of the male gaze through the perspective of male writers and artists results in ultra-objectified female bodies that are nonetheless cast into powerless

respondent put it, “The fact is, whether you’re male, female, or mutant, a superhero costume usually consists of underwear worn on the outside.”

I also ask men and women who are *not* dressed in ‘sexy’ costumes about problematic representations and the abundance of overtly sexualized female bodies, and the invisibility of ethnic bodies. Though most also recognize the voyeur aspects of the discourse and Comic Con specifically, for the most part they’re not complaining. Perhaps not too surprising when considering the naturalizing effects of such media, neither are the women. Although many proclaim, “*I* would never dress like that,” the majority of women I talk to at least highlight at some point the empowerment aspects of having a *super* female body. Nonetheless, whenever I observe a large crowd gather around a scantily clad woman posing for pictures, the most aggressive voyeurs tend to be men. When I find myself in these situations, which is somewhat often, I try to take as many wide-angle shots of the crowd as possible. I am looking to see how the crowd is reacting to the voyeurism (as much as I am documenting a sexy costumed character). Invariably in my pictures I will find female convention attendees witnessing the spectacle of hegemonic objectification with looks of disdain or disgust on their faces.

“Would you ever dress as a character that *isn’t* sexy?” I ask Kami, “Something that did more to conceal your body than reveal it?”

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positions compared to their male counterparts. Historically and contemporarily, the producers, writers, artists, merchandisers, and customers of comics remain overwhelmingly male.

She takes a moment to contemplate other costume options, and then says, "If there was another character I was into as much, I don't see why not. But I *love* [Emma Frost] for her sexiness, and because she's a cool character. And I think I look like her, whether I was wearing this or something else."

Having pinballed the majority of the convention space by now, I am not too surprised by the lack of observable diversity within the space. I very briefly talk with an African American man who is dressed as Batman who is ironically just coming from a panel about representations of race in comic books. He mentions that the lack of racial and sexual diversity in superhero comics is troubling, but also sees it as a trend that's slowly changing.[38] Before taking off, he reminds me not to be fooled by imposters: "If you're going to have a Dark Knight, he better be *dark*!"

I also get the chance to talk with Hector, who is originally from Mexico and today is dressed as Han Solo. He concurs about the lack of diversity within the industry and finds it "somewhat frustrating." He also directs me to several vendors who sell multicultural comics, some of which are produced by Mexican

[38] In recent years, DC's *Green Lantern* has been more so in tune with representations of race and diversity, and there is a new version of Spider-Man who is half Asian, half African American, which will be further discussed in next chapters. Much has also been made of Batman and Robin's potentially homosexual relationship, as well as the sexual tensions that exist between the X-Men's Professor Xavier and Magneto. Though there is a plethora of white, heterosexual superheroes, X-Men does a pretty good job of diversifying the presence of non-white heroes, such as Storm, who reads as an African American woman, as well as mutants from Asian descent like Jubilee, Deathstrike, and Psylocke, or Latinas such as Arclight and Callisto. The presences (or lack thereof) of diversified superheroes will be further examined when looking at Bolton's mutant bodies in the following chapter.

artists and writers and reminds me that we are in southern California, and imagines there might be even less diversity at other conventions. [39]

"If a story is written well enough, then pretty much anyone can see themselves in the character, and that for me, determines if I will read the book or even dress up like that character. It's more about what the character makes me see in myself," he tells me. "Han Solo is great because he relates very broadly to all different kinds of people, especially when you're tough and arrogant like me."

I get similar responses from most every Star Trek fan that I talk to. One of whom is, Megan, a young woman wearing the very classic 1960's 'mini-dress' uniform made famous by Nichelle Nichols' portrayal of Uhura on the original TV series. Megan speaks like a seasoned science-fiction aficionado but is only sixteen years old.

"I think every young girl should grow up watching *Star Trek*. If you compare it to what you see on MTV and *The Jersey Shore* or *Kardashians*, which is what a lot of girls watch – I just can't get into that. There are so many more positive messages on *Star Trek*, *Next Generation*, and *Deep Space 9*. Those are the ones that teach girls how to be caring and feminine but also a strong leader, and not a drunk idiot."

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[39] Positive changes have been seen at the industrial level as well. This year Brazilian writer/artist tandem Fabio Moon and Gabriel Ba took home the Eisner Award (essentially the Academy Award for best comic book) for their (sans-superhero) limited series, *Daytripper* (DC/Vertigo, 2011).

Butler (1990) contends that the broad, comprehensive repetitiveness of hegemony tends to obscure contradictions and instabilities inherent in subject formation, which produces the effect of static or 'normal' gender/bodies. Because one learns gendered behavior from observing cultural performances that are given credence via media, politics, and all-encompassing 'regimes of truth,' it becomes difficult to see any act as working against such powerful constraints.

Nonetheless, it is often when we are most deeply constrained and confronted by power that we manifest a sense of agency *through* the constraint. Thus our attachments and desires evoked by and through the mechanisms that bind us are often the very catalyst that allows us to imagine ourselves beyond constraints. Thus we are left with a body that is "a consequence of taboos that render that body discrete by virtue of its stable boundaries" (Butler, 2004a, p. 107). In order to 'de-categorize' the body from culture, we must dissolve the subject/object binary (fully rejecting the self as object and revive subjectivity) by destabilizing boundaries and taking an active part in one's signification (p. 144). The potential for looseness, ambiguity, and slippage revealed through Butler's theory of gender performativity provides avenues to consider the liminal or transitional aspects of identity and the body once we see it as malleable, but also fully inscribed by history.

Spivak (1987) adds an interesting caveat to the critical/post versions of identity in culture by accounting for the colonializing effects of culture in relation to a de-centered and deconstructed idea of the self. The physical and conceptual mobility and migration of peoples from different lands and customs creates

additional barriers, such as ethnocentrism, (mis)representation, and Diaspora. When it comes to achieving any semblance of collective understanding and meaning-making, too often colonized peoples are forced to "occupy" the spaces of imperialists (or vice-versa) and are made into "self-consolidating Others" (p. 209). In other words, the colonizers re-produce the colonized subject positions in order for them to fit their particular needs. This ambivalence in colonial discourse is taken up by Bhabha (1994), who states that 'normalizing' practices results not in cultural harmonization but rather mimicry or camouflage.

Bhabha uses Lacan (reflections and projections of the ego) to demonstrate how mimicry is "the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power" (1994, p. 85-86). What we end up with are subject positions (discursive practices) that don't align with dominant modes of "discourse-in-practice," a disparity that can result in inequality, mockery, violence, etc. For Spivak (by way of Gramsci), we must instead consider subaltern populations as being subjects of their own history. Or as Asen (2000) puts it, our consideration of subaltern peoples is an investment and emphasis on *discursive qualities*.[40]

[40] In regards to the potential discursive directions superheroes are seemingly guiding us, Spivak's concerns call our attention to the limited categories (only *eight* superhero body types) that become available when examining Bolton's artifact. As such, questions regarding representation and exclusion will re-surface when we account for *who* exactly is able to achieve a better body, and discern from *where* these utopian superhero body-types materialize from. The genealogical undertaking to revel moments of emancipator potential will reveal that other options do indeed exist, and will be covered thoroughly in chapter four. Nonetheless, it is still worthwhile to consider at this moment how certain bodies will inherently not fit into Bolton's limited and constraining body categories.

Poststructuralist renderings of subjectivity typically recognize the vast degree of incompleteness and multiplicity that must be accounted for in identity formation, which according to Spivak, is a tension that is too often ignored by those in positions of authority. Conversely, some postmodern perspectives on identity that we have already mentioned view culture as taking over the subject completely. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987) the apprehension of multiplicity (Burke's *guilt* that is experienced through our disconnectedness) is best understood rhizomatically. In other words, our notion of self is nothing more than a 'collection point' that is produced as infinite and random impulses and symbolic constructions overlap and intercut. Agency under this formula is also reactive in nature, if not completely overtaken by the endless discursive assemblages that can never be made fully meaningful. [41]

Furthermore, Baudrillard sees the 'real' aspect of agency as being completely overtaken by the *hyperreal* through the process of simulation (an increasing and endless separation of signs from and the meanings they represent). Instead, we are only left with an artificial montage of non-meaning (1994, p. 75-80). In other words, we substitute signs of the real in an endless cycle of re-signification (or otherwise the media does it for us). Though Baudrillard dismisses agency in favor of the hyperreal, this does not mean agentic acts are totally lost (though we are never really in full control of them). Rather, the symbols we use to construct the world around us have the ability to represent much larger symbolic

[41] Foucault would likely prefer to see more attention given to the flow of power, and sees the body not as a nodal collector of discursive messages, but devolves by and through culture.

structures of what our immediate surroundings contain. Therefore, he leaves us with a vision of agency that is symbolically distanced and detached from 'reality,' that can be seen as series of symbolic gestures in a sea of simulation with no objective referent.

Other attempts have been made to rescue the postmodern subject from the totalizing effects of culture and technology. For example, Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) examine the intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality in organizational contexts in order to reestablish the postmodern subject:

> Despite their unyielding rejection of subject-centered models of knowledge, postmodernists by no means reject the construction of subjectivity entirely. Instead, they treat the subject as an effect (rather than as the origin or author) of numerous discourses and disciplinary practices. In short, the subject is decentered, not discarded … Postmodern scholars often 'recenter' the subject, asking 'who' is called into being by various discourses of truth and power. (p. xxi)

With these perceptions of the discursive body established, it will next be useful to investigate exactly how these bodies are functioning within the constraints of the Comic Con environment, and thus indicate how *space* encourages the performed slippage and multiplicity of the self/body.

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Masquerade

The convention floor is only one aspect of the Comic Con experience. The top tier of the convention center is sectioned off into dozens of meeting rooms

wherein programmed panel presentations take place. About half of these panels are the entertainment industry's attempt at spreading promotional word-of-mouth. Additionally, there are panels with classic and contemporary comic book writers and artists, each discussing a particular topic – or in some cases, nothing in particular. Each presentation is scheduled in the convention program that everyone receives at registration, which is also posted online months in advance. On first inspection, the panel called "Masquerade: 101" catches my attention. The panelists promise to reveal all the "behind-the-scenes" information about costuming at the Con. I arrive early to be sure that I will get a front row seat.

Those in attendance (about 30 people) are almost entirely dressed in costume, the most impressive belonging to a man dressed exactly like the famous Big Boy restaurant mascot. The costume is accurate down to the checkered suspenders, wave hair-do, and massive hamburger her perches on an outstretched arm. The session begins with each of the participants introducing themselves. They consist of program organizers, coordinators of Comic Con's masquerade contest, and two former Comic Con masquerade grand champions. Ted Arnst is the coordinator of the masquerade contest, which consists of a judged *walk-off* competition during Saturday evening of the convention. Unlike the costumed characters on the convention floor, the formal masquerade is much more regulated and organized, similar to a beauty pageant style of competition. Because there is significantly more prestige attached to the masquerade contest, a lot more thought, preparation, and resources typically go into the costumes entered into the competition.

Arnst informs the room that in the 1940s and 1950s, *masquerades* were often regional contests that took place in conjunction with carnivals or Saturday night dances. Today, costume contests are more infrequent, but draw increasingly bigger crowds. The 1984 Comic Con convention held in Los Angles had approximately 8,000 attendees, 505 of which were dressed in costume, and that evening's masquerade contest took over five hours to complete. The San Diego Comic Con now has restrictions on the number of entries it allows into the competition, which is usually filled to capacity at least five months prior to the actual convention and masquerade.

There are three specific categories that comprise most masquerades accompanying comic book and sci-fi conventions: best replication, best original design, and best in show. Andrea Davis, a professional prop-maker, make-up artist, and award-winning masquerade competitor, notes that many costumes in the masquerade are so elaborate that they usually require a "handler" to assist the person in the costume. For her, costumes that do well competitively tend to be very elaborate and are unique enough that they are not something one would normally see on the convention floor. I ask Andrea what she finds most alluring about costuming at Comic Con.

"The biggest challenge comes in the *process* of doing it, and Comic Con is actually the pay off. It's like you're in training all year long for this big event. But that is also the most enjoyable aspect" she tells me. "Trying to make something go from 2D to 3D is not easy. You're not only transforming someone's body in ways that it doesn't naturally move, but also trying to be as accurate and authentic

as possible while doing it … Sometimes I want to slap the illustrator who drew the image I'm working from and yell at him, 'Boobs don't move like that!'"

Judith Grivich is a member of the 2003 grand champion best in show team and a masquerade runner-up in 2007. For her, the most memorable masquerade costumes are the ones in which the *performance* of the character stands out, and not just the visual aspects of the design. "It's not enough to just stand up there," she says, "You need to perform as well. If you're trying to pull off Gollum, I expect you to move down the runway like Gollum.[42] Therefore, an added challenge is to craft the costume to move that way too."

Though Judith as well as other masquerade attendees are very much motivated by competition, perhaps the bigger challenge is crafting authenticity. "My costume is pitiful compared to what you'd probably see at the masquerade," I timidly admit, an assumption which is then confirmed by her polite silence. "When you see something sloppy or 'inaccurate' on the convention floor, what is your response?"

"It's all in good fun" she says. "Comic Con is a celebration of all the [pop culture] things that are personally meaningful for people. It gives them a chance to display these things, sometimes very seriously, sometimes not. That's why we save the judging for the formal masquerade. But many times you'll see stuff on the floor that is still very impressive."

Just as I am about to take my leave, Judith compliments my costume. This feels special, not just because she's a big deal in the world of convention

[42] She is referring to the grotesque character from *The Lord of the Rings* series.

costuming, but because she then encourages me to *be bold* when I wear my costume – that no matter how ridiculous I may feel in it, from where she's standing, it looks pretty cool.

On my way back downstairs I stop and talk with a man dressed as the villain from one of the Iron Man movies. He is a San Diego native who has been to at least a dozen Comic Cons, but this is the first time he is dressed up as a bad guy. In past years he has dressed as He-Man, Aquaman, and the Incredible Hulk.[43]

"It's a bit of a personality shift," he admits. "I'm usually trying to save the world, not destroy it."

"Do you feel more evil because you're dressed like a villain?"

"Yes, you got to play up your persona, but you don't always have to be *on*. Mainly when you're just posing for pictures do you really amp it up."

He goes on to express some ambivalence about the full-fledged authenticity of costuming. His own costume features several noticeable flaws, by which he reminds me, "If you want to connect with Superman then you just have to read the stories, watch the movies, and accept his ideals. It's fine if you want to do a whole fancy cape and boots to do it. But you can also do it with just a t-shirt

[43] All of which are characters that allow him to display his muscular chest and abdomen.

… But I do think the more we surround ourselves with Superman, the easier it is to see the world like he sees it and stand what he stands for." [44]

The same holds true for academics, and thus becomes another point of conflation between the scholarly and fanatic aspects of Ethnography Man. As academics, we surround ourselves with theories and evocative notions of the way the world works in order to see it in a particular way. Do they not also hold some aspect of splendor and seduction as mystifying, explanatory formulations that we then privilege and sometimes treat as utopian despite their falsifiable, dystopian shortcomings?

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With the preceding perspectives established in order to inform our subsequent analysis of Bolton's eight super body types, as well as extend the analysis to our lived bodies, it is now appropriate to highlight key aspects of Foucault's theory/method in order to demonstrate what will ultimately be revealed

[44] The degree of our costumed immersion and what we specifically get out of performing in these ways is a contested phenomenon. In 1996, Arkansas resident Barbara Adams made headlines when she was called to serve as a juror in the trial of former Whitewater partners of Bill and Hillary Clinton. What made Adams unique was the fact that she wore a *Star Trek* uniform for each of her eight court appearances. In fact, she insisted on wearing at least some aspect of her captain's uniform every single day, even to her job. Adams, a 31 year-old bookbinder, believes that *Star Trek* provides an alternative to otherwise "mindless television" in that the show promotes inclusion, peace, tolerance, and faith in humankind. When asked if she would wear the uniform in the event that the president had to testify in the Whitewater trial, she simply stated, "I'll wear my uniform … At heart I'm a Star Fleet Commander. I don't ever want my officers to feel ashamed to wear their uniforms" (Nygard, 1997). Of course, Adams is further complicating the act of costuming in this way in that she is not at a science fiction convention, but rather is traversing spaces with drastically different pre-established decorum. She was eventually dismissed from the Whitewater jury for talking with reporters.

in the next chapters. When formulated as a method, genealogy can be used to identify or trace the current, historical, political, and lived experiences that inform the power relations in superhero discourse, which I will then extend to the human body. It is my contention that these shifts in power have allowed us to arrive at contemporary understandings of body malleability, which derive out of discursive meanings that symbolically 'equip' us, calling upon us to respond to them. To analyze these power relations, three broad questions emerge out of Foucault's genealogical work, which will be asked in the fourth chapter in order to determine the transformative relationships of power/knowledge in discursive formations of the lived body:

1) Who has power?
2) How is it exercised?
3) What are its effects?

However, before we can specifically relate the lived body to Bolton's super bodies, it is first necessary to provide an overview of where each of Bolton's super bodies discursively emerge from, and how they contain the utopian/dystopian potential to liberate and constrain the self/body. Thus, in the next chapter we will establish key features of each super body type as well as apply these specific attributes to the lived body in order to see how such constraints exist and emerge in the real world.

To do this, we will approach/employ the genealogy broadly, highlighting LeGreco and Tracy's (2009) "discourse tracing" as offered as a qualitative practice to achieve critical, interpretive, and applied research analysis of

discursive practices across a variety of levels.[45] Their procedures involve four essential phases: First, the research is designed through identifying key problems or significant events, "ruptures or turning points," that call forth the discursive organization or disorganization that frames the phenomena under study (p. 1523). In this way, Bolton's fashion exhibition can be viewed as a central confluence from which discursive meaning branches out from and returns to. Additionally within this first phase one must review pertinent literature that informs specific concepts and relationships under investigation, which we have presently accomplished, thus establishing theoretical parameters or boundaries for the analysis.

The second phase of their method entails managing the data or discourses via three specific tasks. Researchers must first gather data from a variety of sources on micro, meso, and macro levels, making use of resources such as "interviews, observations, archival data, public documents, newspaper articles, policy proceedings, transcripts of public meetings, Web sites, blogs, cultural artifacts, or campaign slogans" (p. 1526). This can be an exhausting process of data mining, especially considering how 'scenes' of inquiry tend to change over time, as do the meanings we attribute to certain discursive products and practices. Therefore, researchers must accept that their data will often be "incomplete and

[45] This is not to suggest that the 'method' is a potpourri of approaches, but rather demonstrates how scholars have attempted to locate post-structural meaning in discursive power/knowledge (with varying degrees of success). Though I am not specifically applying the step-by-step method offered by these authors and specifically referencing it in chapter three (again, I prefer the anti-method approach), if one takes a step back from the work and views it as a whole, they will find that I have largely covered most of the criteria that I presently outline.

messy" regardless of their skill and/or resources. Next, LeGreco and Tracy insist that the data then be ordered chronologically, and reference Foucault's suggestion that the historical positioning of events "helps us to understand the way things are now, as well as how to change things if the 'now' is unacceptable" (p. 1526). They emphasize that doing so allows us to more readily see what is apparent in a discursive trajectory but also recognize what is *not there* or missing.

While I agree with the authors as to the reasons why chronology (or archeology, to use a term more familiar with Foucault) is important and essential, I also feel that this criterion is somewhat restraining if we limit ourselves to chronology exclusively. My reservations toward this task stem from a desire to conduct *rhetorical* analyses rather than qualitative or interpretive analysis, per se.[46] Recall that power is not unidirectional, and when one complicates a phenomenon under investigation by referencing numerous discursive trajectories/constraints (multiplying the ruptures or turning points), the flow of power and production will often take on many forms and patterns. More specifically, discursively tracing superheroes is an exhaustive enterprise on its own, but by piling discourses of fashion/costuming, technologies of the body, and the adventures of Ethnography Man, we complicate the generative aspects of these power relationships, which cannot be adequately understood by exclusively looking at them chronologically. Adding such layers immediately adds to the

[46] The method is intended to specifically attend to qualitative inquiry and does not claim to serve the purpose of rhetorical analysis. Nonetheless, this particular task in LeGreco and Tracy's method seems to run somewhat counterintuitive to Foucault's later rejection of origins or starting points.

‘incompleteness and messiness’ of the endeavor, but also has the potential to result in a much more robust and meaningful understanding of discursive power. This is not to say that chronology should be ignored. On the contrary, in the following chapters I will chronologically trace the evolution of our contemporary notions of superheroes, but in doing so I will also note intersections of emerging, converging, and diverging discourses in fashion, performance, and utopian/dystopian technologies of the body, all of which also need to be addressed in order to answer the posited research questions in chapter four.[47] In other words, considering the specific research agenda of this study, it will be necessary to take occasional discursive detours, which might not align with the kind of regimented chronology LeGreco and Tracy suggest.

The final two phases of their method involve data analysis and evaluation. Researchers should next develop structured questions they can pose toward the data in order to locate ruptures and “trace out discursive practices” (p. 1531). Based on the answers to such questions, a case study is then developed. In the final phase, theoretical conclusions should be derived from the findings, as well as implications and practical recommendations/applications, mirroring how one would conclude traditional qualitative (and rhetorical) analyses. These final phases have been somewhat disrupted in my particular approach. The specific ‘case studies’ included in this work emerge throughout and not exclusively or compactly at the end. As such, revelations are not necessarily packaged together

[47] In fact, I have already done some chronological tracing through highlighting the evolutions of characters such as Superman, the Comic Con convention, as well as my personal ‘origin story’ in relations to the discourses at hand.

at one location in the document; however, the final chapter does achieve the overarching goals of this approach and satisfies their criteria.

LeGreco and Tracy also offer useful criteria for evaluating this type of research. In judging the quality of discourse tracing, the authors suggest that theoretical and practical implications be sound and resonate with other forms of knowledge pertaining to the topic and themes. In this sense, the research itself should seamlessly gel with discursive trajectories under investigation, and coherently *ring true* when applied to or contrasted with other relatable discourses or lived experiences (p. 1536-1537). For genealogy, specifically, I would add that it is important to emphasize the position of the researcher, not as the generative center of meaning-making, but as a central constraint and limitation that plays the role of an informed and invested filter or "constraint" (managing the tensions between the universal and specific intellectual) who selects and dissects the ruptures and turning points under investigation. It is precisely this aspect of critical inquiry can often become the most 'incomplete and messy' as tensions can sometimes play out between the researcher (*Scott Daniel Boras*) and practitioner (*Ethnography Man*) sides of the self.

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Traversing Spaces

Early in the evening I decide to leave the convention center and head out into San Diego's Gas Lamp district to grab some food. There are sporadic vendors throughout the convention but none of them sell anything more appetizing than soft pretzels, nachos, and soda. Before I head outside, however, I detour to the

bathroom and remove most of my costume. I tell myself that it's too hot to wear the cape, that the mask is pinching my face, and there's no way I'm going through another dish glove fiasco again. But again, these are just the things I tell myself. The real reason is because I'm still afraid to be the bizarre person on display, especially outside the confines of the convention space. I am fully aware that there are many others out there like me, but throughout the day I've also been able to observe how absolutely crappy my costume is compared to everyone else's. Not only that, no one knows who I'm dressed as, which has made for some awkward and deflating conversations.

So it's too hot to wear the costume and I take it off. I then become even more disgruntled when I realize there are long waits at all the nearby restaurants. Forgoing fast food, I hop on the metro light rail and check out what's available to eat downtown. The next hour or so I spend jotting down, detailing, and reflecting on observations I've made throughout the day. But then my mind keeps drifting back to my own multiple personas.

I purposefully constructed Ethnography Man's costume look haphazardly put together. By emphasizing the tacky dish gloves, fanny pack, bungee cord and glitter glue, I wanted to embody the imperfect play of perfection. And though my confidence within the Comic Con space steadily grew throughout the day, I never expected to be so self-conscious as soon as I was exposed to the outside world. Nonetheless, the people I talked to today (regardless of their gender or background) largely agree that costuming at the convention is all about expressing and celebrating diversity, wearing second skins, and playing out fantasy. I most

definitely felt that sense of communal excitement, acceptance, and togetherness once I got past all the consumption stuff, but again, it was only within the confines of the convention space, and always wrought with paradoxes of representation. The people more willing to costume outside the convention space are clearly more comfortable with their adopted persona than I have become, and it bothers me that there is a disconnect between the side of myself that desperately attempts to blend in with society, and the side that is sometimes on display.

The light rail platform is fairly full on the side taking people back to the convention. I position myself to enter near the back of the tram, which will actually get me closest to the intersection I'll need to take to the convention center when we arrive. Several people around me are dressed in costume; a fairy and an Elvis are to my right. Directly in front of me is a pair of commandos brandishing what look like assault rifles, and to the left of them is an impressive replication of an armored character from the *Halo* video games, also packing heat.[48]

I then notice a man about twenty feet away from me, facing the other direction. He stands out because he is somewhat older than the majority of the crowd, maybe in his early-to-mid sixties, but is also wearing a full military uniform. From his profile I can see he has on a green army suit, polished black

[48] Throughout the day I've been awestruck by how many people on the convention floor are brandish realistic-looking weapons. Even outside the convention, or on the light rail, or just walking down the street, people are always holding what very well might be automatic assault rifles or nuclear warheads. Yet no one bats an eye or raises an alarm. Business as usual when Comic Con comes to town. Additionally, the police presence at the convention is somewhat negligible. Though there are plenty of 'security guards,' these people typically consist of convention attendees who volunteer to be security in order to get free access to the convention without a pre-paid badge.

shoes, and the kind of military cap typically worn by high profile officers (at least from the one's I've seen in movies). His posture is perfectly straight and his hands are clasped firmly behind his back. He has neither a briefcase nor shoulder bag of any sort. Since we are in San Diego I imagine that he is heading to the harbor, perhaps for an evening event on one of the battleships. More prominently, I am desperate to know what he thinks of Comic Con and so many people *pretending* to be soldiers, warriors, and commandos. In comparison, it seems like convention attendees embody only a faux sense of duty, bravery, and patriotism when they play out such characters. Confronted with the juxtaposition of a real military officer, any sense of transcendence I can garner out of the Comic Con experience just seems foolish.

I am about to approach him to ask if he wouldn't mind answering a few questions, but just then the light rail car pulls up to the station. There are close to a dozen people wedged between us as we make our way into the car, and I realize that my opportunity to get his opinion is potentially lost. I position myself standing upright near the door and eventually turn around to see that although the compartment is fully occupied, no one has elected to sit next to the man in the military uniform (but there is still a shoulder-to-shoulder crowd of people separating us. Now that he's facing me, however, I can see that has about ten rows of military rank stripes decorating his left breast. The light rail car pulls away from the station and I have to quickly grab onto a rail or risk toppling over.

There is one stop between where we are and the convention center. Several people are engaged in private conversations, but for the most part the

compartment is quiet. Then, almost too brashly, a man sitting kitty-corner from the officer leans toward him and says, “Thank you sir, for your service.”

He acknowledges the gratitude with a nod and replies, “And thank you for your service.” Three people sitting in the immediate area, including the man across from him, also thank the officer in uniform for his service.

When we arrive at the next stop I squeeze my way past a few people also standing in the aisle, and ask him if I could take the unoccupied spot. Once seated, I then inform him of who I am and politely ask if he wouldn’t mind me getting his opinion about Comic Con and people who costume.

“Not at all, I’d be happy to talk” he offers with a serious grin.

“Thanks so much. I imagine this all a pretty interesting spectacle, considering …”

And then I trail off, not know exactly how to phrase what I want to ask. I hope that he will chime in, but he doesn’t, and I’m quickly interrupted by the thought that maybe he is also pretending to be something he isn’t? But again, we’re in San Diego, home base for much of the US Navy and countless service personnel! How could I even ask someone in his position for verification, *challenge his credentials*, without sounding like a complete asshole?

“You are, uh, you’re a real … veteran, correct?” I manage to sputter.

“Yes, I am. Majority of my career has been in service,” he replies very kindly, which does much to ease my nervousness.

“May I ask what rank you are?” I ask and indicate the rainbow of ribbons that decorate his uniform. His cap is embossed with a gold emblem that looks almost royal.

“Sergeant Major of the U.S. Army,” he says. “My name’s Gary.”

“Wow, that’s incredible,” I reply. “I saw you outside and thought it somewhat ironic. So what do you make of Comic Con and all the people who dress up and pretend to be super soldiers?”

“Well, it’s all a lot of fun. I don’t think there’s any harm in acting. And that’s what I think it’s mainly about, a fun place to act and pretend for a while.”

For some reason, and maybe it is just his incantation, but the way in which he offers his response strikes me as slightly off. “But in thinking about *real* sacrifice …” I trail off again, and for some reason then seek to clarify, “… You’re not going to Comic Con, are you?”

“Oh yes, I am,” he says with the same serious grin.

“*Really?*” I say somewhat baffled. “Wait, are these, uh …,” and then I indicate the stripes on his chest with a heavy glace, “… are these *real*?”

“Well, yes, they are authentic military stripes. But no, I didn’t earn them,” Gary says casually, and then adds, “I do war reenactments as a hobby.”

He goes on to tell me about his costume, which is actually an officer uniform from World War II. Everything he is wearing is authentic and crafted during the time period, from the buttons to the shoe laces, except for the necktie, which he had custom made.

“If you don’t really hold that rank,” I inquire, “how far along did you actually go in the military?”

“I spent twenty-three years right here in San Diego working on the docks and subs, mostly doing maintenance and cleaning” he says, and then adds, “I never held a position higher than Private.”

“But everyone who sees you, especially outside the convention, don’t they sort of assume you’re someone who you’re not. Do you ever feel like you’re misrepresenting yourself?”

Gary shrugs his shoulders and says, “I am who I am. Like I said, it’s just like acting.”

“Okay, but don’t you think, I mean even ethically, shouldn’t there be an on/off switch?”

It takes a long time for him to offer an answer. He looks out the window, contemplates for a moment. Then just as we’re pulling up to the convention center he says, “I do reenactments all year long. Whatever I’m dressed as, that’s who I am. But I can also be me. I don’t know if there is an on/off. It’s just acting.”

I thank him for his time and input. He follows me out of the car where he poses for a quick picture and then we’re on our way. Within a minute of walking with him, a middle-aged woman approaches, ogles the uniform and bands of colors on his chest with wonderment, and asks if he’s a real serviceman.

“Yes, I am,” he says. “Twenty-three years.”

I am positioned somewhat between them as we are walking, perhaps a pace or two behind, and when I hear his response I audibly mutter, “Well, *not*

really." If Gary heard me, he doesn't acknowledge it and instead keeps walking. I feel immediately ashamed for challenging a twenty-three year veteran in such a way, but also totally bemused by the paradox of representation he has offered.

I am at the convention for maybe another hour and a half, which is time mainly spent at an academic panel analyzing the superhero genre, which fails to impress me. Rather, I spend the majority of the time thinking through the similarities between Ethnography Man and Gary: We are always what we appear to be and never who we really are, all at the same time.

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Superman shot and killed himself with a 9 mm Luger pistol on June 16, 1969 amid mysterious circumstances and a cloud of controversy. There are varying accounts as to his activities leading up to the incident. Several witnesses have suggested that he was fighting with his fiancée, Leonore Lemmon, a Hollywood socialite, the night he died. By most accounts, Superman retired to bed early after an evening out with Lemmon, but she stayed up and had a few friends over for an impromptu party. Having a hard time sleeping with all the noise, Superman went downstairs to tell them to keep it quiet, but then settled in with them for a drink, before going back upstairs in a foul mood.

Investigators found it suspicious that some time went by between when Superman shot himself and the house guests calling police. Additionally, there were no reported signs of gunpowder residue on Superman's hand, though this was not something the LAPD would necessarily be specifically looking for in 1969. Nonetheless, even more damming were statements made by one witness

who placed Lemmon upstairs when the gun shot rang out. It was stated that she then pleaded with her party guests to say she was downstairs the whole time. When police did arrive, they found that everyone in the house was fairly intoxicated.

Though he had appeared in several films, playing minor characters in two Oscar winning films (*Gone with the Wind* and *From Here to Eternity*), Superman was never fully embraced by Hollywood. Instead, he had to turn to television to make his living, which offered low pay, tight work schedules, in a far less than noteworthy circumstance.[49] He nonetheless made the best of it and took his status as a role model very seriously. Superman would avoid cigarettes around children and he eventually quit smoking. He insisted on equal billing for his love interest, Lois Lane, and was said by Jimmy Olson to be a practical jokester around *The Daily Planet*. However, Superman was also disenchanted by the one-dimensional role he was playing, and the low salary. After his death it was revealed that the forty-five year old superhero had been battling depression for years. Moreover, Superman was typecast and thus had a hard time finding work outside the confines of his leotard.

If we accept Superman's death as suicide, then it is very likely he took his own life because he could not escape the constraints of being a superhero. As such, Superman's greatest fear was that no one would ever be able to see him as anything but the *Man of Steel*.

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[49] The fledgling television industry was largely considered *beneath* much of Hollywood's elite, especially for someone who wanted to be seen as a *serious* actor.

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I spend the next couple hours walking around the convention, taking in the sights and keeping my eye on the time. In order to save money I've booked a late flight out of San Diego which will return me to my fortress of solitude in the Phoenix desert around midnight. It takes me a while to find a cab but it is only a short jaunt to the airport and I make it to my terminal with time to spare. Finding an open seat, I reflect back on my observations and experiences, thankful to have had so many evocative experiences with convention attendees, but not fully satisfied with my personal transformation.

I think about the broad effects that superheroes have on us, and wonder if utopian tensions that pervade the discourse are always as much a burden – reflecting an inability to never fully be human – as much as they are a means to see ourselves as splendid and seductive. For me, Christopher Reeve embodied the utopian ideals of the superhero to its fullest. He believed in the transcendent possibilities of the body despite being directly confronted with its debilitating constraints. But he is also a reminder that the utopian possibilities of becoming can be an arduous and potentially improbable pursuit. Thus, we are always constrained by our human, dystopian bodies. At Comic Con, designers and prop specialists like Judith Grivich craft costumes that authentically replicate the utopianism depicted in the discourse, but most all of this artistry occurs external to the body, through costumes and fashion rather than corporeally becoming something new.

Perhaps George Reeves offers an altogether different indication of this utopian burden. Through Superman he achieved status, wealth, and celebrity, but once fully immersed in the transformative persona, he could not separate himself from the confines of its iconicity. In this way, George Reeves embodied the dystopian effects of superheroes in becoming splendid and seductive, but altogether constrained by the utopianism of the discourse. Superman's mere presence is astonishing and memorable, but in becoming something so extraordinarily more than oneself, can we ever return back to who we once were?

Perhaps more so than Christopher and George Reeves, Ethnography Man exists at the intersection of these utopian and dystopian tensions. I by no means regard Ethnography Man as utopian, and have in fact designed him in a way that expresses his inadequacies, highlighting the imperfect aspects of our lived bodies. Though I have accomplished a lot in my first endeavor to Comic Con, I am not fully satisfied in my personal sense of becoming. Indeed, I consider the ethnography aspects as well as fanatic aspects of my experiences as successful, but in embodying this persona, I never fully felt heroic. I was never at risk, never put in harm's way or had to overcome a seemingly insurmountable feat of bravery. Though my experiences were anxiety inducing, I was never attacked or confronted because of my choice of embodiment in a similar manner that I was in preschool.

Additionally, the convenience of being able to take off a costume that marks me as different or marginal, as a means to reinstate my masculine, white, heterosexual identity, is a privilege that I fear I have taken for granted. As such, it

would be wrong of me to purposefully seek out a situation wherein I would experience oppression, simply for the sake of ‘attempting’ to overcome it through utopian fantasy and role playing. Rather, I must remind myself that I am not in search of oppression per se, but rather am seeking transcendence.

At the very least, I am more so affirmed than ever in my abilities as a researcher and fanatic. It is within those unique, lived experiences where I agentically move to a more stable sense of self as both academic and fanatic. If anything at all, this is a minimal transcendence, but it is also not without a larger purpose. I am affirmed in knowing that my overarching reason for being there was to discover new knowledge, problematize what we already know about the dominant discourses at play, for the purpose of doing something to help the great good.

Chapter Three

Super Bodies and Secret Skins

This chapter employs a genealogical approach to investigate Bolton's superhero body types in relation to our lived experiences. Various historical, cultural, and discursive conditions and constraints emerge in this investigation, which illuminate the possibilities for real-world change. More specifically, Bolton's (2008) superhero body types are discursive converging points for the topics under investigation. As such, we will temporarily set aside Ethnography Man to more carefully analyze the genealogy that emerges through the transformative play between real bodies and their utopian/dystopian projections and depictions in superhero comic books. It is also important to note how *clothing* materializes as a key discourse that functions as a conduit through which these relationships of power and change flow. Therefore, this chapter is generated out of a discussion of the *fashionable body* to further establish clothing as symbolic skin, thus establishing the means by which expressions of identity and cultural constraints converge.[50] Each of Bolton's body types are then reviewed, specifically attending to the discursive genealogy of superhero bodies in comic books, as well as tensions and exchanges between real-world experiences, events, and technologies of the lived body.[51]

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[50] The fashionable body is a category of my own creation. Again, it is simply intended to help reveal key constraining factors that inform the subsequent super body types.

[51] It may seem counterintuitive to say that I am working through a genealogy then immediately embrace eight body constraints as an organizing method. However,

To keep to our overarching task, the investigation contained herein will be central to answering the subsequent research questions: Who has power? How is it exercised? What are its effects? Specific answers to these questions will emerge throughout the chapter and will be addressed in relation to the extended research questions in the final chapter. Nonetheless, readers need not necessarily look for finite or carefully located answers to questions such as *Who has power?* The answers themselves are best thought of as a series of overlapping tensions that become further complicated with the addition of each body type.

This organization compliments the theories and methods offered in that it locates meaning in relations of power, which can then be viewed for their resistive potential. By approaching the analysis in this way, key features regarding one body type will help define others. When applied beyond the confines of a comic book, these categories and their distinct borders become overlapped and blurred. Again, a brief undertaking of the fashionable body will propel the genealogy and indicate important factors to consider in the analysis.

The Fashionable Body

The body is a central vehicle of cultural experience, formative of the discursive and performative moments that constitute our sense of self and social

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through the analysis I specifically intend to reveal from where these constraints and categories come, and how they have come to possess power as organizing principles. The first two body types (graphic and patriotic) also function to inform or define the superhero body discourse as a whole. In other words, the subsequent body types emerge out of the flow of power (influence/constraints) that result from graphic and patriotic tensions. These body types are responsive and resistive to this framework, and call into question such organizing power as constraints on freedom. In talking through the constraints and categories, we also reveal ways in which they are incomplete, problematic, exclusive, fissured, and absent.

awareness of the world (Nietzsche, 1885/1995; Foucault, 1980; Hoy, 2004; Brandt, 2007). Again, clothing functions as an immediate continuation of the body, made more significant by its proximity and presence with the body. On our clothing and written into its arrangements are expressions of identity which symbolically refine, complicate, and reverberate with what we know the self to be. When we clothe the body we inscribe or encode it with culture – a process through which "ambivalences" of gender, status, occupation, and sexuality emerge (Davis, 1992, p. 21).

As noted in the first chapter, Bolton's identification of eight superhero body types materializes from how he sees the *splendor and seduction* of superheroism expressed in the fashion of character costumes. *Fashion* is the expression of cultural styles, symbols, customs, trends, taboos, patterns and techniques – aesthetically and materially taking form as organized fabrics, textiles, or other forms of symbolic/material adornment – on the body (Arnold, 2001; Svendsen, 2006). Because power is not fixed or unidirectional, *who we are* and the potential of *what we might become* is often discursively expressed in and on what we wear. As such, clothing the body not only fulfills practical and social necessities such as providing shelter, comfort, or socially acceptable modesty, but is also intimately tied to our perception of self and how we express identity as a primary means of differentiation (Arnold, 2001, p. xiii).

If we accept that clothing is a conduit of the body that carries cultural meaning, then fashion should be understood as a means through which symbolic expressions of domination and resistance are made apparent on the body as well.

For example, uniforms not only signify an occupational identity, but also communicate ideological markings that indicate where institutional power resides (a key distinction between the graphic and patriotic bodies). Additionally, the *quality* of one's attire (cleanliness, composition, and economic value) typically conveys personhood, preferences, social affiliations, and social/economic status. Sometimes these discursive indicators are overtly expressed through the adornment of emblematic markers (*Gucci* vs. *Wrangler*), but are also subliminally codified around the cultural, institutional, and political forms of power that constrain us.

Not only do we fashion our clothing to communicate various aspects of our identity; we also (re)shape our bodies to align with cultural norms and popular trends, or to 'fit' inside our symbolic skins.[52] In seeking identity in the body and seeing clothing as an extension or "continuation of the body," our perception of self and the possibilities of becoming are also intricately linked to how we display and arrange the primary symbols we use to adorn and protect the body (Svendsen, p.77). Clothing and fashion are consequently imperative discursive 'ruptures' or

[52] Dieting is a common example of how we attempt to reconfigure our bodies to fit particular clothing/styles and cultural norms/expectations. Additionally, 'foot binding' is a custom that has been practiced upon young girls and women for roughly a thousand years in China, and is an example of how (female) bodies are physically constrained by patriarchal rituals. The practice sometimes involves breaking the bones of a girl's arches or toes in order to achieve desired smallness, potentially resulting in severe deformities of the feet. Nevertheless, as much as foot binding can be detested for its brutal and disfiguring effects on young women's bodies, the prevalence and popularity of women wearing high heeled shoes in Western culture is perhaps an equally problematic and vastly more prevalent form of oppression on the body.

‘turning points’ that filter and/or refine the ways in which both superheroes and human bodies are produced in and around these symbolic structures and norms.

Our symbolic expressions of identity are further complicated in that they just as likely communicate a *deferral* of solid, stable meaning (Derrida, 1982). Ambivalences point to the contradictory and oscillating nature of how our subject states are produced and confounded by culture (Davis, 1992; Arnold, 2001). When we wear clothes, we work to simultaneously display the body/self as well as conceal it. Inasmuch that our sense of subjectivity is abject, performative, and imbued with relations of power, the process of clothing oneself also requires negotiations of such slippage, incompleteness, and multiplicities, so that our fashion “comes to share in the work of ambivalence management as much as does any other self-communicative device at our disposal” (Davis, p. 24-25).

The fashionable, stylistic, and aesthetic aspects of how we dress hinges on this notion of ambivalent change. Davis notes how the word “change” originates from the Old French usages for “to make” or “to fabricate” (p. 14). In other words, to fashion or ‘apply fabrics’ implies that a form of transcendence or change is occurring. Though our clothing makes clear references to who we are and wish to be, they simultaneously evoke “an aura that ‘merely suggests’ more than it can (or intends to) state precisely” (Davis, p.3). This implies that there is always disconnect or ruptures between what clothes can communicate, and any stable understanding of self. Clothes provide a literal layer of symbolic codes which both signify the self, but also offer a means to resist, differentiate, or conceal it.

The identity work that goes into how we dress has a profound impact on how we come to understand the self in culture, so much so that *nakedness* "only says something when it is in dialogue with clothes" (Svendsen, 2006, p. 78). However, this does not mean that a lack of clothes equates to a lack of identity. Though the absence of clothing can be viewed as an expression of 'naturalness,' it equally expresses an alternative, obscure, or contradictory articulation of the cultural norm.

> Clothes rewrite the body, give it a different shape and a different expression. This applies not only to the clothed body but also to the unclothed; or more precisely, the unclothed body is always also clothed. Our perception of the human body is always dependent on the prevailing fashions of the time, and our perception of fashions are in turn dependent on their visual representation in paintings, photographs and other media" (Svendsen, p. 77-78).

So entrenched are these normative assumptions and regulations of propriety in Western culture (and most of the developed world), that the absence of clothing in public situations is often considered indecent, primitive, obscene, or illegal. Such taboos are predominantly inscribed and normalized in cultural texts and practices that resonate powerfully with how humans orientate themselves to the world. For example, the *Bible* tells us that Adam and Eve, having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge, become aware of their nakedness and immediately associate this realization with impropriety or shame, thus covering and disposing of their nakedness with fig leaves (*Genesis* 3:7, 21). It is from such foundational

texts, rituals, and practices that the act of clothing the body becomes ritualized as 'normal' behavior.

Additionally, humans are conditioned to conceal and control sexual erogenous zones, or those mechanisms, apparatuses, and "polluting" functions of the body that have been culturally cast as dirty or taboo (Douglas, 1966). For Douglas, the rules and taboos of social interaction require that we screen out such 'unintended' or 'irrelevant' organic processes (p. 80). Clothing and fashion play an important part in regulating these relationships. The taboos are so entrenched into the psyche of various dominant cultures that any options for real resistance (the absence of clothing, for example) is rarely ever expressed or attempted.

> There is in fact no reason to believe that the use of clothing for sexual modesty or display is dictated by human nature anymore than is men wearing pants and women dresses. The attitudes and practices of modern-day nudists, however, should not be confused with such primeval innocence. The very proclamation by nudists of the superiority of an unclothed way attests in itself to the identity-defining power *in Western culture* of the erotic-chase encodings (enclothings!) nudists mean to overturn (Davis, 1992, p. 94, emphasis original).

Inasmuch that nudists show the futility in trying to see the naked body as separate or distinct from expressions of sexuality, an overabundance of nudity also demonstrates how bodies are eroticized through the ambivalences (competing tensions to conceal and reveal) of clothing. Davis notes the commonplace realization of most anyone who has spent time around nudists, observing that

once nakedness is normalized, “how strangely de-eroticizing casual nudity turns out to be,” (p. 95). In this sense, leaving something to the imagination or covering up one’s ‘private parts’ can serve to amplify sexual allure and arousal (i.e. leave something to the imagination). As such, it is necessary to examine the process of clothing not simply as a matter of interpreting signs and symbols that adorn the body, but also the performative aspects of how and what we clothe (if anything) is also significant.

Finally, it is important to note how fashion is a means by which we emphasize and activate *ecstatic bodies*, or “the figurative and iconic body literally ‘stand[ing] out’ in the cultural [imagination]” (Brandt, 2007, p. 11). Brandt references Marilyn Monroe’s pose on the cover of *Playboy*, Ginsberg’s embodied poetry readings of the beat era, and James Dean’s teen anguish as moments of *bodily ecstaticity*. Within these instances a ‘postmodern event’ becomes a picture in our cultural mind, so vivid that we can no longer differentiate between imagination and actuality. In other words, when we evocative or appealin bodies placed in evocative or contentious situations, the expressions or images of it (whether real or imagined) will vividly resonate in our mind. For example, Brandt notes how there are no photographs of Khrushchev slamming his shoe on the table at the United Nations in 1960, yet the image is so firmly inscribed in our cultural imagination (indicative of the iconic power of Khrushchev’s corporeality) that we can almost *see* the image of the event (p. 11).[53]

[53] In fact, if you do a *Google* image key-word search for “Khrushchev shoe banging,” you will find a variety of ‘photo-shopped’ images of the event.

Ecstatic moments are highlighted or made vibrant/meaningful through context and evocative bodily expression, which adds layers of symbolic meaning to the postmodern event. More specifically, the presence, performance, and aesthetic of bodies (as each of Brandt's examples illustrate) are needed for the event to resonate in the cultural mind. Ecstatic bodies provide a useful way to address bodies within a genealogical framework because they highlight how these factors converge to create a meaningful, powerful experience. This cultural *fashioning* is evocative of the splendor and seduction that allows us to arrive at super versions of the body. Working from this foundation, we can now further explore Bolton's eight superhero body types and relate them to the lived body.

The Graphic Body

The graphic body refers to ways in which the body is physically *inscribed* with discursive meaning, and by extension, how the body is conditioned and constrained in accordance with what we understand these symbolic markings to mean. The process of how we obtain such bodily markings and what they ultimately say about the self in relation to culture are tensions that permeate both the graphic and patriotic bodies.[54] Graphic bodies more specifically contend with individual or agentic articulations of self (e.g. emblems that encapsulate the essences of a unique identity, such as the 'S' on Superman's chest); while the patriotic body conveys the ways we organize around and associate with larger,

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[54] It may seem premature to define the patriotic body along with the graphic body, but again, their distinguishing features inform each other's parameters and both end up framing tensions in the subsequent body types.

social symbols and/or perform the body in accordance with institutional or political markings that evoke allegiance, membership, or authority (e.g. how the presence of a uniformed police officer constrains the self and all other bodies it comes in contact with).

Though the emblematic markings offered through the graphic body allow us to distinguish one superhero from another, as well as highlight a hero's special ability or unique origin, the patriotic body compels us to consider the cultural dimensions that influence various ideological meanings we attribute to these social, symbolic markings. Therefore, superhero costumes express a tension or exchange between *local* or *personal* (graphic) and *social* or *political* (patriotic) inscriptions that are conveyed on and through the costume/body. Once we examine the specific attributes of how the graphic body is inscribed, as well as how we apply these inscriptions to lived bodies, our findings will fluidly lead into a discussion of the more ideological, patriotic body.

With the creation of Superman in 1932, Siegel and Schuster established one of the principle and enduring conventions of the superhero genre: the iconic and overt 'branding' of the super body. As such, almost every superhero character carries a form of expressive bodily marking that sets it apart from everyone else, often in the form of a costume that functions as a "simplified statement of identity" (Bolton, 2008, p. 25). Bodies that are inscribed by or through the self and culture are done so as a means to express a unique identity as well as symbolically signify origin, status, and occupation as well as political membership, affiliations, or social preferences (when considering the patriotic

body). Taken together, these bodies highlight the symbolic power made apparent and possible on and through the body as it is signified into, or symbolically concealed within the world.[55]

A superhero's unique identity is revealed through the branding or inscription of the costume/body with evocative colors, symbols, and patterns. Heroes are typically adorned with bright (patriotic) colors such as white, red, blue, green and gold, whereas villains are typically conveyed wearing dark colors, such as black, purple and blood red. Primary colors are typically reserved for superheroes or superhero teams, and secondary colors are typically featured on villains or subsidiary characters (Goellner, 2011).[56] A costume will often also include the hero's initials or an overt iconic symbol, such as Superman's 'S' or

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[55] Siegel and Shuster were certainly not the first to inscribe or costume the body to emphasize corporeal perfection, or the duality of identity. Zorro (1919) and The Shadow (1930) are just two pulp-era masked crusaders that pre-date Superman. Real-world instances of costume inscriptions also exist throughout history, as with imperial Roman soldiers who would wear cuirass breastplates embossed with abdominal musculature to emphasize their presence, power, and physique. Similarly, high ranking officers in Alexander the Great's army wore masks – not only during combat – but during parades to give off the appearance of a cloned army of super soldiers (Weltzien, 2005). Other studies, such as Levi-Strauss' (1988) anthropological exploration of Swaihwe tribal masks of British Columbia specifically examine how graphically masking the body can be a means through which cultural history, rules, and values are written. In this sense, the mask is the template or canvas on which culture is inscribed, evocative of everything from natural phenomena like earthquakes to personal triumphs such as the acquisition of wealth.

[56] These basic color schemes are also influenced by the comic manufacturer in that Marvel's characters are typically dressed in brighter colors than DC's characters. Additionally, once we establish the postmodern body, the superheroes who emerge as morally conflicted and flawed will also find themselves in darker colors. For instance, Batman's costume has evolved from primarily blue and gray to almost exclusively black.

the offset ‘DD’ on Daredevil’s chest. The symbolic icon can also take the form of pictograms. Stan Lee’s Spider-Man sports a “webbed costume with an ‘insectan’ ideogram on the front and back that serves to embody his origin story and externalize his spider-like and spider-derived powers” (Bolton, p. 25). For others, like the Flash, graphic body markings signify the character’s unique ability – thus the lightning bolt on his chest and wings on his shoes and mask.[57]

For Bolton, the graphic body refers to the *iconicity* of the body as a template or canvas on which something splendid or stylized is conveyed. Iconicity, in this sense, is closely related to the notion of ecstatic bodies. He notes how images of spiders and webbing are so closely associated with Spider-Man, that “even when designers employ [the web] without any direct or deliberate references to the superhero, [Spider-Man] cannot help but be invoked” (p. 29). Likewise, in fashion, to display “the promise and threat of the future,” clothing is assembled, stylized, and adorned with images and icons that add to or even eroticize the otherwise ordinary body, giving it layered meaning (Arnold, 2001, p. xiv). Bolton’s exhibition features designers who have taken well-known superhero emblems and re-stylized them in order to alter an appearance and meaning while still evoking the transformative play of the utopian, iconic body. Fashion designer Rossella Jardini does this through changing Superman’s ‘S’ to the letter ‘M’ (a letter that represents her corporation’s design label) and replaces the pentagonal border surrounding the ‘S’ with a heart-shape. Though the design

[57] The Flash, of course, is inspired by the Greek God, Hermes.

maintains the same color scheme, size, and general shape and placement as the emblem on the Superman's chest, it nonetheless conveys a departure from the norm while still evoking the notion of splendor and seduction.

This 'semiotic specificity' conveyed through a superhero's graphic body not only indicates and glamorizes the identity of the superhero, but also functionally serves the purpose of signifying dual identities. In fitting with Foucault's double-negation of the possessive power of constraints, the graphic body must be examined in relation to two distinct functions that are contradictory in nature but serve similar purposes. As such, the graphic body functions to simultaneously *reveal* and *conceal* multiple and sometimes competing sides of the self. Despite the utopianism that permeates graphic depictions of super bodies, the identities of such heroes are almost always signified as multiple, fissured, or incomplete.

For contemporary depictions of superheroes, Superman himself is a primary constraint through which these discourses typically get filtered, and thus he is a ideal example to examine in relation to the 'gate keeping' or management of identity duality that happens through the costume/clothing. Chabon (2008) makes a strong case for identifying Superman as the 'origin' (or at least *the* primary constraint) of the modern day superhero:

> The comic book, which descended from the glorious newspaper strip of the early twentieth century like an ape from an angel, preexisted the superhero, but so barely and with so little distinction that the medium has seemed indistinguishable in the cultural mind from its first stroke of

> brilliance. There were costumed crime fighters before Superman (the Phantom, Zorro), but only as there were pop quartets before the *Beatles*. As Proust said, more or less, about great works of literature, Superman invented and exhausted his genre in a single bound. All the tropes, all the clichés and conventions, all the possibilities, all the longings and wishes and neuroses that have driven and fed and burdened the superhero comic over the past seventy years were implied by and contained within that little red-and-blue rocket ship hurtling toward Earth. (p. 65)

The tensions that emerge in the duality of Superman/Clark Kent's identity play out on his graphic body, as well as on and through the bodies of his adolescent creators.[58] Their utopian Superman reflects a desire to imagine themselves beyond the confines of adolescent awkwardness, to see themselves as something other than scrawny kids, and craft fantasies uniquely their own yet also inspired by the science fiction and pulp magazines they grew up on (Hajdu, 2008, p. 30). Nevertheless, through Superman's alter-persona we see the neuroses and anxieties of Siegel and Shuster's burgeoning masculinity. In Clark Kent they reflect the teen awkwardness and the nerdy ineptitudes of an intelligent, unassuming, bumbling, socially and sexually deficient loner. But by shedding the business suit, Kent is transformed into Superman, who conversely represents everything that is moral, strong and extraordinary.

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[58] Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster were ostracized sons of Jewish immigrants living near Cleveland, Ohio, when they began creating early versions of the *Man of Steel* at about seventeen years old.

Ultimately, the graphic body communicates a second skin. Whenever we see one of these 'skins' on display we come to expect that another facet of identity, perhaps an alter-ego, is being concealed. In many superhero narratives, the success of the character as a superhero is often contingent on his or her ability to maintain this concealment, the *secret* identity, or an 'authentic' self underneath the costume/mask.[59] The sense of masculine identity fantasized and projected through Siegel and Shuster's iconic character is written into the graphic representations that mark Superman's costumed body, and become all the more evocative in the ways that he enacts (or transitions to and from) these dual identities:

> The pose Superman is most famous for – establishing a kind of Superman iconography – shows him ripping off his shirt, revealing the triangular 'S' on the hero suit, instead of a hairy chest that one would see were he not Superman. This is the icon of performing masculinity by the changing of dress. No skin can be seen under the garment, no 'real man' of flesh and blood, only another costume is revealed. The ideal male, the super-man, is not signified by a naked body but by different layers of identity. To show these layers, the hero has to change constantly from one to the other. Masculinity is defined with the help of this dynamic performance. (Weltzien, 2005, p. 234-235)

[59] The 'post' bodies of superheroes and their costumes highlight the increasing abundance of identity-play, slippage, and ambiguity that permeate the most contemporary fantastical re-imagining of the self, as well as the hyper-sexualizing of *ideal* bodies.

The symbolically marked body we find underneath Kent's business suit is far more splendid and seductive than a naked body we might otherwise expect to find. It is *more* than just mere nakedness in that the costume is sexually and symbolically evocative of nudity despite covering his entire body.[60] This illusion of nudity is highlighted by the taught, skin-tight proximity of the costume to the muscularly defined bodies that wear them, as well as the absence of bodily 'imperfections' (such as birthmarks or body hair) that are otherwise concealed by the costume.

The bodily constraints that inhibit the expression of dual identities within the genre can sometimes feel understated in that there are functional justifications for costumes carefully woven into superhero narratives.[61] For example, Catwoman's sleek suit is not only a graphic personification of the animal associated with her 'occupation' (*cat* burglary) but is also more conducive for rooftop acrobatics, as opposed to wearing blue jeans or an evening gown. Thus, much like Hawkman, the Blue Beetle, and the Penguin, her costume gives the appearance of the animal symbolically evoked and associated with her physicality and/or powers.

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[60] Of course, there are additional things to be said regarding the gendered aspects of how much flesh is exposed on male versus female characters, but more on that when we arrive at the paradoxical body.

[61] I mention these functional aspects here because they are very much 'graphically' marked on the costume/body, but because these functions are also performative and motivated by culture, it is here that we start to see the blurring between the graphic and patriotic body categories.

The costume also often serves the functional purpose of communicating a personal or cultural history, written directly onto the body/costume. Dick Grayson, the original Robin and junior counterpart to Batman, was the youngest in a family of acrobats called The Flying Graysons. However, his family is killed by a mob boss trying to extort money from the circus that employed them (*Detective Comics*, no. 38, 1940). Robin's original costume is comprised of the circus leotards his family wore when they performed. The symbolic evocation of his dead family gives them life after death, as well as and adds sense of symbolic purpose through his embodiment of a dual but familiar persona. Robin wears their history and memory on his body as a second skin every time he goes out to fight crime.[62]

These functional justifications for the costume result in compelling stories. Peter Parker does not 'out' himself as Spider-Man because of the risk it would cause his family and loved ones. In revealing his civilian persona, Spider-Man would jeopardize the safety of his loved ones should villains use them as hostages, pawns, or a means to enact revenge. For characters that were once everyday humans but somehow transformed into the extraordinary by science, culture, or technology, having a civilian alter ego is also a means to stay grounded in what they may see as their core sense of self. Thus the graphic body becomes

[62] Superman's creators were also inspired by circus performers, and fashioned his costume much like the death-defying acrobats and strong-men of the big top.

increasingly politicized (patriotic) when we see superheroes struggle to maintain relationships with the *real* people (and selves) from whom they derive.[63]

As other superhero writers and artists began building off (and creatively 'borrowing' from) Siegel and Shuster's initial creation, the narrative justifications and symbolic functions of the graphic body became increasingly complex. As such, Batman is born out of Bruce Wayne witnessing his parent's murder as a child. Abstractly speaking, his civilian identity (childhood innocence) is destroyed when his parents are slain before his eyes, and thus a dual persona is born out of the trauma. But is the fissure of his identity so complete that he then must exists as a tension between two personas? Perhaps more to the point, which aspect of his persona should we consider more alive or real, and which is a costumed illusion, Bruce Wayne or Batman?

Thus we see that various ruptures in utopian projections of super-bodies happen at the graphic or symbolic level, opening the way for dystopian projections and the messy multiplicity of identity to also play out in the subsequent mutant, paradoxical, and postmodern bodies. For Batman, the costume is not just an ideal projection of the body's splendor and seduction, or simply a means to mask the presence of Bruce Wayne, but is rather born out of a personal tragedy – *a history of the body* – that is by no means utopian. However, Batman's body can still be read as more graphic than patriotic in that, unlike Superman (who buys whole-heartedly into a pre-established social morality), Batman is

[63] Or by which they are abjected and ostracized as abnormal, as will be the case with the subsequent mutant bodies.

primarily motivated by personal pain and a need for social retribution (justice) stemming from a personal attack. Ergo, one hero is swathed in red and blue (patriotic), while the other – adorned in black and personifying a bat – is literally a *Dark* Knight.[64]

As previously alluded to, the duality of Superman's identity in relation to his costume is somewhat unique, and very much highlights the ambivalent nature of clothing the body. This is largely because Superman was Superman before he ever became his alternate identity. Superman is given his utopian powers through exposure to the Earth's sun, and actually must strive to 'pass' as an everyday human. His marked or graphic body is expressed when costumed as a mild-mannered reporter for the *Daily Planet*. The juxtaposition is famously played out in Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill, Volume Two* (2004), wherein The Bride is confronted by Bill's lamenting of the multiplicity of identity:

> Batman is actually Bruce Wayne; Spider-Man is actually Peter Parker. And it is in that characteristic Superman stands alone. Superman didn't

[64] This is an overlapping feature/tension of the graphic body and postmodern body. By giving superheroes real-world problems, they become evocatively empathetic and thus equip audiences for living in equally postmodern conditions; regardless of how splendid, spectacular, or otherworldly foreign the stories are otherwise conceived. Therefore, when we arrive at the last of Bolton's super bodies, the postmodern body, we are confronted with the possibility that all superhero bodies (including Superman's) only offers an *illusion* of utopianism. As much as we see the bat costume as 'super,' it is also intended to frighten us. Wayne need only don body armor, a mask, and a cape to evoke the creature that comprises his identity, instilling fear and darkness in his enemies by graphically marking what he has become. Again, these aspects of the graphic body are arguably more in-line with our lived experiences, allowing audiences to readily connect with the messy, disruptive, or even dystopian aspects of inscribed bodies and identity slippage and play.

> become Superman. Superman was born Superman. When Superman wakes up in the morning, he's Superman. His alter ego is Clark Kent. His outfit with the big red 'S' – that's the blanket he was wrapped in as a baby when the Kent's found him. Those are his clothes. What Kent wears – the glasses, the business suit – that's the costume. That's the costume Superman wears to blend in with us. Clark Kent is how Superman views us. And what are the characteristics of Clark Kent? He's weak. He's unsure of himself. He's a coward. Clark Kent is Superman's critique on the whole human race.[65]

With a stable understanding the graphic body in place, we can now extend these findings to examine how graphic iconicity translates onto real human flesh. Again, the graphic body in superhero discourse situates the costume as the primary means through which superhero identity is conveyed, concealed, and revealed. The utopian branding of the superhero is therefore made possible through the costume's iconic symbols, images, bold colors, and meaningful patterns. When these graphic markers are inscribed on the flesh, the body becomes a canvas on which an otherwise blank or natural body is layered with similar symbolic meanings, thus made to be evocative, splendid and seductive

[65] In various Superman narratives it is explained that Martha Kent, his adopted mother on Earth, fashioned Superman's costume out of his baby blankets because as an infant he kept tearing through flimsy Earth fabrics. His alien fabrics, however, can withstand the force of scissors, bullets, fire, and thermonuclear warfare. In 1963, it was revealed that a young Clark Kent also salvaged strips of rubber padding from his rocket to fashion his red boots and yellow belt. Through these narratives, the costume comes to holds the same indestructible properties as his body. In this sense, Superman's costume is literally a *super* second skin.

(utopian), or otherwise abject and grotesque (dystopian). The most common ways in which these inscriptions are made apparent on the body include stigmas, tattoos, scarring, brandings, and certain adornments of the skin, such as piercings.[66]

For ancient Greeks, 'stigmas' were physical inscriptions placed on the body to mark it as non-normative (Goffman, 2004). Stigmas functioned as outwardly expressed warnings to others that a body was diseased, polluted, or corrupt. Thus the stigma functioned to communicate a history of the body, denoting its previous transgressions, or the current state of the body as it is imbued with social, political, or personal power (Brouwer, 1998). More recently, stigmas have "come to refer not only to marks placed upon the body by others but also to naturally occurring physical characteristics (such as a cleft palate); as well [as] … the social conditions that impact or are impacted by personal characteristics (physically visible or not) that are non-normative" (p. 117). Thus, *stigmatization* demonstrates how graphic inscriptions of the lived body communicate political (patriotic) control via mechanisms and regimes of power.

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[66] Piercings are difficult to place here and might actually fit best with the examination of the postmodern body. Like clothing, piercings are an adornment on the skin that can be more easily removed than a tattoo, but they nonetheless rupture the flesh, are sometimes embedded beneath the skin, and therefore leave a scar or history of the body after their removal. For example, "ear gauging" refers to the stretching of the ear lobe through giant hoop earrings that are worn over time. Through slowly increasing the circumference of the hoop, the earlobe stretches. Without the ring in the ear, the cartilage droops and hangs off the lobe like a wet noodle and will never return to its original shape without cosmetic surgery. Thus we see the body is graphically marked, mutated/mutilated, and made aesthetic and/or grotesque in this one corporeal act.

Further examples of how the graphic body becomes (or is the product of) political/ideological influence inscribe onto the body can be found in Brain (1979), Brouwer (1998), and Goffman (1963/2004). Each offers a variety of examples wherein this domineering relation of power occurs. They include the tattooing of Japanese criminals in the thirteenth century – indicating the type of crime committed as well as the crime's location; the brandishing of deserters of the British Army in the late nineteenth century; as well as the serialized tattooing of Jewish concentration camp victims. These political factors that constraints the body by marking it will be further unpacked with the discussion of the patriotic body in the next section. For now, it is important to realize how the graphic body is also always a patriotic or ideological body, especially if we see culture as an all-encompassing constraint on any sense of agency we might have. The question then becomes, can such inscriptions of the body be resistive of culture/ideology or are they often/always reduced into co-opted expressions of institutional power?

Graphic inscriptions of the body, as opposed to clothing, compel us to rethink the body's relationship with resistance. At face-value, tattoos and brandings are the most basic extension of how the graphic body translates into lived experience. However, those who willfully inscribe the lived body typically do so to either celebrate or subvert normative culture, and thus the inscription of the body is always in dialogue with culture. Bodily inscriptions are resistive when they oppose power-laden, socially determined, economically driven, and hetero-normative regimes. However, subversions of normative culture can also be considered co-opted if said changes do less to dismantle mechanisms and regimes

but rather reify the power dynamics they maintain, regardless if the subject is aware of it or not.[67]

Brouwer (1998) examines HIV/AIDS tattooing as a means to confront stigmatization, and in doing so, demonstrates how lived graphic body inscriptions signify a tension between co-opted and emancipatory resistance. As he explains; a key tension in and amongst communities contending with the disease is the ethics of self-disclosure. Therefore, those who tattoo their bodies as being HIV/AIDS positive offer a "private warning" that can be seen as the individual taking control over the way their bodies are perceived (p. 127). In this sense, bodies are emancipated from the overall conceptual stigmatization by clearing up ambiguity, but do so by marking the body as diseased (perhaps an altogether different form of stigmatization; one in which the stigmatized 'repossesses' the social stigma).

Brouwer notes how these body images do not always clarify themselves, and one would be required to *see* the tattoo in order to make sense of it – though this is not always ensured (p. 128). Additionally, the act of marking the body in this way is still a privileged act, perhaps one that calls upon certain individuals to contend with mechanisms of power in such a de-stigmatized manner, so that those who participated in Brouwer's study tended to be white men, as well as stable and secure with their sexuality.

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[67] For example, a teenager may tattoo their body as a means to rebel from an authoritative parent. At the local level this may seem emancipatory. But if the tattoo is of an eagle and American flag, or the Playboy Bunny symbol, then the marking also functions to undermine the agentic expression by reconstituting the self under a broader authoritative regime of power.

Another example of where we see defiant or emancipatory power expressed on and through the graphic body is with source code hackers (Thomas, 2005). These corporate hackers take industry owned, secretive source codes (literally copyrighted lists of numbers and letters) and tattoo the hacked codes on their bodies as a means to disrupt the hierarchy of ownership, as well as advocate for open source software. Thus we see a graphic disruption of state sponsored encryptions (mechanisms of power) that serve to maintain a particular power dynamic.

> It also marks the body as the disruptive element which continually threatens not only the normative structure of code, but the very security of the state itself, especially when that body … is a transgressive one, marked by its violation of code and its transgression of law. (Thomas, p. 655) [68]

A final way to view how power is exercised on the body through graphic inscription can be found in looking at how physical defects of the body manifest in the human mind and are then translated onto the body. Dysmorphic disorder refers to the psychological condition wherein the subject views an aspect of their body as ugly, flawed, or diseased, despite all outward appearances that suggest the opposite. Though it is not always clear what motivates such psychological

[68] For Thomas, resistance is "always about finding alternative and profound means to transgress" (p. 660), as is apparent in the corporate code having to change into an even more condensed algorithm because of the source code hackers emacipatory resistance, even when confronted with real institutional consequences for each act of dissemination of the code (up to 10 years in jail and $1 million fine).

ruptures (e.g. personal trauma, social pressure, or the like), the symptoms range from self mutilation in the form of scarring to the more extreme (but rare) instances of 'amputee wannabes' – or, those who seek to have surgeons electively remove an otherwise healthy limb (Jordan, 2004). Such brandishing or disfigurements of the body add another layer of contention between the local or agentic (graphic) ways we inscribe and transform our bodies, and the cultural or ideological (patriotic) ways we are socially constrained to *not* disrupt body norms or taboos.[69]

Much more can (and will) be said about the way bodies are symbolically or graphically marked with culture and expressions of individuality. However, as we continually specify and differentiate these influential discursive factors that bring about graphic bodily change, we prematurely overlap our discussion of key factors that constitute subsequent body types. For example, it is appropriate to discuss ambivalences of gender in relation to local, graphic expressions of identity, but to do so in depth right now would risk diminishing the presence of the mutant and paradoxical bodies. In this way, no genealogy will ever feel

[69] Significant to this tension is the rhetorical work people must go through to justify wanting to have such procedures done (communicate a flawed body but a sound mind), as well as the gate-keeping power surgeons (and institutions of power) have in regulating safe access to such procedures (Jordan, 2004). To a lesser degree, the same often holds true in relation to all forms of inscription and branding. For example, in 2011 a woman had "Drake," the name of a popular hip hop and R&B artist, tattooed onto her forehead in big block letters. The singer was flattered by the fan's devotion, but was more so upset with the tattoo artist who allowed it to happen, going so far as calling him an asshole.

complete, but we can nonetheless begin to see where discursive power will emerge and converge in this formulation.

Both humans and the graphic superheroes camouflage the body in order to exert a new utopian version of the self, or recast the body to mean something different. However, whereas clothing and costumes offer second skin by which we switch back and forth to multiple aspects of the self, human body inscriptions more resolutely convey a semi-permanent *layering* or history of symbolic identity. It is much harder to have a tattoo removed or scar surgically 'erased' than it is taking on and off a mask. Thus, for lived body inscriptions, the degree of graphic transformation and transcendence is enduring rather than oscillatory.[70] Humans still 'hide' the corporeal self through clothing, based on lived contexts and constraints, such as covering a tattoo or removing a piercing to appear more professional at work. However, when we inscribe the body in these permanent ways the 'natural' body does not just hide or transform, but is rather always re-written, and potentially disappears.

The Patriotic Body

With an established understanding of how the graphic body functions to articulate and conceal identity, as well as how such symbolic articulations are

[70] Superheroes slip in and out of costumes/identities all the time, but when you brand yourself, it is somewhat permanent or lasting. This also holds true with certain superheroes, such as Swampthing and the Fantastic Four's Thing. Though they cannot escape the ways their bodies have been inscribed/transformed by culture, one should also note that neither of these transformed bodies are considered utopian in the same sense that Superman or Wonder Woman are. Even their names in relation to each other suggest something far from utopian. Instead, they are virile and mutant, but more on that later.

corporeally translated onto our lived bodies, we can now expand to the patriotic body, which again, is best thought of as a tension. As much as Superman's costume denotes a unique self, it is also highly evocative of a national identity. The patriotic body differs from the graphic body in that it embodies "the ideals and values as well as the myths and beliefs of American Society [for the specific reason of] upholding American utopianism as expressed in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution" (Bolton, 2008, p. 47). Thus the splendid and seductive aspects of the patriotic superhero are contained within its ability to defend everyday citizens and uphold the moral/political status quo.

The conflicts of good versus evil that permeate superhero narratives tend to situate super-beings as being either heroes or villains. Patriotic bodies are utopian in that their aim includes 'heroic' functions to uphold laws, justice, and political/institutional authority, usually beyond the abilities of the everyday citizenry. As such, they are also read as quintessentially American because they are born out of real-world social/political conflicts faced by their Western authors, artists, and audiences. Captain America is depicted punching out Hitler on the cover of his debut issue in 1941. A year and a half later, Wonder Woman is shown on the cover of the first issue of *Sensation Comics* as an All-American Amazonian warrior posing defiantly in front of the White House, Capitol building, and other government landmarks. Borne out of war propaganda, issue after issue of these comics offer narratives of superheroes battling Nazis, "Japs," or any enemy of the allies – often with vaudeville flare, ethnocentric biases, and racist representations. Interestingly, the real 'villains' of the world are also

depicted as being super-human. Marvel's Red Skull is a symbolic and ideologically amplified version of Adolf Hitler (and his generals). His secret organization bent on world domination, Hydra, is an allegory to Nazis and SS soldiers.

Both superhero and super villain bodies are graphically marked, but whereas superheroes perform patriotism through utopian ideals (serving a moral order that goes beyond using their powers for personal gain), super-villains typically convey the dystopian aspects of humanity, including greed, selfishness, and primal desire to dominate or control others. Like the superheroes, many super villains experience some sort of trauma or critical event that brings about their super-status, or else they are already (morally broken) criminals before attaining their special abilities, and thus become even more so misguided by their power. This tension is perhaps most famously depicted in the origin story of Peter Parker; not so much in the attainment of his powers, but in the attainment of his morality.[71]

Much like what we would expect to see from a super-villain suddenly imbued with power, Parker initially uses his newfound spider-abilities for personal gain. His purpose for crafting the spider suit is to impress all the kids at school who typically bully him. As he increasingly displays his super-body skills

[71] Here we can see a direct conflation of the graphic and patriotic bodies. Spider-Man's identity is formulated and expressed through the (graphic) iconicity of the spider costume, but his larger (patriotic) purpose is expressed through the moralizing of his performed abilities to an altruistic end. Thus we can use his character (and body) to highlight how the graphic and patriotic bodies inform and imply each other.

in public, people start to notice and he becomes a local celebrity. However, while walking down a hallway following a public appearance, a burglar rushes past him while fleeing from the police. Though the officer in pursuit pleads for Spider-Man's assistance, Parker cannot be bothered by it. He informs the officer that he is only concerned with looking out for himself. Later in the story, Parker returns home one day to find that his beloved Uncle Ben has been murdered. When he learns that the police have the suspect cornered, Spider-Man arrives on the scene to enact revenge, only to discover that the man who murdered his uncle is the same burglar he had had the opportunity to stop but chose not to. Of course, right then and there he makes the decision to do well by the world, and hands the criminal over to police. Spider-Man's first narrative ends not with an evocative display of his bodily super-prowess, but with the iconic and somber moral reminder that "With great power there must also come great responsibility."[72]

Thus we can identify a key distinction between the graphic and patriotic body in that the patriotic body is inherently a *socially performing* body as opposed to a static, graphic representation inscribed on the symbolic self. The patriotic body serves a higher, more moral (and often political) purpose than exclusively expressing a unique (super) identity. Rather, they willingly serve the purpose of fighting ideological battles with global (or metaphysical) enemies, as well as maintain the pragmatic laws that govern an ideal, law abiding world. As such, patriotic bodies refer to both the heavy-handed nationalism that is

[72] *Amazing Fantasy*, No.15 (Lee & Ditko, 1962).

graphically written onto these performing bodies (e.g. Captain America), as well as the moralizing performance of using one's powers in responsible, socially pragmatic and helpful ways (e.g. Spider-Man: a friendly neighborhood superhero).[73]

Unlike Spider-Man, however, superheroes such as Captain America and Wonder Woman quite literally "wear their flag-waiving fervor on their sleeves" (Bolton, p. 47). Bolton suggests that in appropriating and mobilizing the patriotic aspects of their identities/bodies, these patriotic archetypes are almost always seen in "red, white, and blue costumes that [are] composites of the American flag" (p. 47). By appropriating (inscribing) and mobilizing (performing) the patriotic body readers are also compelled, if not instructed to *act* (or *equip* us into 'solving' the problems of war). Outside of comic books we are provided with discursive mechanisms (flag covered t-shirts, coffee mugs, and stationary) through which the *ecstaticity* of nationalism can be fantastically displayed.[74] As noted by Leiss et. al. (2005), the war effort and burgeoning commercial propaganda of the industrial

[73] When features of the postmodern body are revealed, it will become apparent that this notion of 'moralizing,' even along the lines of what we consider a superhero, is a highly contested attribute. Thus, we can foreshadow the postmodern body as an entity that is graphically marked, but neither subscribes to patriotic/nationalistic moralizing or selfish gain. They are still moral superheroes, but there is no patriotic impulse that drives their morality/behavior.

[74] Additionally, patriotic characters like Wonder Woman and Captain America tend to wane in popularity during times of peace and become dramatically more relevant when the nation is engaged in military conflict. Thus, Captain America's prevalence and popularity peaked during World War II, and then again his popularity increased with Vietnam as a member of the 1960's Avengers. And finally, like all superheroes, his presence and popularity has only flourished since 9/11.

revolution were mutually beneficial enterprises. Comics provided ‘free advertising’ to get Americans behind the war effort, and comic publishers profited off fantasizing solutions to our greatest fears. Thus, the utopianism of the patriotic body is ultimately a projection of the nationalistic ideal.

It should also be noted that even this sense of nationalistic utopia is wrought with contradictions and problematic representations, which will become more apparent when we look at the paradoxical and postmodern bodies. For example, though both patriotic bodies referenced display the body in evocative ways, Wonder Woman’s costume is a lot more revealing and overtly sexualized compared to Captain America’s. It typically includes knee-high red boots, blue briefs with stars, gold cuffs, and a tightly formed red girdle. Her costume has also changed over time, often in relation to prevailing social conditions. In the early 1980’s her bust was propped up and framed by a golden eagle, and then in early 2011 she began wearing pants, only to have them removed later that year. As such, patriotic bodies are not only overlaid with the iconography of American flag, but the epitome of the patriotic body is hyper-sexualized and made to reflect the utopian progress narrative of the American Dream/body.

The performative or behavioral dimension of the patriotic body implies that superheroes are not only graphically marked, but that a national morality flows through their bodies and compels them to act accordingly. Joe Simon (writer) and Jack Kirby (artist) crafted Captain America a year before the attacks on Pearl Harbor as a means to articulate their grievances toward what they saw as a repulsive Nazi Germany and drum up support for the inevitable and morally

justified U. S. involvement. Though some isolationists and Nazi sympathizers criticized the comic, its first issue was nonetheless greeted with overwhelming support and sold nearly a million copies (Wright, 2001, p. 36). Captain America comes into being when Steve Rogers (a frail, weak, but exceedingly patriotic young man) takes an experimental super-serum developed by the U. S. government to create superior soldiers to help in the war effort. Rogers' body is completely transformed into a utopian version of his prior self, amplified to be Herculeas amongst mere mortals. Though his body is profoundly altered by a political technology of the body, his core sense of courage and patriotism is firmly unwavering.

Again, and not surprisingly, the presence and popularity of patriotic superheroes tends to fluctuate in relation to the real-world conditions that position the U. S. government in positive and negative lights. Prior to the Vietnam War and the 1960's, patriotic bodies were almost exclusively depicted as having an American sense utopianism.[75] As time went on, this adherence to institutional power did not prohibit patriotic characters from then critiquing the U. S. government and what it means to be a patriot. In confronting the dystopian aspects of government and ideology, patriotic bodies resist authoritative powers should those institutions and governments abuse their power. As such, in 1974 Captain America's "disgust over the Watergate scandal prompted his rejection of

[75] Batman could be considered a unique exception, largely because his motives for fighting crime are grounded in a personal, psychological tragedy. Nonetheless, he is still a crime fighter, and ultimately becomes a formative member of the Justice League, which is a conglomerate of superheroes that function patriotically.

his patriotic persona and the adoption of the identity-denying Nomad" (Bolton, p. 51). Decades later, the fictional alter-ego behind the Captain America, Steve Rogers, is assassinated in a March, 2007, *Civil War* storyline, wherein the narrative "was intentionally written as an allegory to current real-life issues like the Patriot Act, the war on terror, and the September 11 attacks" (Kokenes, 2009).

Again, for wartime readers of early Captain America, the fantastical utopianism is made possible through his super-body, but his morality and sense of duty (which has not been chemically altered) remains the uniquely human attributes audiences most easily empathize with. Thus, within most superhero narratives of the era (be it Captain America, Wonder Woman, or Superman) we find specific calls to action. Explicit propaganda messages permeate the comic narratives and supplemental advertisements in these comic books. Included in the early issues of Captain America are full-page spreads evocative of the *Uncle Sam: I Want You* posters, only with Captain America doing the pointing and commanding. Several issues include advertisements for the 'Captain America Fan Club,' a group called *The Sentinels of Liberty*. For ten cents and the cost of postage, one could obtain their very own Sentinels badge with an inscribed pledge that "proves that you are a loyal believer in Americanism … [joining] in a gallant crusade against the spies and traitors who accept treason against our nation" (Simon & Kirby, various issues, 1940's).

Bolton's extension of the patriotic body in the realm of fashion includes a focus on designs that complicate traditional modes of representing allegiance and nationalism. He notes how real world events like 9/11 give credence to the

proliferation of patriotic expressions. Following 9/11 we see a surge in people adorning and surrounding themselves with patriotic symbols. The American flag, along with certain insignias of the twin towers and the 'NYPD' and 'FDNY' acronyms, served to brand citizen bodies as patriotic. Ergo, the nation's patriotic response was a reactive means to maintain ideology, established power mechanisms, and the status quo.

Unique to the patriotic body, however, is not just how it is branded as being patriotic, but how it performs in relation to the nationalistic morality. Soldiers who go off to war and become performing military bodies are of course patriotic, and more fully embody the utopian or idealistic translation of patriotism expressed in superhero discourse. For the majority of citizens, however, our response to a decade long war was perhaps most viscerally felt at the gas pump. Or, for a while, within the gas station itself where one could immerse themselves in patriotic hats, t-shirts, Bic lighters, and magnetic 'ribbons' that graphically marked the self (or one's SUV) as patriotic and in support of the war/troops. But do these graphic gestures really call upon us to corporeally act/perform in relation to the ideals they symbolically convey, or is knowing that a percentage of the proceeds garnered from one's 'sacrifice' will go to help support the troops enough?

In concurrence, the instructions given by the Bush administration during the 9/11 aftermath was (much like that for the Cold War) to keep shopping and consuming, thus ensuring that money is continually pumped into the economy. These instructions seem to convey the idea that by maintaining consumption

rituals we are able to 'fight' an enemy who would rather see the Western *way of life* (consumption: the engine that drives our economic superiority) disrupted. Thus consumption was depicted by the government as a primary means through which we maintain our national identity in the face of hostile and unprecedented threats.[76]

Several of the designers in Bolton's exhibit use patriotic iconography to diminish individuality in favor of nationalistic identity, while others attempt to conflate the notion of nationalism with consumption. For example, designers like Galliano depart from functional aspects of the patriotic body and use designs to mute the body in favor of the display of country, as in a model's body shrouded in a flowing American flag and posing like the Statue of Liberty.[77] However, designers are just as likely to problematize our overt consumption practices through the same patriotic iconography. Designers such as Van Beirendonck overlay symbols of consumerism (McDonalds and Coca-cola) onto patterns of the American flag to demonstrate how consumption has become a primary means through which we construct a national identity (Bolton, p. 52-63). Thus, the utopianism contained and maintained by the patriotic body becomes dystopian

[76] This discussion is somewhat truncated here because what gets revealed through these specific tensions is directly addressed in answering *how power is exercised* in the final chapter. For now it is enough to know that the tension exists and where it might come from.

[77] This is juxtaposed in the exhibit with the overtly exposed and sexualized female body of Wonder Woman, who is essentially wearing an American flag bustier and not much else. Again, to avoid too many detours, the gender implications of Wonder Woman's overtly sexualized patriotic body will be contended with when the paradoxical body is revealed.

when governments, 'for the people, by the people' more readily serve the interests of corporations.[78]

These dystopian effects also emerge when corporate logos and emblems usurp patriotic images as a primary means by which we identify and act. We are then left with an array of competing corporate symbols, such as McDonald's golden arches, that potentially become more indicative of a sense of Americanism than the stars and stripes. An effect of this power dynamic is how citizens then perform their patriotic allegiance not in relation to the government to which they belong, but to the products they purchase and the corporations that employ them. Again, graphic and patriotic bodies are both marked bodies, signifying the self in relation to culture/ideology. The graphic body highlights the splendid and

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[78] By the mid 1950's patriotic allegiances to the nation began to shift from nation to employers and private corporations (Leiss, et. al, 2005). Thus the 'clothing codes' of laboring bodies became deeply rooted in the decorum of the workplace. For certain occupations, like firefighters and police officers, symbolically marked uniforms serve functional purposes by signifying the status, power, utility and affiliations of such bodies. However, this also plays out in the corporate world. For example, the sense of 1950's post-war conservatism and containment had an effect on the dress of (male) employees at companies such as IBM. For decades the sterilized, white button-down dress shirt with necktie symbolically reinforced the corporation's institutional values, highlighting the reliability and consistency of their product as well as the corporate conservativism of the United States. The professional business suit is, of course, much more historically and contemporarily rooted and relevant beyond the purpose it serves for IBM. However, the point to be made here is that its uniformity and blandness still evokes a certain *constraint* on identity that gives way to corporate allegiance. Otherwise, Apple's powerful *1984* campaign (i.e. Super Bowl commercial equating IBM to Orwell's 'big brother' and the 'thought police') wouldn't have been so effective in usurping the decorum of the company's bland, yet seductive uniformity. Likewise, Apple's 'I'm a Mac, and I'm a PC' campaign to personify products uses *bodily ecstaticity* (actors) to effectively highlight the tension between what is a *cool* computer and what is not.

seductive aspects of revealing and concealing the self, the careful identity play we engage in when personalizing or specifying our identities in culture, as well as revealing the psychological ruptures of our bodies/history.

By definition, Bolton (2008) establishes that the patriotic body indicates an ideological or moral body, one that expresses certain ideals and silences others. Like with Captain America or Wonder Woman, lived patriotic bodies are called into action when real-world events transpire that signify a need for bodily sacrifice, for the sake of maintaining a national identity or overcoming a threat to the (power-laden) status quo. Patriotic bodies (when considered for their utopian/dystopian potential) highlight the ways we then espouse and maintain a sense of performed allegiance or affiliation with national, institutional, political, or corporate symbols. The patriotic body, when examined through Foucault's relations of power and applied to the lived body, is recognized as a constraining mechanism that exercises power through thriving on (co-opted) resistance.

As mentioned, there are plenty of instances of citizens who admirably and heroically sacrifice themselves for the patriotic purpose of preserving justice and freedom. The point here is not to diminish the real sacrifices made by those who choose (or are co-opted into choosing) to serve and sacrifice for the country on the battlefield, while working at 'ground zero,' or through laboring on the home front (or just as likely, the board room). However, in attending to the discursive (superhero) constraints at hand, we often see the actual exercising of patriotic power play out in non-physically combative ways. Thus we often witness bodies perform patriotically, but without ever exerting corporeal risk or sacrifice.

Whereas Captain America, Wonder Woman, and Superman are soldiers who get down and dirty in battle, on the home-front our means of performing patriotically is often reduced to acts of consumption.

War itself has become a commodity that gets bought and sold as entertainment in the popular culture. McCoy and Waugh's *Acts of Valor* (2012) is a film that follows an elite team of Navy SEALs as they embark on a covert mission to rescue a kidnapped CIA agent. It features footage of real life military training missions, turning soldiers into movie stars in a contemporary Baudrillardian twist. As such, we are just as likely to know what war is, embody it, and immerse and empathize with patriotic sacrifice through a video game instead of attending the funeral of a veteran (Hess, 2007). As noted by comedian Jon Stewart:

> Maybe we should always show pictures … of our wounded service people, pictures of maimed innocent civilians. We can only make decisions about war if we see what war actually is – and not as a video game where bodies quickly disappear leaving behind a shiny gold coin. (in BruinKid, 2011)

In seeing the absence or disappearance of bodies in relation to the exercising of specific bio-power, both in the way we fulfill patriotic obligations through consumption, as well as how the media frames the act of war as utopian/patriotic by rendering the fallen invisible. Additional key tensions regarding how the body/self is constituted and constrained through graphic inscriptions and patriotic performance will emerge throughout the analysis. Each

subsequent body type builds off, or is a reaction to the core assumptions made in grounding the graphic and patriotic bodies. For example, some body types will emerge as a tension between the ways bodies gets graphically represented (or rendered invisible) in political, patriarchal, and ethnocentric cultures. It is central to remember that to some degree, all of the super body types are graphically marked or perform patriotically. Building upon each other in this way will allow us to move more efficiently through the emerging body types and tensions.

The Armored Body

Armored and Aerodynamic bodies both convey how the body is optimized for defense, force, and efficiency. Stemming out of the discussion of the body being marked or inscribed with culture, these bodies are a response to the evocative utopianism in superhero narratives that manifest in very functional ways. Because conflict in superhero narratives typically result in various forms of combat and violence, the armored and aerodynamic bodies serve the purpose of enhancing one's ability to protect the body while augmenting speed, efficiency, strength, and brute force.[79] Additionally, in the absence of superpowers that would otherwise enhance the physical body, armored bodies provide a means through which non-superheroes achieve super-human functioning, as is the case with characters such as Batman (who is adorn with armor) and Iron Man (who, to a degree, *becomes* his armor).

[79] Again, we must recognize the overarching masculine and hegemonic foundations of the discourse. Problems in these discursive universes are almost always solved with fists and body-blows over reasoning and diplomacy.

Though the armored body consists of mechanical enhancements and protective barriers applied on the body, it is also often made to be aerodynamic to aid in mobility and speed. This distinction highlights the relational influence these two body features have on each other. Human-made armor is often crafted to be aerodynamic in order to optimize speed and efficiency, much in the same way that aerodynamic superheroes will sometimes include aspects of body armor (often in the form of their costume) as an added layer of strength and protection. Thus again, the discussion of the armored body is in some ways also a discussion of the aerodynamic body. Once we conclude our explanation of the armored body, the discussion will fluidly lead into a (subsequently briefer) analysis of the aerodynamic body, a category that emerges out of similarly established tensions and themes.

As noted by Bolton (2008), "Power is central to the definition of the superhero. Power that is transcendent, power that violates the laws of physics, power that surpasses the physical confines of humanity" (p. 113). Thus, the body-made-powerful is a central theme that links the armored and aerodynamic bodies. However, it is from where this power derives and how it functions that also distinguishes them from each other. At basic level, the armored body evokes the frailty of the human body. They can be historically charted throughout civilization wherein there has ever been a human struggle to protect the body from animals or natural elements; as well as wherever we have seen human conflict manifest into physical aggression, or the *threat* of physical aggression. This, of course, includes a broad expanse of human history with the exception of various moments of

resistive, non-violence. However, even times of civil peace are usually accompanied with a sense of security provided by a sound defense system. To stay within a workable parameter of the superhero discourse, however, it is necessary to focus on the cluster of discourses informing superhero/bodily transcendence specifically. Thus, we will focus our investigation on seeing the armored body referenced in Bolton's exhibition as largely a product of the industrial revolution and twentieth century warfare.[80]

Armored bodies that fulfill a utopian ideal are understood for their transcendent potential. They are intended to enhance or augment the organic body to make it function in ways that are superior and more powerful than what we would otherwise be capable of. While burgeoning industrial technologies were used to aid in the ease and efficiency of mass production, the same technologies began to be applied (or imagined) onto the human body. Thus, in order to improve, replicate, and replace human functions, such body technologies are usually made to be ergonomic. *Ergonomics* refers to the study of how products or objects 'fit' the human body or mimic its movements. Early inventions that bridge machines with the organic body tend to be devises that function as exoskeletons or 'wearable robots' attached to an appendage or worn as a brace. The challenge was to create a device which was strong enough to function in superior ways, but

[80] One can hopefully now see how the genealogical approach leads to discursive nooks and crannies, specified rupture points of power/influence, as well as broadly reaching reflections on transcendent human practices/conditions. Again, a central challenge of this approach is selecting what to include and exclude.

lightweight enough to be controlled by the wearer. Thus, energy in the machine's design must be created apart from, or in conjunction with the user.[81]

Early pop culture depictions of fantastically armored and mechanized bodies can be found in the pulp magazines, films, as well as artwork and advertisements of the era.[82] But perhaps more notably, the overt branding of super bodies as living machines did not fully resonate in the superhero or comic book discourses until the silver age of comics in the 1960's. Cyborgs and robots readily appear as sidekicks, mindless henchmen, or super villains in early pulp stories, but it took a while before the superheroes or 'good guys' were readily depicted as being more so mechanical or automated than human. Science fiction and superhero stories readily play out the wonders (and test the boundaries) of contemporary technologies and science, but in doing so are also charting an unknown future, one in which there is great uncertainty as to the impact of

[81] The earliest exoskeleton devises were invented in Russia by Nicholas Yagin in the 1890's. Nearly thirty years later, U.S. inventors used steam power to operate exoskeleton devises, allowing artificial ligaments to move in parallel motion to body. By the 1960's, hydraulic and electric technology allowed these devises to function even more powerfully despite still being cumbersome in size and weight, and thus fairly impractical to use (Hoggett, 2011). Today, nanotechnology researchers are experimenting with electrically-contractive fibers to increase the strength-to-weight ratio of these technologies. Thus, we now have a variety of ergonomic advances that function to either protect the body (i.e. a bullet-proof vest that serve as a second, more powerful skin) or 'mech' devises that aid or augment the body's functioning (i.e. the lived body in the cockpit of a machine that encapsulates the human).

[82] For example, Biro (2009) notes how the Dadaist art movement of 1920's Weimar Germany is a product of the industrial revolution and growing social, political, and economic tensions between canonized art and mass production (i.e. popular culture), as well as in how automated society was being inscribed onto the body. Thus, in the art movement we often see depictions of 'hybrid identities' that bridge the natural body with the effects of a techno-society (p. 100-102).

technological and scientific progress. Thus, “despite the ways it had enriched human beings, technological development also possessed a semi-autonomous power and logic of its own – one that exceeded the abilities of human beings to fully control and regulate it” (Biro, 2009, p. 4).

The under-proliferation of depictions of automated crime fighters in early renderings of superheroes is perhaps due to the general unease or distrust of a mechanized society. In other words, we tend to like stories wherein humanity wins out over that which is ‘manufactured’ or mechanically produced. For those living and working at the outset of the industrial revolution, the bridging of technology with all facets of life resulted in a potential destruction of the body (e.g. tanks, guns, and the dangers of unregulated and unrefined industrial labor), but also ushered in concerns that basic humans functions would be replaced by machines altogether (Biro, 2009; Haraway, 1991; Rutsky, 2003). The notion that we are becoming mindless techno-bodies akin to cogs in assembly line production ran counter to the utopian, transcendent promises that the industrial body also afforded.

Additionally, coinciding with the burgeoning industrial changes were major global conflicts that rapidly ushered in ever-evolving, highly mechanized systems of war. Thus, there was perhaps a propensity to see the mechanized, armored body as product of the political/patriotic aspects of transformation (something out of our control) rather than the personal/graphic transformations (which are local or familiar). Regardless, these highly functional technologies

became a point of contention because they complicated and confused the previously held conceptual and physical boundaries of what it meant to be human:

> Through machines that automated human functions, human beings would become more interconnected – both within their societies and across them. Thus, as a result of the development of cybernetics in the context of World War II, a human being augmented by mechanical prosthetics and computers was a figure that bound in a new and much more closely-knit relationship with the enemy 'other' … Such augmentation did not simply make humans both more powerful and more vulnerable. Despite – or perhaps because of – the division of world societies into groups of competing nations, the transformation of human beings through cybernetics also made them much more interrelated and thus less able to say where the 'self' ended and 'others' began. (Biro, 2009, p. 3-4)

This notion of the *techno-body* shows a more intricate meshing between body and machines (Balsamo, 1996). As noted by Bolton, "Like Batman, Iron Man serves as an effective metaphor for defensive paranoia, for our fears about human weaknesses, limitations, and vulnerabilities. At the same time he acts as a metaphor for our social reality, in which the distance between the body and technology is fast disappearing" (2008, p. 99).[83] The key utopian/dystopian tension that permeates the armored and aerodynamic bodies is that of how the

[83] Again, the tension then revolves around questions of where does the human end and the machine begin? In this sense, the popularity of Batman and Iron Man can be traced to the notion that because they retain some of their 'humanness,' despite being physically powerful and superior, perhaps they are easier characters to identify and empathize with.

technology is infused with the body, or the degree of techno-body immersion that results in altered (corporeal and cognitive) subject states.

Though the armored body specifically implies defense or protection, it should be noted how these tensions play out in *all* facets of life. As previously noted, Biro (2009) adopts a broader perspective in looking at these transformations and notes how urbanization (and the mass mobility of people and ideas via industrial progress) is itself a way that identity becomes a fissured hybrid with technology. In this way, we don't just exist in cities, but our bodies take on the automated/technological characteristics and tensions of the urban, industrial environment. And thus "the metropolis became a site wherein the struggle between one's nature as a 'general human being' and one's nature as a 'unique individual' reached its greatest degree of tension" (p. 99).

In the 1950's, Cold War tensions further fueled U. S. fascinations and paranoia with industrial technologies. Again, out-consuming the Soviet Union became a strategy that resulted in the full and aggressive embrace of industrial production. However, with these conveniences and new channels of communication came an increased "collective anxiety about the quality of American technology in relation to the rest of the world" (Brummett, 1984, p. 167). War and the subsequent social anxiety associated with industry-run-amok "produced a situation in which whatever dangers science and technology could be imagined to create for a subject were projected onto a feared enemy, whose explicit goals then became the subject's complete annihilation" (p. 4). Thus war machines and advanced machines that could know more than what we were

capable of (such as *Sputnik*) were still largely considered something outside of the body that could be utilized to manufacture victories, but also must be overcome in battle should such technologies 'fall into the wrong hands.'

Popular culture provides a means by which the pleasures and paranoia of the contemporary world are played out in safe, evocate stories that equip us for living. Though the industrial revolution compels us to imagine ways to harness such technologies to advance a better humanity, we equally imagine or play out the risks of it destroying us. Thus, early renderings of Superman often depict him stopping runaway locomotives with his bare hands, redirecting rockets or airplanes, or punching a tank. In fact, one of the first iconic images of Superman, on the cover of *Action Comics*, No. 1, depicts him with an automobile hoisted over his head as he smashes it into a boulder.[84] In these early comics we might see a superhero fight off a legion of evil robots programmed by a super-villain, but we are less likely to see the same robots used for altruistic purposes. It was more comforting to see a superhero *overcome* technological superiority rather than strategically use it as a means to exert superhuman dominance. Subsequently, the only way to then distinguish the heroes from the villains is in their unique sense of morality, or how they exercise such power.

[84] The armored aspects of the bodies of superheroes within this era are often located in the mysticism of the costume. Otherwise, added accessories typically hold similar mystical qualities, such as Captain America's indestructible shield that always returns to him like a boomerang, or Wonder Woman's golden lasso, bullet-proof bracelets, or invisible jet.

Once again, in order for contemporary audiences to 'buy into' the idea that a mere mortal could compete with superheroes that have mystical, chemically/genetically modified, or god-like abilities, their human bodies must become enhanced and mechanized to a degree that captures a similar essence of strength and power. Batman is a character who readers easily empathize with because at his core he is still very much a human (and humanly inadequate in ways that Superman never can be, unless stripped of his other-worldly powers). Every aspect of his costume in some way enhances his body to the degree that he appears (graphically) and functions (*somewhat* patriotically) alongside those who have more 'naturally occurring' super powers.

Nonetheless, prior to becoming mechanically enhanced, Bruce Wayne trains his body relentlessly to achieve otherworldly strength and dexterity. He is skilled in every notable combat technique and has rigorously educated himself to be able to out-smart his opponents. In other words, Wayne maximizes the naturally powerful and *aerodynamic* potential of his body before encasing it in armored technology. As such, Bob Kane (writer) and Bill Finger's (artist) original Batman (*Detective Comics*, No. 27, 1939) had no body armor beyond his fabric costume, and did not receive his utility belt until two issues after his debut. It is mainly contemporary depictions of the Dark Knight that tend to show him as overtly armored. Much of the modern mechanizing of Batman is influenced by Hollywood's renderings of the character and not necessarily DC Comics specifically.

In fashion, designers tend to invoke a heightened and even exaggerated awareness of the frailties of human flesh when crafting clothes that articulate an armored body. Defensive paranoia, weaknesses, and vulnerabilities are dominant themes designers such as Mugler and Cardin attempt to conflate by layering metal and machinery on the body, so much so that the body is made minimal in relation to the machine (Bolton, 2008, p. 99). For Bukatman, these cyborgian superhero designs contrast shielded, mechanized armor with the supple vulnerabilities of flesh. He notes that "the subject always retains a meat component" (p. 99). Though the body is morphed, modified, or retooled through technologies and fashion, it still retains some essential aspects of organic humanness that is always conflated with the techno-body.[85] Through this tension, the armor is also *aesthetic* and evokes it own sense of abject desire in those who wear and consume it.[86]

Finally, we tend to clothe and encode the body in relation to potential threats (natural, human-made, or otherwise) with external 'armor' – everything from Kevlar vests to winter coats, bike helmets, and condoms. But we must also

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[85] Military bodies are armored bodies made fashionable through both patriotic and graphic influence, despite attempts to reduce individuality in favor of establishing a collective force. Likewise, football, hockey, and other sports attire is made to be uniform (patriotic) but also fashionable (graphic), all while serving the purpose of protecting the body.

[86] Baudrillard's (1994) reading of Ballard's 1973 novel *Crash* (a story about people who conflate sex with car crashes) offers an interesting analysis of how technology relationally functions with the processes of the organic body; such as desire, sexuality, and death. He notes how violence done to technology is also violence done to the body in that "all the metallurgy of the accident can be read in the semiurgy of the body" (p. 112). Ultimately, the body and technology are made to be "hyperfunctional, since traffic and accident, technology and death, sex and simulation are like a single, large synchronous machine" (p. 118).

consider the more invasive ways we shield the body from threats. One way is through medicines that fight off threats or boost the immune system, as well as preventative check-ups.[87] One in five Americans undergo an annual screening with a physician, accounting for 8% of all ambulatory visits with physicians, at a price tag of around $7.8 billion annually (Blue, 2008). In anticipating foreseen industrial and human-made toxins to the body, immunizations and sunscreen are other ways in which the body is made more safe or protected. As such, we tend to armor the body (preventively, internally, and externally) as it to contend with problems we anticipate to face in a technologized and often inhospitable world.

In the final chapter, the exercising of power will also be considered in terms of who has access to defense and prevention and who can afford it. Thus inequities in bio-power constrain and subjugate bodies into a health care hierarchy (in the U.S.) that ensures that some will receive a high quality of care while others will not. In other words, the armored body is also always a political or patriotic body that can be examined for aspects of emancipatory and co-opted change. For now, a closer examination of the aerodynamic body will further contribute to our discussion of bodies made powerful.

The Aerodynamic Body

The aerodynamic body is ultimately a sleek, smooth, or optimally performing body. Whereas the armored body's power is centered on defense and aggression, the aerodynamic body's power takes shape in the form of enhanced

[87] Previously mentioned nanotechnologies are also being employed to mend, protect, and defend the body at cellular levels.

velocity or dexterity. To some extent, almost every superhero has aerodynamic qualities. But if by chance the superhero is explicitly marked as non-aerodynamic, such as with The Thing or Blob, then they more than make up for the deficiency in some other powerful way.[88] Nonetheless, superheroes that we associate with the aerodynamic body have distinguishing qualities or skills that they have mastered (such as super speed or flight) which set them apart from all other superheroes. This would *not* include characters that are a composite of a multitude of powers, like Superman, who profoundly evokes a god-like supremacy. Though Superman is very aerodynamic, he is also much more than that.

This by no means suggests that 'single-powered' superheroes are simply one-trick ponies. Superheroes such as the Flash will "use his speed to produce a range of super-powered effects, such as time travel, whirlwinds, invisibility, intangibility, and appearing to be in more than one place. The Flash, therefore, represents multiple powers conflated into a single power" (Bolton, 2008, p. 113).[89] Though Superman's speed is comparable, the Flash has perfected his

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[88] Though these characters might not be very mobile or fast, they still pack a pretty mean punch, or otherwise they typically possess some sort of cognitive prowess or mental abilities that still distinguish them as being super, utopian, or seductive.

[89] Throughout this section I will largely be referring to the 1960's silver age Flash. There is also a golden age Flash (1940) whose secret identity was Jay Garrick, a college student who gained his power by inhaling 'hard water vapors.' The two characters/personas have an interesting but somewhat complex history. In his origin story, Barry Allen – a police scientist and the silver age version of the Flash – is taking a break from his work and reading a copy of a golden age Flash comic when lightning passes through chemicals he is experimenting on, which also go through his body. And thus he harnesses the powers of a natural world phenomenon embodied in a lightning bolt; and immediately contemplates

super ability to the point that it has become completely second nature to him. Thus he is perhaps more capable and qualified for dealing with situations that specifically call for super speed.

A central distinction between armored and aerodynamic bodies exists in tensions between of the industrial complex and the natural world. Whereas the armored body is derived from the burgeoning industrial revolution and emergent technologies of the body, the aerodynamic body just as likely utilizes the natural world as a form of influence and inspiration. As 'products' and progress of the industrial revolution came to fruition, the appearance and functioning of material goods were borne out of that which was 'naturally' familiar. The impetus of automation, aviation, and mass media in almost all aspects of public life (social, political, and economic) caused us to increasingly value speed, accuracy, and efficiency. Thus the advent of micro-processing, scaling technologies, and our escalating use of computer and mass mediated communications are all effects of streamlined aerodynamics.

The conflation of industry and the natural world consequently induces a sense of futuristic mysticism expressed through products and processes, which is subsequently written onto (and expressed through) the body. It was through the combination of aerodynamic technology, power, and speed or sleekness that

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how he can use his newfound powers to help humanity (Kakalios, 2005, p. 229). In 1961 the two versions of the character are further conflated when it is revealed that they simultaneously exist in parallel version of Earth, separated by a 'vibration barrier.'

allowed us to accomplish feats that had previously seemed otherworldly, such as breaking the sound barrier or space exploration.

Likewise, Leiss et al. (2005) reference General Motor's attempt to challenge the Ford Motor Company in realizing the aesthetic value of 'dressing up' a car, as well as the functional aspects of consumer demands. To amplify the presence of aerodynamic aesthetics, cars of the 1940's and 1950's often featured 'fins,' as well as elongated and forward slanting profiles, as if they were leaning into the future. These machines also borrow names from the animal kingdom to personify powerful speed (e.g. *horse*power) and sleekness. Likewise, modernist architecture such as the LAX airport in Los Angles and Seattle's Space Needle evoke similar futuristic splendor. Therefore, innovations of the industrial revolution as well as the natural world became primary means through which the boundaries and limitations of human corporality could be re-imagined in utopian ways.

As such, throughout the burgeoning twentieth century we see continual attempts to move the body beyond the confines of corporeal limitations. If the power of a superhero is derived or is similar to a real-world creature, that animal typically becomes the iconic metaphor (and graphic emblem) through which the character is crafted and defined. Spider-Man, Catwoman, Blue Beetle, Dr. Octopus, and Killer Croc are just a smattering of superheroes and super villains whose bodily projections as well as powers mimic specific animals. Likewise, the Flash and Storm are evocative of the organic environment. Whereas the Flash is a product of naturally occurring phenomena, Storm (aptly named) has the ability to

control it. Others can manipulate physical matter or molecular properties of the earth (Swamp Thing), as well as other key natural elements such as air (Hawkman), fire (Human Torch), and water (Aquaman).

Inasmuch the armored body investigates the meshing of human and machine in the form of mechanic or cybernetic power, the aerodynamic body emerges out of utopian/dystopian tensions regarding *parahumans*, or human-animal hybrids.[90] Thus, Aquaman is a parahuman with the speed and dexterity of a dolphin, strength of a shark, and can stay submerged underwater for indefinite lengths of time.[91] Others, like Doc Octopus, may be made physically and combatively superior through parahuman meshing, but because they are villains, their bodies are typically rendered abject or grotesque as part of the exchange for animalistic power. Much like a bird that cannot fly, Penguin (one of Batman's arch nemeses) is more inhibited by his animalistic evocation than by made superior by it.

There are also plenty of historical renderings of parahumans, perhaps because humans are also part of the animal kingdom and thus we readily see the body borne out of these Darwinian evolutionary changes. Ape-like features of cro magnons, or the earliest humans, provide empirical evidence to suggest this is the

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[90] It should be noted here that we are beginning to overlap with one of our later body types, the virile and mutant bodies. By referencing the genetic binding of *parahumans*, we are also referring to virile and mutant manifestations of body/identity. Thus, if it feels like the analysis in this section is somewhat truncated, rest assured that we will return to such transformations in the near future.

[91] Aquaman is evocative of the Greek God *Poseidon*, and even carries a trident.

case. In various world mythologies we also see Gods or deities frequently take shape as both humans and animals. The Egyptian *Anibus*, for example, depicts the head of a jackal on an upright human; and of course Zeus often took the form of an animal to seduce his sexual conquests.

And thus we are left asking similar critical questions regarding such profound bodily changes. Namely, at what point do the unique elements that make us human become subsidiary to the new hybrid entity? As much as these parahuman creations hold super-human characteristics, they are also potentially 'grotesque' amalgamations that, in relation to the rest of society, seem profoundly *unnatural*. These dystopian aspects of the parahuman are revealed in various fictional texts that feature characters seeking meaning in the mysteries of the natural world and anatomy of the human body (a product of the Enlightenment). As such, in novels such as H. G. Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896) we see a horrific display of such inter-species amalgamations. [92] [93]

Inasmuch we have dystopian fears that machines will take over the body; there are similar dystopian tensions in the aerodynamic body in that the body it is

[92] They also readily appear in science fiction and horror genres specifically. Vampires, Werewolves, and creatures from the Black Lagoon all evoke carnal, animalistic body transformations.

[93] In Marvel's current *The Incredible Hulk* (Aaron & Silvestri, 2011) storyline, the Hulk (with the help of Dr. Doom) successfully splits Bruce Banner and his shared identity into two corporeal entities. Thus the Hulk 'frees himself' from the confines of Banner's id. Interestingly, Banner goes crazy once the Hulk is removed and becomes a mad scientist hell-bent on recreating the Hulk, even at the risk of his own life. Of course, this all takes place on a secret island with a host of hideously modified Hulk-creatures that Banner is experimenting on. Banner essentially becomes Moreau, whom the Hulk is determined to kill.

somehow is made more carnal or animalistic compared to our otherwise rational self. The X-Men's Wolverine is a great example of this tension. When engaged in intense conflict Wolverine's beastly side seems to take over, lowering his rational inhibitions and amplifying his animalistic adrenaline to the point that he 'loses control.' Thus, he sometimes needs to be 'talked down' in order to regain control or to prevent him from ripping an enemy to shreds. Fitting with his personality, Wolverine is a loose cannon who must fight the instinct to fight first and ask questions later, and has historically been at odds with X-Men teammates who take a more cautious and reasoned approach to problems.

Nonetheless, these dystopian aspects of the super body are sometimes the only means to combat the dystopian aspects of culture. In the current Swamp Thing (Snyder & Capullo, 2012) and Animal Man (Lemire & Foreman, 2012) storylines, these heroes combine forces to fight "the Rot," which is basically death or decay incarnate (i.e. morbidly depicted dead animals and 'dead nature' that come back to life and attacks). Because they are both in-tune with the natural world via their unique powers, they are better equipped to combat forces that are borne out of the natural world. They can control and connect to the natural world in ways that Superman is simply not capable of.

The way these aerodynamic constraints play out on the lived body are primarily through physical health and athletics. Bodies are rigorously trained and developed in order to perform particular skills required to further enhance how they perform. Of course, there are also instances where people are born with a naturally aerodynamic body. U. S. Olympic swimmer Michael Phelps' arms,

abdomen, and torso are proportionately large and long compared to the rest of his body. In fact, Phelps has "an upper body of a 6'8'' person but his lower body seems to be of someone who is only 5'10'', which also makes the perfect plane in water" (Spiegelman, 2008). He's even further aided by his swimsuit, the *Speedo* 'fastskin,' which is designed to function as a second layer of sleek, smooth skin. Additionally related to fashion, Atair Aerospace, a manufacturer of parachutes, has recently developed a "twin-turbine powered exoskeleton wing suit" which allows skydivers wearing the suit to achieve speeds of around two hundred miles per hour during freefall (Bolton, 2008, p. 115). Corporations that market and manufacture clothing for athletes or extreme sports have been a major source in the development of aerodynamic bodily possibilities.

The propensity of costuming superheroes in leotards and skin-tight costumes highlights this distinction and adds a sexual (splendid and seductive) dynamic to the physicality of superheroes. Even while clothed, the body is taught, hairless, and essentially naked save their second skins. Fashion for the aerodynamic body is therefore somewhat minimal compared to the other body types, simply because the bulkiness of some clothing is an impediment to speed and sleekness. For both superheroes and real-life athletes, aerodynamic clothing tends to be made of "superstretch fabrics that mold to the body … [and] rely on unique seaming and innovative textual surfacing to decrease friction and increase velocity" (Bolton, p. 115).

Physically healthy bodies tend to be aerodynamic in the sense that they are slimmer, more agile, and perhaps highly functional compared to bodies not

identified in this way. Of course, physical health is also a relative concept that is as much a product of cultural and ideological factors. A person can be anorexic (unhealthy) but still very sleek. The abundance of mediated representations of incredibly thin models adorn with desirable products and fashion only further programs us to view the aerodynamic body as the social and sexual ideal.

Nonetheless, the U. S. is also undergoing an 'obesity epidemic.' The effects of food processing and preserving chemicals/technologies, as well as ample government financial subsidies for the meat and dairy industries (compared to vegetables) are potentially contributing to the problem. The prevalence and popularity of fast food franchises that offer high calorie, fat, and sodium enriched food at a low costs is another contributing force that must be culturally resisted in order to attain the ideal/utopian aerodynamic body. And finally, one must find the means and motivation to exercise the body in order to achieve aerodynamic *power*. Ultimately, an aerodynamic body that is powerful is one that is athletic.[94]

Embedded in our refashioning of aerodynamic bodies are metaphors that sustain the dominant sense of splendor and seduction articulated through ideas of efficiency, freedom, and progress – possibilities of becoming physically 'better' expressed in our lived experiences. Again, the aerodynamic body is a body made more powerful or transcendent toward optimized perfection. In both the realm of superheroes as well as the lived body, we take this form of power to mean an

[94] The causes, effects, and implications for such an obesity epidemic are incredibly varied and complex, as is the rhetoric of *health*. I have given it a short paragraph of space. So long as the central tension here is evident, I trust I can keep moving things along.

optimization of the body. Of course, these features of the aerodynamic body are all essentialized to be utopian or ideal. Thus far, each of our body types has had a strong utopian component that suggests the idea that a *better* body is always possible. The latter half of the body types, however, more so projects (or even embraces) the dystopian aspects of superheroes and human body transformation. In other words, they do not necessarily presume that the utopian body is ideal or even possible.

The Virile Body

Virile and mutant bodies share features with the graphic, patriotic, armored, and aerodynamic bodies, but also complicate the relationship between the self and cultural representations of *better* bodies. They are mentioned together here because they both convey how super bodies evoke a corporeal transition, highlighting the *process* through which a body becomes super. Thus, the virile and mutant bodies offer a recognition (and even *embracement*) of the dystopian effects of body transformation, and further complicate the relationship between changes that occur internal and external to the body. Taken together, these bodies are largely the product of the silver age of superhero comic storytelling wherein the status, representation, and paranoia of post war industry became apparent on and through the lived body. Moreover, these historical underpinnings have been extended to include contemporary concerns regarding the ways bodies are genetically engineered to fulfill the specific desires of those with the means to constrain a body's features before it is even borne into the world.

Virility is characterized in bodies that possess strength, energy, and a strong sex drive. In superhero narratives, virility takes the form of amplified, inflated, and augmented manliness (Bolton, 2008, p. 65). As such, the virile body is marked by two key features: the escalated uncertainty of the atomic age (culture), and the embodiment of overt, hegemonic expressions of masculinity (cognition/identity). Like the armored body, the virile body is optimized around power; however, these super-features emerge and are expressed *through* the body rather than more exclusively on it. Because virility is often built into the bodies of superheroes, they cannot necessarily 'take off' their virility to evoke an alternate identity or otherwise exercise control when the virile aspects of their bodies emerge out of the civilian self, such as with the Incredible Hulk.[95] Therefore, virile superheroes tend to have problems controlling and maintaining a stable sense of identity/body, which often takes form as violent, masculine aggression in its virile form. However, these fissured and ambiguous aspects of superhero identity are not universally written into every superhero character. Although Superman is clearly virile in his strength, stature, and prowess, he is largely always in control of the shifting aspects of his identity. When he shifts from one persona to the other it is for very practical and purposeful reasons, and not

[95] Psychoanalytically, The Incredible Hulk is an ego manifestation of Bruce Banner's id.

because there is an uncontrollable internal tension or because he is at odds with an alternate aspect of his body and being.[96]

In order for the virile body to exist, there must be an established notion that the body is transformable or in a potential state of flux. Historically, and as explained in previous chapters, prior to the industrial revolution the human body was thought of as relatively fixed and stable. However, over the course of two world wars, medical techniques were developed on the battlefield to restore damaged limbs, organs, vital tissues, and facial features of injured soldiers. This demonstrated that the body could be reconstituted through plastic and cosmetic procedures, or that a body-in-transition was possible (Jordan, 2004). Additionally, the residual and often unknown effects of the industrial revolution and atomic warfare were fearfully played out in comic books, typically in the form of exaggerations of the body's *virile* destruction.

Interestingly, and as noted by Bolton (2008), "Compared to their presence in World War II narratives, superheroes played a minor role in the mythologizing of the Cold War. An exception was the Hulk … responding to fears inherent in the atomic age" (p. 65). Though the Hulk did not debut until May, 1962, more so emerging with the mutant bodies of X-Men and The Fantastic Four, he nonetheless uniquely stands out as a character whose grotesqueness is a result of human ingenuity gone horribly wrong, and as such, is largely not in control of his transformation. Whereas the traditional superhero conceals and reveals his or her

[96] It is also probably best to note that he is really *shifting* his costume and not necessarily his identity, especially if we view Superman and Clark Kent as two sides of the same crystal.

super-virility through managing the graphic body, Bruce Banner and the Hulk are often depicted as two separate entities occupying the same body. The Hulk, in this way, reveals a more nuanced tension regarding our abilities to manage and control the body/identity dynamic. Rather, outside forces that effect Bruce Banner's mood are the triggers that evoke the body/identity transformation.

The shift from utopian to dystopian virility in superhero narratives is historically located. Depictions in golden age superhero narratives emerging out of World War II tended to convey a utopian virile corporeality. For Superman (an alien) and Wonder Woman (an Amazon warrior) explanations for such body virility are made apparent through their origin stories, and more broadly, through the armored and aerodynamic bodies. For Batman, virility is made possible through rigorous and obsessive physical training. Captain America is literally transformed from a patriotic weakling into a courageous, virile super-soldier, and ultimately a sexual object. Wonder Woman is an Amazon warrior as well as the direct descendent of a deity.

For early comic artists like Joe Shuster, 1920's bodybuilding was a key cultural fad that especially captured his attention. Although he hated sports, Shuster nonetheless frequented the gym wherein his aspirations of bodily perfection could play out on himself as well as through his initial renderings of Superman. Both Siegel and Shuster were also captivated by depictions of bodies at the movies (Jones, 2004). As such, Shuster based Superman's stance and posture on images of Douglass Fairbank's *Robin Hood* (1922), yet another example of a leotard-clad, muscle-bound purveyor of morality. In 1922, magazine

publisher Benarr McFadden introduced the world to Brooklyn bodybuilder Angelo Siciliano, otherwise known as Charles Atlas, "the World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" (Jones, 2004, p. 70). Atlas became a cultural icon and template of physical perfection that many young boys strived to emulate. Again, images of ideal, virile bodies were also prevalent in popular films, especially images of swashbuckling pirates or strapping young heroes in adventure stories, as well as footage of real-life Olympic athletes that played in the newsreels prior to a movie.

Comic book renderings of utopian virility were maintained in popular depictions of superheroes through the 1950's.[97] However, though superheroes were not readily depicted as dystopian, consumers of the postwar era were nonetheless heavily invested in abject, dystopian depictions of the human condition. The late 1940's and early 1950's saw a surge of consumer interest in profoundly violent and graphic horror and crime stories, such as *Crime Suspense Stories*, *Vault of Horror*, and *Tales from the Crypt*. These were not superhero stories, but rather nightmarish horror or gruesome depictions deceit, death, and dismemberment. Of course, the noir anti-heroes in films and pulp fiction of the 1930's and 1940's helped launch interest in such stories in comic books. Unlike dime novels and gangster movies, however, these comics were being directly marketed to kids.

Of course, the prevalence of such dystopian depictions did not last long. Internal social and political paranoia fueled by McCarthyism and the threat of the

[97] This coincided with mediated representations of superheroes, such as the Superman television series.

Soviet Union created a general mistrust of the publishing industry as a whole, especially in seeing so many creative depictions of Americans being violently accosted or mutilated for the sake of entertainment. What resulted was a strategic mistrust of America's youthful delinquents who seemed to be both apathetic toward, and disinterested in, postwar containment. Thus, their unchecked and out of control youthful virility posed a serious threat to the carefully manicured status quo.[98]

What followed was years of comic book censorship and legally mandated 'moral codes' spearheaded by German-American psychiatrist, Fredric Wertham in the early to mid 1950s. Wertham effectively argued that comic books were dangerous to children in that they seduced them into thinking that violent, amoral solutions to real-world problems were ideal and entertaining (Hajdu, 2008, p. 82-83). In his book, *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), Wertham specifically identifies reoccurring lurid and morbid themes as well as hidden sexual imagery contained in comics specifically marketed for children.

In the same year that Wertham's book was published, Congress held a special inquiry into the effects of comic books on children. Testifying before Congress, Wertham blamed everything from gang violence and teen angst on comic books and in doing so, contended that the moral fabric of society was

[98] From Hajdu (2008): "Within a year of Pearl Harbor, the American press was probing the effect of the war on home-front families … there were dozens of prominent stories about young men from fatherless households, roaming the streets in lawless packs, and young women … dropping their morals and whatnot for servicemen at military bases – or worse, for the men in those gangs" (p. 83).

quickly being eroded by the damaging messages contained in comic books that encourage unchecked aggression. Though it was mainly the crime, suspense, and horror comics that suffered extiction from Wertham's assault, the traditional superheroes were not immune.[99] For example, Wertham argues that Batman and Robin are gay, that Superman is an un-American fascist, and due to her heightened virility and overt bondage subtext, Wonder Woman must be a lesbian (Hajdu, 2008).The point to be made here is that by the end of the decade the ideology and utopianism of superhero discourse had been greatly called into question by both its critics and creators. As noted by Hadju (2008):

> The panic over comic books falls somewhere between the Red Scare and the frenzy over UFO sightings among the pathologies of postwar America. Like Communism … comics were an old problem that seemed changed, darkened, growing out of control. Like flying saucers, at the same time, comics were wild stuff with the garish aura of pulp fantasy. Comics were a peril from within, however, rather than one from a foreign country or another planet. The line dividing comics' advocates and opponents was generational, rather than geographic. While many of the actions to curtail comics were attempts to protect the young, they were also efforts to protect the culture at large from the young. Encoded in much of the ranting about comic books and juvenile delinquency were fears not only of

[99] This includes the financial collapse of several publishers as well as public book burnings of comic books at schools and community centers across the United States (Hajdu, 2008).

> what comics readers might become, but of what they already were – that is, a generation of people developing their own interests and tastes, along with a determination to indulge them. (p. 112)

Having been so heavily censored and scrutinized for nearly a decade, it would take a comic content and cultural revolution in order to revive the now dormant and disciplined discourse. Enter Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, the counter-culture movement, and what would become the 1960's silver age of superhero comics. Within a three year span, Lee spawned virile and mutant heroes such as *The Fantastic Four (*November, 1961), *The Incredible Hulk* (May, 1962), *The Avengers* (September, 1963) and *The X-Men* (September, 1963).

Again, perhaps the most iconic of the virile superheroes is embodied in the Incredible Hulk. His human counterpart, Dr. Bruce Banner, is the inventor of the "gamma bomb," and thus functions as an allegorical equivalent of J. Robert Oppenheimer. Banner is caught in the bomb's first test blast thanks to a devious entrapment by a communist spy. Though he seems initially unharmed by the bombardment of radiation he is exposed to, he later undergoes a complete *Jekyll and Hyde*-esque transformation into a *hulk*ing, virile monster.[100] As such, "little was known about the effects of radiation on the human body. As the terrible by-product of nuclear science, the Hulk represents an escalation of this uncertainty to paranoiac proportions" (Bolton, p. 65). However, despite the debasing aspects of

[100] Because Stan Lee insisted that the Hulk be a color that did not specify any particular ethnicity, the first issue depicted the monster as being gray. By the second issue they had adopted the iconic green that we are now familiar with (Bolton, 2008, p. 65).

this bodily transformation, the Hulk is nonetheless one of the good guys.[101] Though he personifies an extremely unparalleled virility, many of the Hulk story arches depict him as a profoundly misunderstood hero, often hunted by civilian authorities who cannot see beyond the rough exterior to get at the hero within.

Another significant example of a masculine virile body is Ben Grimm, or The Thing, from the Fantastic Four. Grimm and Reed Richards (Mr. Fantastic) were former college roommates and subsequent best friends. Through Richard's hubris and "overweening pride," he accidently turns his family and Grimm into mutated superheroes (Ryall & Tipton, 2005, p.119-120). However, whereas the Richards and the rest of his family retain human-like appearances, Grimm is hideously disfigured by the accident and develops super-strength and an orange bullet-proof exterior. Thus, Grimm's plight (as articulated in his name) is a tension that plays out in his inability to embody the humanness that was taken from him by his best friend.

A second aspect of body virility that plays out through most all superhero characterizations, regardless of historical era, is an overt performance of hegemonic masculinity. The embellishment of embodied hegemonic masculinity in superhero stories is doubly exaggerated, in both the genre as well as gender representations. Virility is historically a masculine term, or has been primarily

[101] Though his specific transformation may be indicative of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), his character or persona is more so inspired by Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), wherein we must contend with the tension of a grotesquely powerful monster with a (moral) human heart and soul.

used to define or establish a sense of masculine sexuality. As such, along these gender lines, a feminist view of virility might reduce it to an outdated abstraction of sexuality. The sexual vigor associated with the term 'virility' translates into 'fertility' for women; a term that evokes a kind of power not nearly akin to associations of physical size, force, and corporeal strength as virility does.

Apparent within these corporeal transformations is an embedded phallic symbolism made apparent in the transformational process of the superhero. In his origin story, Bruce Banner's transformation into a virile 'monster' occurs when the sun sets. However, this aspect of the character quickly changes within the first few issues wherein the transformation is instead caused by his emotions. Completing the phallic metaphor, Banner is an average, flaccid human who swells into a bulging, rock solid *Hulk* once his emotions are stimulated. The inhibitions of Banner are completely abandoned. Perhaps indicative of Wertham's concerns from the 1950's, the Hulk's trigger emotion that casts him into the dystopian super monster is anger. Thus, through the Hulk we are offered a confluence of uncontrolled power, strength, and phallic sexuality.

Today, lived aspects of the virile body perhaps most prevalently emerge in the form of human growth hormones (Jones, 2010). The desire to have bigger, stronger bodies is fueled by (typically masculine) sports competitions wherein bodies must perform to near super-human levels to be competitive. Thus wherever we see bodies perform at ultra-optimal standards we tend to question if they were aided by chemical enhancements, and regularly test bodies wherein the stakes are high and there is pressure to cheat. For those who have been accused of 'doping'

but test clean, like Lance Armstrong, there is nonetheless a cloud of suspicion that hovers over them. More damaging is when a 'culture of steroids' overshadows an entire sport, such as with Major League Baseball. Interestingly, in these instances the *natural* body is always preferred over the chemically altered body, regardless of how superior or utopian the body becomes. This is to preserve the tradition and authenticity of the sport, and is a means by which institutional power can control and ensure a 'level playing field.' Of course, in the realm of cosmetic body building (when not for competition) the intrinsic value of a natural body is not necessarily as institutionally imperative.[102]

The metaphor of the virile superhero can be seen throughout fashion as well, especially in designs that amplify or emphasize the body as bulging, muscular, or sexually potent. Because the visual aspects of the virile body are similar to the armored body, there is a lot of overlap regarding where these fashions evocatively take us. Walter van Beirendonck's jackets feature inflatable pockets that transform the body's appearance in a way that exaggerates one's musculature. The inflation/deflation effect compliments the transmutability of the Hulk – his ability to transform between two *forms*, out of the same body. Additionally, Berhard Willhelm's designs of padded uniforms are reminiscent of something a football player might wear, conjuring the feeling of power and

[102] I have purposefully omitted an immediate discussion regarding how lived bodies can be transformed by incidents such as atomic accidents, radiation poisoning, ingesting toxins, or through alterations to our genetic make-up. To full make sense of them here, I would need to more fully review the mutant body, which will be addressed in the next section. For now, one should note that these can be considered virile mutations, but the body is often not made utopian in that we might see a body on steroids and ideally virile.

masculinity that one might respond to when faced with fear, paranoia, or a super/armored adversary (Bolton, 2008, p. 68).

In comparison, female versions of virile bodies are wrought with contradiction. Without stepping too much on the toes of the paradoxical body, we can briefly look at the Hulk's gendered counterpart, She Hulk, to highlight where these tensions in representation exist. The human counterpart of She Hulk (who debuted in 1980) is actually Bruce Banner's cousin, Jennifer Susan Walters. On a day that Bruce Banner happens to be visiting his extended family, Walters is shot by a crime boss who had crossed paths with her (now deceased) father, a former Sheriff of Los Angeles County. In order to save his cousin's life, Banner provides a blood transfusion and thus mixes his radioactive blood with Walter's, and thus she comes to possess similar powers. However, whereas Banner's transition into the Hulk involves a drastic overhaul of corporeal form to the degree that he is monstrous, Walter's 'virility' is drastically minimized, and thus she simply transforms from a petite human to a green, leotard-clad bodybuilder. Though she is 'enhanced' through a virile transformation, it is a change that overtly sexualizes her body (Ryall & Tipton, 2005, p. 128).

Ironically, and despite the overwhelming gendered stereotypes that saturate the discourse, Banner's transformation is triggered by the unchecked emotive response of anger and rage whereas his cousin maintains rational control over her body. She Hulk eventually abandons her former corporeal persona in favor of permanently embodying her green and virile self. Despite fully embracing her new corporality, she maintains certain aspects of her human

identity, but again, in potentially problematic ways. She Hulk becomes a criminal lawyer who often defends superheroes who have been accused of crimes. Though this may be a welcomed alternative to fighting physical battles with fists and punches (an intellectual resistance), it is also a much more subdued and domesticated version of the otherwise hegemonic virility.

Though virile bodies are not necessarily always mutant bodies, they nonetheless share the characteristic of body transformation. Again, these categories are indicative of bodies that exist outside the norm or status quo. Virility specifically evokes a body that is bigger, stronger, or – in terms of transitions of the body – in a state of growth. With the succeeding mutants, the corporeal/transformative aspects of body power flows in an infinite number of directions, materializing in a variety of physical forms.

The Mutant Body

The mutant body is similar to the virile body in that they both highlight ways in which the body is unstable, abject, and potentially in a state of transition. However, the mutant body has a much broader transformative potential that is not necessarily as explicitly masculine or emphasizes physical power and prowess. As noted by Bolton (2008), "While all superheroes represent fantasies of metamorphosis, mutant superheroes embody the agonies rather than the ecstasies of transformation." These dystopian aspects of the super body have cast mutants as "genetic accidents" or "categorical mistakes" wherein superheroes "display bizarre, even grotesque, physical characteristics … which usually develop at puberty" (p. 129).

As bad as that sounds regarding the *super* potential of these 'disfigured' characters, they nonetheless are immensely powerful. Additionally, they defend and endorse the utopian ideals of self-sacrifice for the greater good, and despite being graphically marked as flawed or dystopian they nonetheless uphold the ideals of justice. What's more, mutant bodies maintain these ideals (to serve humanity) regardless of the overt hatred and discrimination that befalls them. Housel (2005) offers a concrete explanation of the origins of the X-Men, the archetypal mutants:

> In various parts of the world, children have been born with genetic mutations that give them various powers beyond the reach of normal humans. These mutants can do great good for their fellow human beings, or can inflict terrible harm. The normal population fears them, and some even hate them. Two leaders have arisen within the mutant population, the heroic Charles Xavier, and the villainous Magneto. Xavier wants to organize and train mutants to serve the greater good of humanity, and hopes to convince both communities that they can live in harmony. To this end, he brings together a team known as the X-Men. Magneto takes a very different path. He believes that humans have waged war against the mutant population and that mutants must respond in kind. His actions are all undertaken in the name of mutant freedom, [and] … he is willing to murder a fellow mutant to accomplish this goal. (p. 76)

From this brief formulation we can identify several key tensions that frame the narrative, but are also unequivocally played out in real life. Historically,

these bodies emerge most prevalently during the onset of the counter-culture movement, and at the peak of civil rights tensions wherein social tolerance for those outside the norm was by no means easy to come by. By the 1960s, the containment and isolationism of the past decade and a half began to erode, at least to the point where it was seen by some as a whitewashed dystopia that excluded or subjugated those outside the Eurocentric, masculine norm. Most obviously, the mutant versus non-mutant divide is allegorical to race tensions of the 1950s and 1960s, and segregation policies wherein attempts were made to classify and construe marginal bodies as 'separate but equal.'

Thus, in and amongst the minority group of mutants we also see infighting (Professor Xavier versus Magneto) that emerges as an allegory for real world struggles between opposing resistive philosophies (Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X). In both instances we see radically different methods employed to resolve the same problem.[103] Whereas some mutants hold a sense of animosity for how they are treated, others see humans as ill-informed bigots for whom they must have compassion despite their ignorance (Housel, p. 79).

Likewise, female superheroes took on a dramatic new role under this formulation. Not only did the X-Men slowly encourage the increased prevalence

[103] To be fair, even this allegory took some time to develop, and is only meant here to identify a tension. I am reluctant to cast Malcolm X as the 'evil' counterpart to civil rights advocacy. Magneto is more of a mad scientist with explicitly evil intentions rather than a (more radical) advocate for equality. Magneto is not so much concerned with achieving equality per se, but rather views mutants as inherently physically and mentally superior and therefore believes they should rule the world.

of female superheroes, but they eventually took on leadership roles as well. Whereas Storm (an Egyptian, female mutant) has at times been the leader of the X-Men, another female character, Jean Grey/Phoenix, is often considered *the* most powerful mutant of all.[104] As such, the mutants represent much more than just a metaphor for race tensions, but also take us beyond the binary of the white/black divide. Because mutant bodies produce a disruption of utopian, normative, or ideal bodies, they become launching points through which all ethnicities and body types challenge the dominant, heteronormative, masculine, and Caucasian standard. Therefore, the X-Men and mutant bodies are marginal bodies that must find a way to coexist and 'fit in' with a dominant society that sees them as different. As such, they are "explicitly analogized to Jewish bodies, gay bodies, adolescent bodies, Japanese or Native American bodies – they are first and foremost, subjected and subjugated and colonized figures … [but also] valuable sources of disruption and challenge [dominant norms via] transgressive, uncontrollable, and alternative bodies" (Bukatman, 2003, in Bolton, p. 131).

In fact, in 1975 the X-Men were re-envisioned to be even more diverse (in terms of ethnicity, nationality, gender, and abilities) with the inclusion of a new cast of regular team members: Storm (Ororo Munroe), Wolverine (Logan Howlett), Nightcrawler (Kurt Wagner), and Colossus (Piotr Nikolaievitch

[104] Creator, Stan Lee, wanted to use a gender-ambiguous name for this super group, like *The Mutants*, but a (male) editor disagreed and went with *X-Men*.

Rasputin).[105] In gathering these mutants at a young age, as they first come into knowledge of their powers and unique position amongst the rest of society, Professor Xavier attempts to safeguard them against their greatest and most immediate threat: themselves. The professor's Academy for Gifted Youth inasmuch functions to educate them on assimilation strategies, as well as lessons on how to use one's powers effectively and ethically. Until they learn to harness their powers as well as understand why they are so passionately feared and hated, they will potentially feel shame or self-hatred for who they are, and run the risk of joining forces with Magneto. As such, X-Men masterfully evoke complex, real-world tensions regarding internalized homophobia and reverse racism.

These tensions are further complicated (and made more real) by a key distinction regarding where these mutant powers come from. Unlike characters that derive their powers from mysticism, body technologies, or scientific interventions/accidents, mutants have the genetic potential to possess their powers from birth. As such, many of the most enlightened in the scientific community tend to see mutants as the next evolutionary phase of humanity. For this very reason they are both feared and chastised by everyday 'normal' human beings. We see within a mutant's own perception of self a dire struggle to fit in.[106] Before

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[105] The original X-Men were comprised of Cyclopes (Scott Summers), Marvel Girl (Jean Grey), Angel (Warren Worthington III), Beast (Hank McCoy), and Iceman (Bobby Drake).

[106] Certain characters like Cyclopes, Jean Grey, and Kitty Pryde have the ability to appear or *pass* as everyday humans. Others, such as Beast or Nightcrawler are so physically abject that they cannot easily escape their mutant markings. In fact, early depictions of Beast have him looking more like a human (with big hands

they are ‘discovered’ for their superhero potential, these characters are often depicted as trying to conceal their superpowers, which is somewhat difficult for those whose unique abilities are apparent on and through the body. Thus, a distinct facet of these super bodies in particular is the notion that one’s superpowers are actually a burden, that no matter how good their intentions may be, society will always reject or repress them for being different.

Thus through the fissured or disfigured (graphic) body we also see mutants as see key disruptions in (patriotic) morality. Although the mutant villains are committed to ridding the world of ignorant and feeble humans, their plight as ostracized ‘Others’ still make them easy to identify with. Thus we see a very overt rendering of anti-hero figures that readers simultaneously demonize and empathize with.[107] Collectively, despite their superior abilities, mutant bodies are dystopian in that they are always in some way subjugated by society. But is this sense of dystopia actually more in line with our real-world experiences, perhaps much more so than any traditional renderings of superheroes? As such, Lyubansky (2008) observes that, “The X-Men are less about superpowers and

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and feet) rather than a creature. As time went on he developed a furry blue exterior. Likewise, Nightcrawler is initially given the ability to shape-shift into a ‘normal’ appearing human; however, he eventually abandons this ability. He forgoes hiding behind an illusory exterior and rather embraces his true form/self.

[107] Much more will be said regarding anti-hero superheroes when discussing the postmodern body, but such tensions are nonetheless apparent in the mutant body as well. It should also be noted, however, that as much as Xavier and Magneto are at odds, they also have a profound respect for each other (and even friendship) that endures despite their differences.

more about human tendencies to fear and hate those who are different" (in Bolton, p. 129).

In fashion, the mutant form articulates the aesthetics and fantasies of metamorphosis, embodying both the agonies and ecstasies of transformation through clothing. Utilizing sequences, mixed mediums, gender neutral signifiers, and uncomfortable fabrics are ways in which designers attempt to usurp and challenge totalitarian and oppressive beauty standards. Thus Bolton offers designs that not so much depict techno-bodies or parahumans, but rather clothing that construes images of the body in otherworldly ways.[108] What stands out in several of the designs is the propensity of the models to hunch over, bend, or contort their bodies in relation to what they are wearing. It is unclear if they are being instructed to pose in these ways, or if their bodies are unconsciously reacting the abjectness of what they are wearing.

Mutant bodies/fashion challenge standards of beauty and what is constituted as the ideal form. Subsequently, mutant bodies in fashion demonstrate how the body/clothing seductively, graphically, and stylistically respond or react to body prejudice, intolerance, and oppression. This process of 'mutation' occurs when that individual looks for ways to physically (and genetically) alter one's

[108] As someone who is not too familiar or invested in fashion beyond this project, these designs appear as if they could've come straight from the set of a science-fiction film. They look more like alien 'costumes' rather than something anyone would actually wear – which is exactly the point of the mutant body. Lady Gaga is an example of a contemporary fashion icon that readily plays with mutant imagery in her costumes and clothing. Most of the designs offered by Bolton appear similar to things one would expect to see her wear on the red carpet.

appearance so that the external self more closely resembles how that person sees themselves within. Thus, when we extend these finding to include our lived experiences, we must recognize that these tensions take form as bodies in (abject) transition. Lived bodies that fall in line with the mutant body tend to be ones that are disfigured, deformed, genetically manipulated, or in a state of flux – such as with transgendered bodies.

Like Nightcrawler, disfigured or deformed bodies cannot necessarily transition into something different or more ideal. Instead, their bodies are a confinement in which they must exist. Of course, there are varying degrees of such 'disfigurement' that we must always consider in relation to the white, heteronormative, masculine norm.[109] The physicality of such body inscriptions can be expressed through mangled or missing limbs but is also evident in those who are 'morbidly' obese, as well as in regards to race and ethnicity. Ethnic minorities have been so historically underrepresented in the superhero discourse that, until more recently, they have largely been rendered invisible. Even now the number of characters from diverse racial backgrounds falls far short of any authentic depiction of reality.[110] Additionally, there have been more contemporary

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[109] I call these physical body markers 'disfigurements,' but I am only using this negative language to highlight how the tension plays out in the allegorical discourse. This is the very reason why the mutant body exists; to challenge and usurp any notion that the absence of a limb or the color of one's skin is anything but natural, and *not* a disfigurement.

[110] There have been some popular minorities in the lineage of comic book superheroes, such as Luke Cage (1972), Shang Chi, Master of Kung Fu (1972), and Storm (1975), although they in no way rival the prevalence and popularity of the more established, mainstream characters.

attempts to bridge the racial divide in comics and diversify the more mainstream characters. One key example is the *Ultimate Spider-Man* (Bendis, 2000) series wherein Peter Parker dies at the hands of the Green Goblin, and thus the superhero persona is taken up by a new, multi-racial Spider-Man named Miles Morales, who is of African and Latino descent.[111]

Turner's (1969) concept of *liminality* offers another way to conceptualize the ambiguous and betwixed nature of what occurs as we move in-between states of solid, stable meaning. When one is liminal, they in transition between such stable spaces. As such, people are born into the world with a particular set of sex characteristics that are biologically derived, and then are socialized into a particular gender category, but might not necessarily align with their perception of self (Butler, 1993). The process of 'mutation' occurs when that individual looks for ways to physically and chemically alter one's appearance so that the external self more closely resembles how that person sees themselves in the world.[112]

Though being transgendered is *not* akin to being gay, there are still interesting parallels regarding how we abjectly inscribe the body (graphically add or remove sex characteristics), and how we abjectly perform it (resistive to

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[111] This is just one of several Spider-Man story arches, as other versions of Peter Parker are alive and well in the larger Marvel Universe. Of course, this did not stop conservative pundits like Glen Beck from demonizing the new character as untraditional and un-American. Beck goes so far as to blame Michelle Obama for the new multi-racial Spider-Man, who –as far as anyone else can tell – has absolutely no connection to the comic book whatsoever (Flock, 2011).

[112] The X-Men super-villain Mystique is a shape-shifter who perfectly embodies such liminal spaces.

patriotic performance norms that essentialize gender into a false binary of male/female):

> Gay liberation, which has been variously assimilative and radical since the late 1960s, has spurred a whole range of discussions, practices, and identifications related to sexuality. Some of these celebrate alternative sexual pleasures and encourage so-called deviant body styles, including the use of leather, tattooing, and piercing within fetish practices … as well as transgendered dress, adornments, and permanent and semi-permanent modifications, including the use of 'tight-lacing' corsetry, which over time can alter and 'feminize' the shape of the waist in both men and women. [Radical] queer activists … have argued against gay assimilation into the mainstream, instead championing more radical, in-your-face body styles and pleasures that can push at the boundaries of sex and gender norms. (Pitts, 2003, p. 7)

Ultimately, the mutant body evokes what Housel calls "a demand for diversity," which is reflected in the vast array of abilities and corporeality of these particular super bodies (Bolton, 2008, p. 131). As such, within the diversity of characters there always exist key tensions regarding how the body materializes and functions. Bodies are constructed and contrasted as both utopian and dystopian in regards to appearance, functionality, ethics, and ideology. What makes mutants unique is the propensity to identify and embrace the more dystopian aspects of the body while maintaining the utopian ideas of truth, justice, and the American way. As the last two body types will now demonstrate, the

historical stigmatization of mutant bodies complicate their roles as villains or superheroes within the fantasy universe, as well as any notions of splendor and seduction.

The Paradoxical Body

The paradoxical and postmodern bodies both convey how superheroes are inscribed and subsequently perform in problematic, contradictory ways. As such, they compel us to directly confront the gendered and hegemonic utopianism that overlays the superhero discourse, as well as ideological morality (e.g. patriotic body) through which superheroes generically perform splendor and seduction, sometimes resulting in "ambivalent and even hostile reactions to superheroes" (Skoble, 2005, p. 29). Each offers revisionist accounts of the superhero discourse that highlights *disruptions* in the meta-narratives that fix and locate super bodies into strict classifications. Thus, they are used by Bolton to confront and problematize the very categories that establish the influential relationships between comics, fashion, culture and the body.

More concretely, these post-body perspectives allow us to unveil the dystopian effects of hegemonic bio-power that serves to sexualize, marginalize, and exclude certain bodies. They challenge how the graphic and patriotic bodies invite and influence readings of superhero discourse as an overtly ethnocentric, masculine, and sexist enterprise – wrought with inequities of power. As such, the mutant body could also be classified with these 'post' perspectives, as could some aspects of the virile, armored, and aerodynamic bodies. However, unique to this final pairing is the acknowledgment of the dystopian effects of *all* superhero body

inscriptions, representations, and performances. As such, paradoxical bodies include an examination of all gendered super bodies, regardless if they are categorized as graphic, patriotic, mutant, or otherwise. Likewise, the postmodern body contends with the dystopian effects of super bodies that are constructed to fall in line with dominant ideologies, and thus becomes a response or reaction to the behavioral morality conveyed through heroic (American) utopianism.[113]

The paradoxical body refers to depictions of female superheroes and how utopianism permeates their graphic/patriotic presence as largely a manifestation of masculine sexual fantasy. When considered this way, these utopian depictions of splendor and seduction translate into dystopian projections of fetishistic sexual stereotypes. As such, it is with "unabashed and unapologetic obviousness [that] women are portrayed as objects of male desire and fantasy with absurdly exaggerated sexual characteristics" (Bolton, 2008, p. 81). In regards to their graphic depictions, female superheroes typically possess massively exaggerated breasts on extraordinarily tall, thin, taught and muscular frames. Their costumes highlight the erogenous areas of the body by exposing the surrounding flesh, resulting in evocative clothing that more so suggests stylized lingerie than combat attire.

[113] Each of the other body types play a part in reinforcing and resisting these primary tensions (especially when we consider where/why they have emerged at different historical moments), and thus become exemplars to demonstrate the specific contradictions or tensions under investigation. Again, in the next section we will examine how the postmodern body specifically calls into question the moral constraints of the graphic/patriotic bodies.

Furthermore, the ways in which their bodies are framed on the comic book page (i.e. the predominant 'male gaze'), also highlights the overt sexualizing of female bodies by overwhelmingly male writers and artists. These androcentric perspectives in comic narratives tend to locate the reader's attention primarily on the breasts, legs, and buttocks of female superheroes. Additionally, whereas male superheroes are consistently displayed as having dominant and impenetrably strong personas, this is not always the case with the female heroines and minorities, who more often fulfill subsidiary roles or are rendered invisible altogether.

Comic book depictions of male superheroes are also sexual and exaggerated. As noted by Bolton (2008), "While it is true that the costumes worn by male superheroes can also be defined by an overt sex appeal, a fact that goes some way in readdressing the chauvinism of comic books, those worn by their female counterparts tend to reveal a lot more bare flesh. Indeed, the standard formula seems to be minimum clothing and maximum body exposure" (p. 81). Again, as with male superheroes, their costumes leave little to the imagination in that they are so taught to the body that the costume appears and functions as a second layer of skin. However, whereas male flesh is likely to be hidden underneath the costume, typically covered in a leotard that runs from head to toe, the female super body is made bare and reveals flesh *in spite of* the costume. Female superheroes essentially wear lingerie in comparison to the male superhero costumes which are akin to a 'onesie' with a cape.

As such, the "paradox" exists as a tension in the veiled intent and effect of these dominant depictions. In other words, these problematic depictions are naturalized into the discourse because they are often never challenged. As such, the comic book industry (writers, artists, editors and publishers) is comprised almost exclusively of men.[114]

> Yes, there are women in the industry. Yes there were in the 50s and 60s as well. I am not discarding them or marginalizing them. But percentage-wise? It's sad. And it isn't because 'women don't want to do comics' or even 'women don't want to do superhero comics.' It's because they've been chased off, told they shouldn't want to do them and then often shown that what they would be working on is insulting to them. (Knave, 2011)

The 'boys club' mentality that pervades the industry constrains options for resistance and highlights contradictory representation in comics themselves. Thus, we must question if the female and minority presence in the discourse is a wholehearted attempt to bridge the gender/racial gap, or an effect of tokenism. This overbearing masculine filter has direct repercussions on how super heroine characters are then displayed and conveyed in comic narratives:

> They read like men's voices coming out of women's faces. Or worse, they read like the straight girls who make out with each other at clubs, not because they enjoy making out with women but because they desperately want guys to pay attention to them …This is not about these women

[114] There are exceptions and I will specifically highlight some resistive representations of female superheroes. However, the dominance of male voices in the production of superhero characters is profound and far reaching.

> wanting things; it's about men wanting to see them do things, and that takes something that really should be empowering – the idea that women can own their sexuality – and transforms it into yet another male fantasy. It takes away the actual power of the women and turns their 'sexual liberation' into just another way for dudes to get off. (Hudson, 2011)

Rather than any 'authentic' depiction of feminine power, we are instead bombarded with depictions of women as physically superior, yet vulnerable and subservient to masculine desire. It is this expression of the female body, as powerful and strong but sexually subjugated by the disciplining gaze (of the reader, primarily) that highlights the paradox under investigation. In fulfilling these dominant fantasies, female characters in comics exist as a tension between two aspects of (masculine) desire; namely, the *heroine* and the *whore*. As such, female superheroes are expected to fulfill the utopian promise of possessing a superior body, but then are often reduced to a sexually appetizing object in doing so.

Catwoman is an archetypal 'paradox' because she is both good and bad, sinner and saint, subservient and resistive to male power. Though she will ally herself with Batman in combat (and in bed), she nonetheless resists the social morality and institutional laws handed down by men/patriarchy (and thus also finds herself at odds with the Dark Knight). Thus there is a surface-level illusion of sexually liberated super heroines in comic narratives. They are doubly articulated as objects of desire through their scant clothing and propensity to adhere to masculine sexual mores.

As a powerful character who usurps social and legal norms of the patriarchy, Catwoman would seemingly be a very strong and potentially empowering female character to emulate. Yet at the same time (through her costume) she evokes a dominatrix, and she is consistently rendered 'powerless' in the face of Batman's sexual presence. Hudson's (2011) critique of DC's "New 52" re-launch of their superhero universe focuses heavily on the first issue of Winick and March's *Catwoman*:

> Out of all possible introductions to the character of Selina Kyle, the moment we're going to meet her is going to be the one where she happens to be half-dressed and sporting bright red lingerie. That is in fact all we see of her for two pages: shots of her breasts. Most problematically, we are shown her breasts and her body over and over for two pages, but NOT her face." (Hudson, 2011, emphasis original)

In this foundational issue, Catwoman is explicitly depicted as a sexual object long before we learn anything of her personality or even get a sense of who she is beyond her sexually exaggerated body. Additionally, the conclusion of this premier issue ends with her straddling Batman (the implication is that he is sexually penetrating her) as they tear each other's clothes off. With minimal narrative content to justify the exchange, the effect is that Catwoman is not having sex for her own empowered pleasure, but rather for the specific pleasure of the male reader. Batman serves no purpose in the limited narrative's conflict beyond checking in on Catwoman to see if she is okay. He nonetheless takes full

advantage of the sexual tension, offering a lens through which the (predominantly male) reader can empathize.[115]

As much as she displays the qualities of super heroism, Catwoman is also used to "undermine women's ability to protect themselves, while at the same time encouraging sexist violence by emphasizing female vulnerability" (Stabile, p. 89). Since her debut in Batman, number one (1940), Catwoman's origin story has gone through several drastic evolutions. She is first depicted as a luxury-loving socialite whose impulse to commit crime is derived from boredom. Later she is shown as an airline stewardess who commits burglaries during amnesiac episodes. More recently she has been depicted as the wayward wife of a tyrannical husband, a prostitute under the control of a violent pimp, and the daughter of an alcoholic and abusive father.[116] Likewise, her costume has undergone several drastic evolutions, which for Bolton (2008) is "another instance of comic book chauvinism … Female characters are typically subject to more stylistic makeovers, whether radical or restrained, than their male counterparts.

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[115] In fact, upon surprising and confronting Catwoman at her hotel, Batman says "Are you all right? I heard that your apartment was firebombed. What have you gotten yourself into this ti--", and then without a saying word in response she is upon him, devouring him in a carnal explosion of sexual energy (Winick & March, 2011, p. 22-24).

[116] The reoccurring theme of her suffering abuse by the hand of a more powerful, masculine authority figure seems to run rampant in contemporary depictions of Catwoman (Bolton, 2008, p. 85).

Submission to the dialectics of fashion is presented as another expression of a fetishized femininity" (p. 85).[117]

Early representations of women in comic books tended to depict them as either treacherous femme fatale seductresses, as peripheral side-kicks, or as the girlfriends of male superheroes (i.e. Lois Lane). Then, in the early 1940's Dr. William Moulton Marston created Wonder Woman as a means to combat the dominant masculine superhero archetypes he feared would undermine the qualities of powerful women.[118] For him, the obvious remedy was to "create a character with all the strength of Superman plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman" (in Crawford, 2007). Wonder Woman is sent by the Greek goddess, Aphrodite, to aid in the U.S. war effort, but also to spread the message of love, peace, and equality in a world torn apart by hatred. Likewise, the way in which she goes about fighting crime is also unique. As noted by Crawford (2007):

> Wonder Woman's approach to crime fighting was different than male counterparts as well. Where they used force to defeat the villain, she tried

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[117] Again, the cat-suit is most closely associated with the dominatrix archetype: tight, shiny black leather, high-heel shoes, and whips. The iconicity of her appearance is greatly aided and even further sexualized in the cinematic depictions of the character, such as Julie Newmar's mod chic fashion (*Batman*, television series,1966), Michelle Pfeiffer's skin-tight polyvinyl wet-look (*Batman Returns*, 1992), and Halle Berry's cat-scratched costume that exposes as much flesh as it covers (*Catwoman*, 2004).

[118] Marston was a psychologist and feminist who was already famous for inventing the lie detector device. Interestingly, one of Wonder Woman's primary weapons is her "golden lasso of truth," which forces her adversaries to be honest when ensnared by it.

to reason with them and often convinced them to reform. Only when this failed did she use force, or her magic lasso.[119]

However, when Marston died in 1947, he left Wonder Woman in the hands of writers and editors who never really grasped her unique purpose. By the 1960's her origin story had been stripped away and instead she was given an everyday civilian persona who worked at a clothing boutique. She also more readily resorted to violent, masculine methods for fighting crime.

Then, in the 1970's, Wonder Woman experienced resurgence when the second wave feminist movement adopted the character as a core icon. In 1972 she graced the cover of the first issue of *Ms. Magazine* and soon after returned to her Amazonian roots.[120]

Concurrently, other female characters from the superhero world shared a presence with Wonder Woman with titles such as *Superman's Girlfriend, Lois Lane* from 1958-1974. However, these comic series often had a lighthearted and frivolous tone despite taking on some very serious issues of the era. For example, in November 1970, Lois Lane uses Kryptonian technology to transform herself

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[119] Wonder Woman's main handicap is also one of her greatest assets. Her gold, bullet proof bracelets can be used against her should an enemy clasp them together, thus restraining her. Therefore, critiques of Wonder Woman sometimes overly obsess about the bondage taboos depicted through the character but sometimes ignore the emancipatory aspects of the character. Regardless, her predominant costume nonetheless reminds us that she is essentially wearing lingerie.

[120] Coinciding with the second wave momentum, from 1975 to 1979 Lynda Carter portrayed the character on the vastly popular television series, *The New Adventures of Wonder Woman*. Though still sexually objectified, she nonetheless embraced some feminist ideals.

into an African American woman in order to do undercover reporting in Metropolis' "Little Africa." Though the story does confront racism, it also reinforces ethnic divides in that no African American characters in the story (including children and the elderly) will speak to "Miss Whitey," and thus she must go 'undercover.' Though their increased presence speaks to a growing female readership of comic discourse, these characters and their subsequent handling by white, male writers and artists firmly supplanted their paradoxical presence for decades to come.

There have also been several key moments in superhero storytelling that have done a great deal to counteract the paradoxical tensions that override the discourse, although many are produced by what is considered 'independent publishers' and not are necessarily being read by the mainstream readership (DC and Marvel). One of the first comics in the 1980's independent revolution was the Hernandez brother's *Love and Rockets* (1982), which used surrealist humor to problematize the dominant gender and ethnic classifications that seem to subjugate women and minorities in the mainstream discourse. More recently, Terry Moore's *Echo* (2008) is a super heroine story that features female protagonists whose vulnerability and attention to care and concern as opposed to aggression and violence becomes a powerful asset in their ability to overcome the male villains and war machines. Through being in the wrong place at the wrong time, Echo's main character, Julie, is forced to wear a costume that is essentially a living bomb that has attached itself to her. Her resistance to masculine

hegemony/violence therefore must also be a resistance to her own body.[121] More satirical works, like *The Boys* (Ennis & Robertson, 2006), provide meta-narrative critiques of the genre itself. They explicitly challenge these normative gendered assumptions, but rarely interrogate where they come from, and then end up reifying the norm in even more graphically exaggerated and problematic ways.

Again, a key problem that upholds the prevalence of paradoxical representations in comic books is the overabundant male, Eurocentric presence in the industry despite a growing diversified readership. Especially in mainstream superhero narratives, the propensity to uphold the paradoxical dynamic is made all the more easy when there are few female voices and creators actively challenging these assumptions.[122] Some female creators have found limited success in challenging these paradoxes, such as artist/writers Becky Coonan,

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[121] Moore won a GLAAD media award for Best Comic Book for his earlier series, *Strangers in Paradise* (1993-2007) which depicts powerful female characters (albeit not necessarily superheroes) confronting patriarchal hegemony while playing out their own sexuality.

[122] An example of this lived paradox can be seen by looking back to the 2011 International Comic Con in San Diego. One of the programmed panels titled "Oh You Sexy Geek" featured female actresses, models, bloggers, and 'feminists' who largely argued that overtly sexualized depictions of females in comics and popular culture is empowering just so long as women embrace and "own their sexuality." Most of the women on the panel (most of who identify as feminists) have been so naturalized into seeing themselves as objects of male fantasy that they gladly support the paradox. Their position is not too dissimilar from post-feminists who embrace counter-advocacy such as "slut walks," wherein women dress in sexually provocative and revealing clothing and parade in public to 'reclaim' their sexuality. Despite the personal sense of empowerment achieved through the advocacy, if men are nonetheless standing along the sidelines sexually ogling them, one must ask what is really being accomplished. In other words, simply 'owning' one's oppression does not necessarily mean the oppression is removed. In fact, it is potentially even further naturalized, justified, and excused.

Fiona Staples, Amy Reeder, Gail Simone, Amanda Conner, and Vertigo co-founder and editor, Karen Berger. However, stories and characters that resist the paradoxical norm are just as likely produced by male comic creators, which despite what might be good intentions, still tend to use the paradox to draw out such narrative tensions.

Thus, the content depicted in superhero narratives reinforce strict gender categories, strengthening masculine perceptions of who has power and how it is exercised, or perhaps more disheartening, teaches women that they can be empowering so long as they look and act sexy while doing it.[123] Splendor and seduction is more likely derived from objectification than through the body functioning more powerfully. The same can be said regarding Bolton's identification of the paradoxical body in fashion. Most all the designs he offers are somehow evocative of the iconic skin-tight, black leather cat suit. Again, the dominatrix theme runs rampant in fashion renderings of the paradoxical body as they consist of "conceptually loaded and psychologically coded items such as cat suits, corsets, bustier, and harness bras" (Bolton, 2008, p. 85).

Ultimately, superhero discourse is blatantly androcentric, consciously and unconsciously locating the narrative's point of view at the center of the masculine meaning-making experience. Superhero narratives appropriate the empowerment

[123] Feminists and media scholars have pointed to the ways in which these paradoxes play themselves out in *many* popular entertainment discourses, advertising, politics, industry, and the like. In our lived experiences, young girls and women (and to some extent, even men) are potentially conditioned to see themselves as 'fitting in' through engaging the paradox. In other words, *power* and presence is achieved by becoming desirable to others, even if that means reducing yourself to a sexual object.

of female sexuality, but almost always for the (sub)conscious purpose of arousing male desire, regardless of how 'sexually liberated' the female characters profess to be. Here we see a direct contradiction (or paradox) in the supposed intent (utopian empowerment) and effect (arousal of male sexual desire) of the discourse. Again, Hudson (2011) offers a reading of tensions that highlight the dystopian effects of such paradoxical representations:

> The problem is that when I look at these women, I would very much like to see confident ladies who enjoy sex and are having a fun sexy time. But what I see instead are women who give me the same impression as creepy dead-eyed porn stars mechanically mouthing 'oh yeah, I want it.' And that feeling of coerced sexual enthusiasm is the creepiest, saddest, most unerotic thing I can imagine. And if I were able to have a boner, seeing something like that would make me lose it every time.

One must then question if we have yet to ever see a truly feminist depiction of a super heroine. In other words, how would one re-write the discourse to confront the problematic gender representations that pervade comics? What would this new heroine look like and would anyone ever want to read it? Responses to these questions will be forwarded in the next chapter as we address how power is exercised throughout the discourse and bodies. For now, we must simply be aware that the tension or paradox exists; further moving us toward the fissured, disrupted, or post aspects of super/body transformation.

The Postmodern Body

The postmodern body shares many characteristics with the mutant and paradoxical bodies in that they all communicate disruptions in the fixed meaning systems that signify and perpetuate our understanding of how bodies function and how they are then normalized and categorized. Bolton (2008) notes that the superhero genre has been greatly influenced by postmodernism, but does not immediately describe what the postmodern body specifically entails. Instead, he reminds us that the seeds of postmodernism in comics were "planted in the 1970's," then offers examples in both comics and fashion from that era onward. However, this explanation is somewhat limited and misleading in that he does not recognize the larger genealogy of the postmodern body.[124] While his categories thus far have been incredibly revealing, Bolton's scheme falls especially short in describing and evaluating this particular body type. The postmodern superhero body does not just magically appear in one particular decade (although there are a couple key texts that conflate it directly), but is rather more of a *dystopian* continuation, reaction, or response to the superhero as "an indelibly American invention connoting ideal citizenship through white muscular force" (Wanzo, 2009, p. 93).

Though the transcendental and hyper-globalized aspects of identity/body (dif)fusion may be a product of contemporary, post-industrial conditions, the possibilities and limitations of body transcendence have been readily theorized,

[124] In viewing mind/body tensions regarding identity as post-structural or postmodern, we specifically contend with a history of the self/body and its capacity to resist or change (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009, p. 1517). Thus the genealogy of such an expansive topic can be made more efficient by looking specifically at how we arrive at perceptions of body *transcendence*.

contested, and inscribed on and through the body throughout history. As noted by Mercer, “Identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty” (as quoted in Du Gay, 1996, p. 1). Because we have the ability to imagine ourselves beyond the confines of our physical constraints – exacerbated by modern technologies – the body is a site wherein these identity tensions readily play out.

For the purposes of examining the post body as it pertains to superhero discourse, it is useful to begin with relationships and disruptions offered by Nietzsche. By breaking from Kantian/Hegelian formulations of rational self-consciousness, he locates the body as a central constraint through which experience and the ‘will to power’ is made possible. For him, the ‘illusion of agency’ that emerges in his writings reinforces the notion that “much of what we do is conditioned by embodied social background practices that we do not and perhaps cannot bring fully to consciousness” (Hoy, 2004, p. 13). And thus we have a significant departure from enlightenment renderings of the self/body made possible through rationality, as well as historical attempts to establish the mind/body as a combined force through which we “put forward a more intelligent mind and prepare the body to become more useful” (Isocrates, as quoted in Hawhee, 2009, p. 5).

In his book *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1885/1995), Nietzsche warns against the apathetic nature of humans and what he sees as undirected and frivolous uses of our potential. He offers the idea of the *Übermensch* – contending that the

limitations of humans are something that can be overcome. Nietzsche's "overman" offers a means to forecast human potential by testing oneself against the possibilities that the world has to offer (p. 3-4). Ultimately, Nietzcshe sees the Übermensch as a way for us to overcome a need for God. By becoming the Übermensch, humans can achieve a self-contained moral authority to guide personal and social principles. But in doing so, one would also have to resist the influences of a world that often forces us into apathy and complacency. The Übermensch is an entity capable of finding internal excellence and absolution as an alternative to fearing external authorities (Dontigney, 2008). Thus it becomes possible to (graphically) resist the (patriotic) relations of power that falsely naturalizes our understanding of what it means to be super.[125]

Nietzsche's depiction of the Übermensch would become a controversial subject as the Nazi's drew upon the idea in their aspirations to conceive a master race. Once it was associated with fascist goals, the potential that Nietzsche saw in the Übermensch was further, if unfairly, associated with eugenics, ethnic intolerance, and racial persecution. Though Siegel and Shuster never mention Nietzsche as a direct influence, the concept of the Übermensch is something that was commonly depicted in the science-fiction magazines and pulp novels of the

[125] The personal/social tensions that derive from this projection of identity will help answer the posited research questions in the final chapter. The 'self-contained' morality of the Übermensch is a form of resistance. However, it is not enough to simply satisfy the personal or inscribed self. One must also resist the political (patriotic) influences that, again, subdue us into complacency. It is only when the graphic body is refined and the patriotic body is resisted that we achieve the Übermensch, Nietzsche's transcendent and 'utopian' model for the process of becoming. Thus, our real options of resistance tend to start at the local level.

era. These fantasy periodicals and 'fan-zines' were read religiously by Siegel and Shuster, and thus they were likely exposed to the *idea* of the Übermensch.

When essentialized to signify an entity capable of usurping the confines or constraints of the human condition, the Übermensch could be read as a utopian concept. However, the Übermensch is Nietzsche's version of a resistive body that *mistrusts* the reliability and authenticity of the utopian morality that supersedes it. Jacobson (2006) points out that in many ways Siegel and Shuster's Superman is actually the polar opposite of the Übermensch. Nietzsche envisions an organic human capable of transcending the limitations of society, religion, conventional morality, and institutional power; whereas Superman (despite possessing extraordinary powers) chooses to *uphold* the moral values, social codes, and institutional laws that are already in place. Nietzsche envisions a perfect human capable of going beyond the moral confines of society. Superman is instead an alien who maintains and adheres to a pre-established (patriotic) morality by simply holding himself to a higher standard (Jacobson, p. 5). In other words, despite all the 'splendor and seduction' that Bolton and others have associated with early renderings of superheroes, Nietzsche would likely find Superman to be whole-heartedly dystopian, if not a purveyor of false consciousness.[126]

Thus we see tensions of utopian and dystopian forms of transcendence play out in super body projections long before the 1970's, and is explicitly

[126] Recall that pre-war superheroes, though largely crafted as a means to escape the confines of reality, were quickly recruited into the war effort for propaganda purposes. In other words, the patriotic impetus is written all throughout their bodies and expressions.

depicted a decade earlier in comics such as *X-Men* and *The Incredible Hulk*. Though Superman is uniquely established as an alien in his origin story, *all* superheroes are marginal in some respect because they represent a clear departure from the norm. “Because superheroes are celebrated icons of their received cultures, to suggest that one of their generic features is marginal status may appear oxymoronic. However, the superhero is necessarily an outsider, unlike ordinary mortals: super is, by definition, marginal” (Shugart, 2009, p. 98).

As previously noted, we have always had the capacity to imagine ourselves outside of the confines of our lived bodies. If we understand the postmodern body as a reaction or rebellion from those fixed and finite categories, then all superhero bodies are post bodies at their core. This is a hallmark of the science fiction/fantasy genres, wherein Siegel and Shuster’s dissatisfaction with their own corporeal constraints result in post possibilities of becoming something beyond themselves. For Bolton, this represents a critical turn in the discourse’s ability to call into question the limitations of its own post-body projections. Again, Shugart (2009) highlights specific problems that emerge out of the utopian marginality of traditional superheroes, which are later directly confronted in the silver age of comics:

> The vast majority of superheroes are wealthy, white heterosexual men. Furthermore, the categorical mandate of the superhero has been ‘a mission to preserve society, not reinvent it’ … Indeed, the classic superhero is fundamentally conservative and reactive, at best driven to defend and protect ‘democracy’ and, at worst, motivated by ‘fascist,’ antidemocratic

> vigilantism. Historically, then, superheroes have served as the vanguards of besieged wealthy, white, heterosexual masculinity, and their marginality is useful insofar as it serves to camouflage that fact. (p. 99)

The 1960's and 1970's postmodern bodies (such as mutants) *recognize* this 'camouflage' for what it is and attempts to contest it. However, the ultimate paradox is that it attempts to do this while maintaining some semblance of besieged morality, upholding yet muddling the distinctions between heroes and villains. The Punisher is a great example of such a character. He is a violent vigilante whom any 'utopian superhero' would be completely justified in throwing in prison. However, whether teamed up with or fighting against characters such as Spider-Man or Daredevil, he is the very catalyst in which the utopian superhero gets problematized.[127] Is he a good guy or a bad guy? And is the traditional superhero better off or worse off for holding to such a rigid utopian morality? Though they would never adhere to The Punisher's execution-style vigilantism, Spider-Man and Daredevil continually fall short of incarcerating him. And in this sense, an encounter with The Punisher is a means through which the traditional superhero must confront his or her own 'camouflage.'

The lineage of the postmodern body emerges out of – or responds to – the dominant discursive attributes and constraints that exist in relation to it. Superheroes were once tucked in with rations kits and gunny bags, and GIs literally took these superheroes to war with them. A decade later, in the era of

[127] As previously mentioned, the Punisher is also a human – Vietnam War vet, Frank Castle – who would never even identify himself as *heroic* let alone *super*.

McCarthyism, they were under attack by institutions that challenged their American authenticity and questioned their destructive effects on youth, thus complicating their ideological or patriotic influence. Then, in the 1960's, superheroes began to directly confront representations of ethnicity and 'Otherness.' They fought for civil rights and (albeit paradoxical) gender equality through the subtexts of their narratives, as well as displayed the more 'unnatural' effects of technological innovation in the form of mutants and grotesque bodies. However, though the silver age superheroes of the 1960's were graphically different than their predecessors, they still upheld the patriotic impulses that clearly framed boundaries to distinguish good from evil. As time went on, superhero bodies would not only graphically change, but their infused moral patriotism would rupture in ways that would alter the entire discourse.[128]

It is also important to note how key pragmatic changes in the comic book industry helped reinforce why postmodern superheroes were desirable and necessary. First, the strict censorship and content regulations put in place by the government in the 1950's had lost a lot of steam by the 1970's.[129] Through

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[128] Even Superman is susceptible (though only temporarily) to such postmodern leanings. In April, 2011, he renounces his citizenship to the United States in proclaiming, "I'm tired of having my actions construed as instruments of U. S. policy. Truth, justice and the American way... it's not enough anymore." Of course, he quickly renounces this renouncement soon after this issue, perhaps because it is this unflappable morality that really sets him apart. By choosing to preserve the 'American way of life,' this demigod is ensured a purpose (serve humanity) beyond simply being master and commander of the world.

[129] Nonetheless, many comic book publishers of the 1950's went out of business as some of their most popular titles (crime, suspense, and horror stories) were demonized and eliminated. The publishers that survived had the resources and

characters like the X-Men, Marvel was able to explicitly and subversively tease out dystopian tensions while still upholding the 'camouflage' of patriotic utopianism. Additionally, an underground movement of alternative storytelling emerged in the peculiar works of independent creators such as Harvey Pekar and Art Spiegelman. They used the comic book medium to depict the banality of everyday existence (e.g. Pekar's *American Splendor*, 1976-2008), as well as real-world historical events such as the Holocaust (e.g. Spiegelman's *Maus*, 1986).[130]

These writers/artists envisioned comic book storytelling as something more than superhero parables, and their influence helped other creators to see how the human condition could more readily conflate and counteract the utopian superhero. Comic books were no longer just about superheroes, fairy tales, Bible stories, and comic adaptations of canonized literature, but rather more about *us*. And thus the utopian standard in the medium itself was forever ruptured.[131]

Returning back to the superhero genre, two comic book narratives from the mid-1980s embodied the "adult ethos" that became a new organizing principle

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material to uphold the patriotic utopianism that the government wanted to see ensured in these stories. Thus DC and later Marvel – robust with a wide array of moral crime fighters – were able to survive and monopolize the industry.

[130] In *Maus*, Jewish concentration camp prisoners are personified as mice, and the Nazi captors are cats.

[131] Once this happened, crime, suspense and horror stories also made their return, and the censorship codes eventually fell to the wayside completely. It should also be noted that there were non-superhero comics before Pekar and Spiegelman. However, this is where we must draw distinctions between 'comic books' and 'comic strips.' As previously noted by Chabon (2008), popular comic books and superheroes emerged together in such a fashion that they "seemed indistinguishable in the cultural mind" (p. 65).

through which the postmodern superhero emerges (Bolton, p. 141). *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns* (Miller & Janson, 1986) and *Watchmen* (Moore & Gibbons, 1986-87) both present postmodern strategies to "deconstruct the superhero, including parody and pastiche, revision and reinvigoration, and self-consciousness and self-reflexivity" (Bolton, 2008, p. 141). In Miller's *Dark Knight Returns*, we see a near-future dystopian version of Gotham City wherein nearly all superheroes, with the exception of Superman, have been forced into retirement by an oppressive government or driven away into exile by a distrusting populace. A 55 year-old Batman is then forced out of his ten year retirement when government sanctioned violence is too much for him to ignore. Throughout the saga we witness Batman team up with former adversaries, like the Joker, as well as confront an array of ideological and institutionalized 'adversaries' including Superman. Regardless, the villains become the 'heroes' and the heroes become the 'villains,' and Batman is the means through which the tensions in such a post-scenario are expressed.[132]

In *Watchmen*, Moore and Gibbons construct an alternate superhero universe and use real-world tensions (Cold War, Vietnam, Nixon-era political corruption, and nuclear proliferation of the 1980s) to confront the moral absolutism that encompasses the superhero discourse. In traditional superhero

[132] Film director Darren Aronofsky conceptualized an un-made script for *The Dark Knight Returns* and had Clint Eastwood cast as his ideal, aging and grizzled Batman. Because we so rarely ever see superheroes age, one can see how this 'post' version of the superhero would have been so profoundly different from the status quo.

narratives, when forced into an 'impossible' scenario (e.g. decide whether to save a love interest or save a bus full of school children), the superhero will overwhelmingly manage to overcome the obstacle and save both, or otherwise will suffer a personal loss in place of the harm that would otherwise befall the innocent. In *Watchmen*, however, we see a superhero willfully and judiciously execute millions of innocents in order to prevent (what he assumes will be) global nuclear annihilation.[133]

These two stories had a great influence on reconstituting comic book subject matter, the complexity of narratives, as well as moral aptitude of superheroes. Superheroes quickly began to behave in emotionally and morally complex ways that more than ever closely resembled the very things that they were crafted to transcend: the limitations of humanity. However, whereas this post version of Batman maintains a semblance of graphic body utopianism in *The Dark Knight Returns*, a key protagonist in *Watchmen* named Rorschach does not:

> Both are depicted as morally ambiguous, and Rorschach, especially, is portrayed as essentially psychotic. Like Batman, Rorschach is a vigilante superhero without superpowers, but unlike Batman, he lacks any veneer of glamour. His alter ego, Walter Kovacs, lives in a filthy bed-sitter owned by a woman he accuses of being a whore. Kovacs' mother was herself a prostitute who mistreated him mercilessly, and who died when her pimp

[133] This ultimately forces us to consider the ethics of utilitarianism – the idea that the best course of action is one that maximizes happiness for the greatest amount of people – as well as question who is in power to make such decisions. Thus the lasting motto of the story becomes, *who watches the Watchmen?*

> forced her to drink a bottle of Drano. He is known for his acrid body odor and his disheveled, down-at-the-heels appearance. His costume, among other items, consists of a trench coat with several missing buttons, and a latex mask with a Rorschach inkblot pattern made from the fabric of a dress that a young woman had ordered but decided not to purchase from the factory where he once worked. Rorschach believes the woman may have been murdered in a sexual assault, fueling his resolve to avenge the powerless victims of crime. He has no qualms about killing people, and one of his methods of making criminals talk is breaking their fingers one by one." (Bolton, p. 143)

Today, superhero narratives are saturated with depictions of the anti-hero, or characters "with dark, cynical, even nihilistic worldviews" (Bolton, p. 143). As such, the costumes of these characters also mirror the darkness within them. However, this does not make them villains. They do posses a moral code, only it is more likely derived from their personal experiences and not necessarily a blind adherence to a political ideology. Although one would not be able to make this distinction simply by looking at them. The Punisher wears a giant skull on his chest and is otherwise dressed all in black. In *Ghost Rider* (1972), Johnny Blaze is a stunt motorcyclist who sells his soul to Satan in order to save his dying mentor. When transformed into a super anti-hero, his head literally becomes a flaming skull and his body is suddenly adorn with leather and chains.

In the realm of fashion, Bolton includes designs that specifically evoke the skull or flames, clad over black leather or fabrics. Also included is Mugler's

design of a bustier in the shape of a motorcycle, complete with headlight, handlebars, and rearview mirrors (Bolton, 2008, p. 150). This is yet another conjunction of the body and machine; however it is conceived as much for its aesthetic appeal than for power specifically. Otherwise, Bolton's fashion examples are 'dark' and graphically embrace dystopian iconography (such as a sweater with a skull on it – not too dissimilar from the Punisher's garb only much more comfortable). And again, fashion designs offered in the mutant or virile bodies also function to challenge the moral, grand narratives of the body that can be considered 'post.'

The postmodern body is a product of humans working through and imagining ourselves beyond the contemporary constraints alluded to throughout this project. In the cultural consciousness these are deviant practices that reconstitute the body as a site of exploration as well as a space that is in struggle with culture. Post transitions of the lived body can be envisioned through the work of performances artists such as Orlan, who stays conscious while undergoing cosmetic surgery operations. Orlan transfigures her face to appear like canonized depictions of 'beauty' in famous pieces of art. She has also had her face surgically reconstructed to appear like various animals, such as having horns implanted onto her skull. Another extreme example can again be found in Jordan (2004), who examines the phenomena of 'amputee wannabes,' or people who electively remove a perfectly healthy limb. This is a profound disruption of the utopian impetus that overrides our popular culture depictions of what it means to be an ideal (super) human.

Such modifications are considered postmodern when they disrupt cultural taboos or reconstruct the body "in ways prohibited by Western culture" (Pitts, 2003, p. 9). Of course, these changes in the body need not be as drastic as the previous examples.[134] Patriotic bodies can also become postmodern when we behave in ways that are ideologically opposed to dominant norms. Acts of vigilantism are prime examples of where this tension plays out. Of course, this aspect of the postmodern body is somewhat complex. Is the corporeal act of terrorism, such as with a suicide bomber, a postmodern expression because it counters ideological norms? Not necessarily, simply because the act is still a rational expression of *an* ideology, just not the dominant Western one that would graphically (through language) constitute the act as 'terrorism' rather than 'freedom fighting.' Thus, it is more so a *co-opted* acts of graphic/patriotic resistance.

Through examining Bolton's eight superhero body types in relation to fashion, culture, and body/identity, we have charted a genealogy of body transformation and transcendence that reverberates with dominant and fantastical depictions in popular culture. We have covered a wide spectrum of discursive meaning that is both inscribed in comic books as well as experienced through culture and the self. Thus, we have now arrived at a point wherein we can

[134] Pitts (2003) offers a catalogue of body modification practices that usurp the notion of a solid stable body in very postmodern ways. One prevalent example is the practice of embossing the skin by having objects surgically implanted beneath it, but perhaps with less of a specific political agenda that Orlan has. Pitt references Jesse Jarrell's 'bionic arm' which has been made bumpy with ridges from the implantation of hand carved Teflon and silicone sculptures.

interrogate and answer the posited research question from the opening chapter and derive key implications from our findings. The following, final chapter will address these body types further as well as provide some closure to lasting tensions regarding bodies potentially not accounted for in this formulation. Additionally, we will return to the adventures of Ethnography Man because every good superhero story needs a sequel (and maybe some closure of its own).

Chapter Four

The Body, Identity, and Transformation

I get a phone call from my mom in early December. She asks if there is anything I might want for the upcoming holidays, maybe a gift that I've had my eye on or some money to help me get by. I don't offer much by way of a response only to tell her that I already have everything I need and she should save her money. "How about Comic Con?" she eventually asks. "Do you want to go back this year? I wouldn't mind buying your ticket."

I think this over. In all likelihood the convention passes are already sold out despite it not taking place until the end of July. On the other hand, it is still early enough to find something online, even if for an inflated price. "Don't worry about it," I tell her. "They're probably already sold out by now. I think it would be fun to go back, but in all honesty, I'm not exactly sure what I would get out of it."

I very much enjoyed my Comic Con adventure. The experiences were meaningful, revealing, and adequate for establishing the relationships I want to contend with in the larger work. I was able to investigate ways in which identity is shaped and performed in relation to popular culture, convention costuming, and superhero discourse specifically. Though I realize I didn't accomplish anything that can really be considered 'heroic,' I was nonetheless able to experience some meaningful moments that allowed me to learn from my fanatic and researcher identities.

From the experience I was able to draw a couple key conclusions regarding costuming and our relationship with popular depictions of superheroes. First, in sharing in the communal play of Comic Con-as-carnival, attendees have a safe and inviting place to live out the iconic symbols and moral lessons of fictional stories they most closely identify with. Outside of spaces like Comic Con, it is becoming more and more acceptable to 'see' equipment for living expressed on and through our lived bodies, often through costuming, but ever frequently in spaces where people can perform characters/stories as well as inscribe them. Thus, the physical space of the convention provides a permeable boundary for identity play, and the written and unwritten rules of the carnival indicate what form of transcendence, if any, we can expect to find there. As such, I also have to wonder if what I observed was more a series of ecstasy inducing consumption rituals rather than a genuine admiration for a character or narrative. Fandom seems to be a combination or tension of these things.

From this experience we can additionally observe how the crystallized self metaphor rings true to the experiences of the participants, as well as me. Through our interactions, I essentially invited participants to reflect on how popular culture has equipped them for living. The most insightful moments involved the interplay, exchanges, or identity management that people go through in displaying and conveying various sides of the self. For some participants, such as the elfin horde, costuming was an evocative yet not too significant aspect of their Comic Con experience. For others, like Chris, Janice, and Eddie, the opportunity to become their favorite characters is a means to celebrate aspects of their bodies

and identities that are otherwise made marginal outside the confines of Comic Con. Thus the space offers a means for temporary, embodied transcendence – a way to play out the key aspects of anecdotal characters they closely identify and empathize with. And for some, like Eddie, his Comic Con persona is as much his *real* self as anything imagined or crafted for the Con specifically.

Gary, on the other hand, offers perhaps the most interesting example of intersecting identities. His authentic self and performed persona problematizes the boundaries of identity display and exchanges that emerge in such spaces. Is it fair to say that he 'misrepresents' himself (graphically) if we see the culture of convention costuming as a safe space to traverse any and all aspects of embodied identity? The fact that he is really a life-long veteran of the military only further complicates these overlapping identities. Though he explains away such tensions of representation as mere "acting," the accuracy and realism of his 'second skin' nonetheless evokes such a powerful sense of patriotism, service, and sacrifice that, when learning of his true self, I cannot help but feel duped by him.

Nonetheless, who am I to say that his years of service are any less significant or diminished simply because of his lower military rank and status? Gary clearly sees nothing wrong with the way he presents himself. What responsibility do I hold in making unfounded assumptions based off the way he looks? Had I or my companions in the light rail car realized that he was wearing a World War II era uniform rather than Vietnam era uniform (something *he* was profoundly aware of); perhaps I would have been less likely to judge him. Again, this only reinforces the importance of space (and the 'unwritten rules') when

examining the ways identity interplay and slippage occurs when costuming. Though I was uncomfortable presenting my researcher/fanatic self outside the safe confines of the convention space, perhaps the most meaningful options we have for true resistance and transcendence are when directly confronting the multiplicity of identity and the body in such ways. What ultimately gets conflated is a histography of the body that must be made sense of in relation to its current graphic and patriotic expressions.

Months pass. I am still trying to make sense of everything I have encountered in San Diego but have also busied myself in other projects and responsibilities. By March the prospect of returning to Comic Con over the summer is completely off the table. Then, one afternoon I am sitting at my computer and notice an online call for applicants for a new documentary being filmed at Comic Con over the summer. Morgan Spurlock (producer and director of *Super Size Me* and *30 Days*) is auditioning Comic Con fanatics for his upcoming project *Comic-Con Episode Four: A Fan's Hope*, which will be a feature length documentary chronicling costumed fans at Comic Con. The call notes that they are only looking for four or five people or groups to closely follow, but will consider doing alternate interviews at the convention as supplementary material. All they ask is that you submit an e-mail expressing why you believe you're an ideal candidate/fanatic to follow and attach a photo of yourself in costume.

I quickly draft a letter explaining my investment and interest in the Comic Con experience. In doing so I introduce them to my Ethnography Man persona

and highlight my attempt to argue that humans hold the potential to become superheroes. I also mention that I am not likely a good candidate to feature as a main character in the film, but would be able to complicate the experience and offer intriguing insight regarding the events they will likely be recording. I send the e-mail that very afternoon and anticipate it will be a while until I hear anything back from them as I'm sure thousands of fanatics have also submitted profiles.

Several weeks go by and I don't hear anything. By early summer I assume that I was not selected and have all but forgotten about the documentary and my application. Then, on July 14, less than two weeks before the convention, I get an e-mail from a casting director who indicates, "Though you were not selected to be one of the five main characters that we are following, we definitely do not want to miss the opportunity to get you on film." They ask that I attend a brief, ten minute interview to take place during the convention and specifically request that I "wear the Ethnog Man costume."

I immediately respond to the casting director, promising to be in attendance and thank him for the opportunity. I'm excited about the prospect of sharing my work on such big stage. However, before long I am struck by the arduous realization that Comic Con is less than two weeks away and I had absolutely no intention of attending. I dare not ask the casting director to allow me free entry into the convention for two reasons. First, he might not have the power to do so and will potentially dismiss me outright should I indicate that I need this kind of help on such short notice. Additionally, I don't want to diminish

my credibility by making them think I never planned to attend but was brazen enough to apply for the film. To be fair, the casting call specifically invited anyone already planning to attend the convention.

I do a frantic online search to see what I can find by way of passes still being sold online. The cheapest I come across is a three day pass selling for $450, which is *way* out of my price range, especially considering this does not account for food, lodging and transportation; the important details mere mortals without super powers or an invisible jet need to consider. I contact a colleague I had met while presenting on superheroes at one of the regional communication conferences. Within a couple days he has met set up with a free four day 'professional' pass, lodging accommodations at a local college's dormitory, and affordable transportation.[135] Considering the dismal chances of making the trip happen without his support, it felt like I had a personal 'Alfred' in my corner to provide endless resources when the dire need was upon me.

When I arrive at the convention center this time around, I do so with a newfound sense of eagerness and animation. Everything looks like it did before only with some different booths, and new signs and displays sprinkling the convention floor. However, the most notable changes have occurred outside. It appears that in every direction Comic Con is spilling out into the city. There are significantly more gathering places outside the convention for various niche groups, or as a way for vendors to make money without having to pay convention

[135] All of this was made available to me through the Comic Arts Conference, which is the scholarly branch of the overall convention that hosts its own series of academic panels.

fees. Additionally, with the growing prevalence of instantaneous social networking via mobile devices, these niche groups are strategically and spontaneously popping up all over the place.

I am also spilling out into the city, in costume, and not feeling very self-conscious about it. Well, maybe a little. But any anxiety I feel is nothing compared to the first time I was here. Having engaged all this before and acknowledging the importance of re-thinking the spaces I traverse, I am much more comfortable and confident in my second skin this time. I carefully ironed my cape and shirt before I left the dorm and made sure to get a haircut a full week before lift-off. I've restocked my utility belt and have extended the strap on my mask so that it doesn't pinch my face so much. Since last year my mask has suffered a major crack down the bridge of the nose, no doubt due to the fact that it never really fit my face. I realize that a high definition camera will likely pick up such a crack, but in keeping it as is, I remind myself that I am not a utopian superhero. Instead I wear my history on my body and embrace the messiness that goes along with its imperfections. I'm no longer worried that I won't fit in, but rather satisfied in the knowledge that in order to be a superhero I shouldn't necessarily have to be perfect.

There is definitely something different about this trip. Yet despite the newfound sense of comfort and confidence, there is also an overbearing new risk I am about to embark on. Though I am now more comfortable maneuvering the physical spaces in my Ethnography Man persona, being in a movie means I occupy a completely different kind of space. The meta-physical 'spaces' of

cinema are as lasting and publicly grandiose as you can get. Embodying Ethnography Man on such a big stage is not the real concern. What really perplexes me is that I must give up all control over how I am then depicted and conveyed in the film. In other words, no matter what I happen to say in the interview, or how very carefully I frame my 'elevator speech' answers, if the producers and editors want me to come off looking like a raving lunatic who thinks he's a superhero, I imagine I will provide them with enough 'footage' to do so. In my first encounters with Ethnography Man I struggled to come to terms with the conditions that conflate how my researcher/superhero personas were displayed and conveyed. This time I will be asked to give up that power altogether.

Who has power?

Following the journey through the body types and attendant cultural manifestations, we address the research questions posited in the first chapter. They provide a means to attend to key tensions emerging from ways in which super bodies and lived bodies interrelate. As such, each set of answers should be considered in relation to the stories, historical moments, and ecstatic experiences that have emerged through the genealogical undertaking. Broadly, these questions take form as *Who has power? How is it exercised? What are its effects?* I have also teased out specific features of the themes under investigation in order to address more nuanced questions in relation to what the genealogy reveals. For our first set of questions, this includes examining discursive power relations between

utopian and dystopian projections of super and lived bodies to determine from where these power constraints come from:

> What are the primary discursive constraints that inform and influence the ways in which body malleability is regarded as utopian/dystopian? If we accept that superhero bodies are sites of splendor and seduction, how does this knowledge inform the human capacity to continually improve or change? Regarding utopian/dystopian bodies, what mechanisms of power privilege one perspective over others? More broadly, who has power?

The foremost question refers to ways in which the body is influenced or constrained by and through privileged discourses. The second essentially asks us to consider the degree of agency we have in relation to such constraints. We have previously noted how discourses "work to 'fix' identities in particular ways that favor some interests over others and thus constrain alternative truths and subject positions" (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005, p. 171). Discursive constraints on the ways in which bodies are expressed imply where power resides and who maintains it. Based on what was revealed in our analysis of the super body types, power is most centrally possessed through the discourses of the patriotic body, and is likewise maintained, reinforced, or resisted through the graphic body.

Power is 'possessed' by the patriotic body in that it provides a standard or ideal through which all bodily expressions are constrained or influenced. The patriotic body is an ideological body; a product of dominant discourses that can be read in two contrasting ways. First, the patriotic body possesses power because

it functions as the organizing mechanism of culture, or is representative of discourses that call upon lived bodies to respond to moral, spiritual, and political guidance. Second, the patriotic body gives rules and structure to our social world, and in doing so, indicates (or privileges) how we should come to value certain discourses or belief systems over others. Thus, we are compelled to organize and function around a set of written and unwritten rules in order to avoid chaos and ensure justice.

The utopian/dystopian dynamic is specifically introduced into the genealogy as a constraint of the superhero discourse. In understanding its relational significance to our lived experiences as equipment for living, we can also see the patriotic 'lived' body as utopian. This happens when we understand 'regimes of truth' to be naturally given structures of reality and thusly ideal. We place trust in institutions or regimes that have gained prominence and use their principles as a way to strive for what is culturally ideal as well as provide standards of progress. Through their organizing power they appear to be 'built into the system,' so that we often do not think to question them. In fact, we often profess allegiance to limited and binding texts and institutions, again, if for no other reason than to engage at communal levels and progress toward what we believe to be a better, more 'utopian' life.

It must also be emphasized how these dominant discourses exclude and marginalize people based on privilege and power. Each subsequent body type is in large part a reaction, being both productive (utopian) and disruptive (dystopian) to the patriotic/graphic norm. As much as the virile, mutant, paradoxical, or

postmodern bodies are disruptions, each still withholds or maintains some sort of ‘patriotic’ impulsion. No matter how disfigured or grotesque the body may be, they will still serve the utopian ideals of truth, justice, and the American way. Absent from much of the discussion thus far has been a focus on the super villains. In many ways, they represent the dystopian dangers of science and technology, or power placed in the wrong hands. In coexisting with the superhero, they provide a constant reminder that with every imagined ideal is a potentially dismal but ever-present, powerful alternative.

The postmodern body is the most intriguing example of these conflating relationships because it calls the moral assumptions of the patriotic body into question. In doing so, it also maintains a strong anti-hero morality. As such, these heroes tend to isolate themselves from culture and institutional norms. They exist on the fringe of society and often work alone. If the patriotic body/system is seen as flawed, inadequate, or corrupt, then the postmodern body serves as a greater, perhaps even more utopian ideal.

Constraints that occur at the local/graphic levels are understood as ‘mechanisms of power,’ which maintain and give structure to ‘regimes of truth.’ Our agency is derived from how we manage and maneuver around and through constraining symbolic mechanisms, like police uniforms or biblical crosses, which influence behavior and represent legal/moral preferences and standards. As discussed earlier, options for resistance can be co-opted and/or emancipatory (Hoy, 2004). Our agency is co-opted if we function more so as a product of privileged types of knowledge of the body, putting them on such a high and

exclusive pedestal that it renders alternate bodies as abject, obsolete, or invisible. In other words, our own power feeds the power of the regime.[136]

The Guy Fawkes mask, in contrast, has become a graphic symbol of resistive power through its historical evocation of the 'Gunpowder Plot' to blow up English Palace of Westminster in London in 1605; which was then made contemporarily relevant and powerful through Alan Moore and David Lloyd's dystopian, anarchist comic book *V for Vendetta* (1982-1985). The mask has since been used by resistance groups such as 'Anonymous,' who advocate for government transparency through releasing secret and clandestine information despite institutional and legal pressure not to do so; as well as by the various 'Occupy Wall Street' movements sprouting up throughout the United States. In other words, the Guy Fawkes mask has become a 'representative anecdote' that discursively expresses patriotic or institutional resistance. It is a symbolic mechanism through which power is conveyed, constraining and compelling people to respond accordingly.

The possibilities of bodily transcendence are ultimately an effect of bio-power that emerges at the graphic and patriotic levels. As such, the graphic body offers the local frame (mechanisms) through which we both signify/support and resist patriotic or utopian forces. As such, the graphic body becomes a post body when it disrupts our notion of splendor and seduction (through prosthetics,

[136] More will be said regarding these consequences of bio-power in addressing the final set of questions pertaining to its effects of power.

tattoos, brandings, scars, etc.) and challenges or complicates universal ideologies, thus reminding us that one person's utopia is another person's nightmare.

It must also be noted how bodies cast through this genealogy of discourses are constrained by my limited knowledge, experiences, and examples. To further answer the research questions; I have power. I have nonetheless made every attempt to embody the 'specific intellectual' and resist universal generalizations regarding body/power change. Even so, I have selected superhero and comic books discourses because they are first and foremost familiar to me, but also because I know (along with Bolton) that they contain narratives and tensions that specifically speak (locally and globally) to the human condition and body/identity transformation. They also seem to emerge productively out of the industrial revolution and therefore offer a useful mirror through which one can examine narratives of contemporary human change.

One could also examine such relationships or depictions of transcendence through other discursive mechanisms, such as romance novels, song lyrics, or architecture. Each would potentially reveal a different set of constraints or tensions through which the body is projected. As such, a different comic book scholar undertaking a similar enterprise may find something unique or dissimilar based on a different set of examples used to illustrate points and solidify arguments. Regardless, the superhero discourse (for all its problematic paradoxes) specifically attends to the pleasures and pitfalls of our unforeseen future imagined

through depictions of fantastical lived bodies, and therefore is a useful mechanism of power to contend with.

The next set of research questions examine how we mobilize around these regimes and mechanisms. We turn our gaze locally to investigate ways that real people are becoming superheroes through playing out patriotic ideals in graphically inscribed bodies. Though Comic Con offers a carnivalesque space to safely play out these local forms of transformation, we will ultimately move beyond the confines of the convention and into the alleyways and neighborhoods frequented by everyday citizens.

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It soon approaches time for my interview. I head over to the hotel adjacent to the convention center, which is where it is going to take place. The lobby, hallways, and restaurant are almost as packed as the floor of the convention center. Before I can figure out where I need to be to check in, the casting director recognizes me.

"Ethnographer Man, aren't you? Did I get that right?"

"Ethnography Man," I reply.

"Well, you're costume looks great, and thanks for stopping by to talk with us" he says, and then adds, "Do you prefer Ethnog-Man or Ethnography Man?"

"I guess it doesn't matter," I say. "But probably best to say Ethnography Man for the interview."

"Good, good, good," he offers and points out where I need to sign on the release form. "Go have a seat and read it over if you like. As I said, it will be a

little while because we've still got to get you through make-up. Carrie will be taking care of that, she's right over there."

He points to a woman who is applying foundation on a woman dressed as a Ghostbuster. I take a seat nearby to wait my turn. I read over the form once, see nothing unusual and do not hesitate to sign. I've come this far and there's no backing out now. When I go to return my form I notice Morgan Spurlock walk by very quickly with a stern expression on his face.

"Something's wrong," I hear someone from the production company say to a colleague. "I think some guy said he was going to propose to his girlfriend while they were here in costume but now they're backing out."

I try to put myself in the shoes of the film's producers and casting directors. My e-mail audition only gave a vague overview of my overarching project. In it, I presented myself as a bit of an eccentric, both in what I intended to argue, as well as in my description of what I wear. Did they select me because they thought my ideas would inform the film and resonate with what they were trying to convey, or did they see me as wild eccentric with perverse ideas that would make for an entertaining spectacle? Spurlock isn't exactly known for his subtleties, and even more perplexing is the thought that I will never be able to explain my claims in the ten minute window of time that they will be filming me, at least not in a way that will make much sense to a mass audience. What's more, it is not like I can any longer hide behind the identity of Ethnography Man. My real name would be plastered across the screen or at least in the credits should

they select to include my footage in the final cut. Is this the perception I want to have associated with me as I start a professional career?

I convince myself that I will just have to sound intelligent enough to convince the editors not to turn me into a complete spectacle. I've only get one shot to get it right. And even then, I will have no control over the final outcome of how I am presented.

The make-up artist is already waiting for me when I hand in my form. "You're next," she says, and walks me over to her set-up by one of the conference rooms. "There are just a couple people ahead of you and then we'll get you in." She sits me down and starts to apply a light foundation. Right now it's just her and me, and the Ghostbuster a couple chairs down.

"Have you done this before?" she asks. I have no ideas what she's referring to.

"Have I been filmed for a documentary?"

"No, have you had make-up on before?" she says and smiles.

"Uh, I don't know. Not really, I guess," I mumble. I still don't know what to say, a bad sign for someone about to go into an interview.

"It's just that you're very still and calm," she informs me. "Most people I put make-up tend to flinch away. You're loosened up."

"Really, because I'm a little freaked out on the inside," but as soon as I say this I realize that it's not true. I'm about as prepared as I could possibly be. The make-up stylist is right, I am pretty composed; actually feel kind of numb, like a calm before a storm. I take a seat next to the Ghostbuster. She introduces

herself as a paranormal expert who visits haunted houses looking for real ghosts and ergo the Ghostbuster get-up. She's also does this while being a Girl Scout leader.

"Can you believe that we're not going to get to meet Morgan Spurlock?" she says with a tinge of disgust. I'm actually not that surprised. Though I visualized doing the interview with him, the thought crossed my mind that it might just be an assistant or casting director taking on the duty.

"I'm more worried about what I'm going to say," I casually admit. "How about you?" I ask.

"Not at all." she boasts. "It's going to be so much fun."

I ask her a little bit about paranormal activity and what kind of equipment she uses to track down ghosts. She knows astonishingly little and quickly changes the subject. Before long, the door cracks open and she is called in. I take my time putting on my dish gloves, pressing the plastic deep into each knuckle, one finger at a time.

A few minutes go by and then the door opens again. It's the same casting director who originally greeted me that brings me into the room. One wall has a giant white screen that folds down onto the floor so that when filmed, it will look like I am standing in an infinite white abyss. The casting director tells me to stand on an 'X' marked on the floor and give them a minute to get the lighting right. There are at least five high intensity bulbs blinding me in the face so that all I can see are a couple red dots in the distance in front of me, which is where I assume the cameras are at.

A voice out of nowhere says, “Alright, I think we’ve got it,” and a couple more flashes go off. The voice is someone other than the casting director but I can’t for the life of me see anything but the blinding lights. This is not at all how I pictured things would go. I saw myself in a comfy chair or standing in a corridor having an intelligent conversation about costuming and fandom. This feels more like an interrogation, but I maintain my composure and roll with the punches.

“Okay, can you strike a pose for us?” the voice out in the blinding light requests. I push my shoulders back and put my hands on my hips, lift up my chin and hold it for a few seconds. Another flashbulb goes off.

“Alright, and now we’re rolling,” yet another voice says, and then, “So what is your name and where are you from?”

And in this moment, through my response, I violate one of the most sacred codes of superhero lore. I breach the most fundamental aspects of super-identity embodiment; that of the alternate *secret* persona. I wish that I could say that I resisted. I wish I could say that I didn’t give it up willingly, that I struggled under insurmountable duress and merciless torture.

I wish I could claim all those things, but the reality is that as soon as I am in front of the cameras, seductively transfixed under the lights, I revealed my identity willingly without giving it a second thought.

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How is power exercised?

Power does not just mysteriously exist but rather emerges and changes at the level of action and engagement. People are produced, co-opted, and made

emacipatory through discursive power mechanisms that condition and constrain them. We have previously discussed how these mechanisms are conceptually framed through 'utopian/dystopian' regimes of truth. The following set of questions asks us to look at such transformations at a more local or lived levels. In other words, they more pragmatically address the conceptual findings revealed in the initial set of questions through examining how power is exercised:

> In what ways are contemporary bodies transforming at local levels through lived experience? What critical problems emerge when our models and modes of transcendence are highly reflective of gendered, political, and hegemonic discourses, such as with superheroes? In other words, how is power exercised?

First, bodies are transforming in the myriad of ways addressed in the previous chapter. I have used Bolton's (2008) eight superhero body types as a means to address dominant discourses that give shape to such changes. In the final set of questions I will address the effects of viewing body transcendence through this formulation and point to limitations, revelations, and implications of doing so. For now, it is enough to say that bodies are transforming graphically and patriotically, highlighting the ways in which bodies are inscribed with culture and perform or behave in relation to broadly systematized, privileged discourses. We have also seen how techno-body and parahuman transformations play out the splendor and seduction of advancing human capabilities to match and exceed that of the industrial and natural world. These transformations are contrasted with an ever-present anxiety that whatever makes us uniquely human is jeopardized or

potentially lost when we embody such unnatural amalgamations. The virile and mutant bodies demonstrate how, even in disfigurement, there is exotic power that we are abjectly drawn to. They introduce the notion that a utopian body need not be a *better* body, as well as confronts the ethnocentric and xenophobic tensions that permeate our 'patriotic' selves. A paradox defies logic or reasoning, or places the subject in an impossible situation with contradictory meanings. Thus, the paradoxical body offers evidence of how dominant discursive mechanisms are seen as empowering, but also maintain a profound sense of hegemonic sexism that is co-opted rather than emacipatory. And finally, in the postmodern body we see a more complete disruption of fixed meaning systems that signify and perpetuate our understanding of how bodies *should* function and how they are then normalized and categorized. We are thus forced to consider if the anti-hero is a more real, or ideal figure to contend with changes that are more complex than what one might find in a comic book.

These aspects of the lived body are broader than superheroes specifically. They indicate forms of transcendence that occur regardless of the superhero discourse and despite its influence in calling them into existence and naming them. In other words, it is likely that human growth hormone would still exist without The Incredible Hulk, and as such, one could map out similar bodily changes using different genealogical discourses. However, this does not alleviate the superhero discourse of critical problems that are highly reflective of its unique projection of gendered and hegemonic power. Anything that does not align with dominant 'truths' risks being marginalized if not rendered invisible. As noted by

Brown (2001), “Because the comic book industry is a medium very clearly dominated by some of modern popular culture’s most quintessential images of heroism, it is also one of the most obvious examples of unequal representation” (p. 2). Racial and gendered biases that historically and currently pervade the superhero genre remind us that the discourse is ideological, but anything but utopian. The scant depictions we have of racial and female bodies in the discourse have tended to depict their splendor and seduction as villainous savagery, damsels in distress, or the heroine/whore figure. The challenge of representation then, is a matter of evoking time-honored conventions of the discourse in order make these representations ‘fit’ the paradigm of what would be considered a superhero story, while simultaneously evolving the discourse by calling those same conventions into question. Otherwise we should disrupt them altogether.

As Ethnography Man attempts to demonstrate, bodies are also transforming in relation to the specific superhero characters we read about in comic books. Convention attendees dress as their favorite popular culture characters, and in doing so, graphically inscribe the body as something different. They often perform or play in relation to these inscriptions, which becomes part of the spectacle of the experience. When costumed, the body is graphically marked to stand out, and can thus be examined as both a personal expression of self and a product of the larger discursive universe.

In some instances, convention attendees note how they feel transformed within the Comic Con space. Through costuming they become a different person, usually something more provocative and desirable than their everyday self. But it

also must be noted how this transformation is temporary, commodity-driven, and is primarily confined within the walls of the San Diego Convention Center. In the first chapter I referenced the notion of Carnivalesque spaces as a means to view social performances contained within an environment that allows for subversion and liberation through costuming and play (Bakhtin's, 1984). The idea is that within the carnival the dismantling of power-laden hierarchies is made possible through the mingling of opposites. Though people who occupy the convention space are diverse, powerful discourses nonetheless constrain what kind of behavior goes on inside the facility.

The overlaying of consumption, depictions of violence, and objectified bodies are primary ways that Comic Con excludes rather than becomes an open space to play with and challenge representative, utopian norms. To rather do so, one would need to traverse spaces not so confined by such constraints, and rather explore options for resistance outside the walls of the convention. This is in fact happening more so each passing year. The surrounding buildings become promotional billboards and the Gas Lamp District is overrun at night with convention attendees looking to unwind. Last year there was widespread discussion that Klingons had taken over the area and replaced all the traffic signs with ones in their native language. Certain venues, such as "Trickster," have popped up as off-site creator-owned hot spots where artists and writers can show each other work, collaborate, and let loose when they are burned out by the fandom across the street.

Being outside with my costume on was anxiety inducing, even when just across the street from the convention center. But the more familiar I got with the costume and playing out my persona within it, the more I felt comfortable to explore such transformations outside the boundaries of the 'carnival.' This is in fact readily practiced by various pockets of highly devoted fans. Entire subcultures are built around fictional characters and narratives that become the bond that solidifies real world relationships. Outside the confines of Comic Con we see the transformative potential of superhero discourse play out in the ever-growing phenomena of 'cosplayers,' whereby people dress up as superheroes or other thematic popular culture characters and traverse public spaces, usually to hold mock battles or play games. On one of my last nights at Comic Con I attended a play put on by a troupe of Klingons. They were performing a very loose interpretation of *Alice in Wonderland*, which basically consisted of them yelling at each other at random intervals. Their group regularly meets throughout the year to put on similar performances, and not just for comic and science fiction conventions specifically.

Many cosplaying groups across the world provide community service, do public appearances at fundraisers, or otherwise organize charitable events. At a very pragmatic level, they live out utopian patriotism by sacrificing the self for a greater good. For example, a cosplay group that meets and organizes at the Desert Ridge Shopping Mall in Scottsdale, Arizona, does regular appearances at the area children's hospitals and often will appear in local parades. Likewise, the Arizona Ghostbusters (2012) are a costuming fan club bound together by a mutual love for

the Ghostbusters, and through their costumed presence seek to “draw extra attention to many well deserving charities.”

Many ambitious real-life superheroes and hero groups have intervened in communities in the form of neighborhood patrols to combat crime while in costume. Though these groups don’t carry ‘lethal’ weapons, they are known to carry devices such as tasers, clubs, and mace, which when used improperly can seriously and permanently injure, blind, or kill someone. Perhaps the most publicized real-life superhero is Seattle based Phoenix Jones. He dresses in a dark mask and body armor to patrols the city streets and purposefully intervenes when he sees a crime being committed. Armed with pepper spray, Jones has prevented minor physical altercations from escalating and is directly responsible for thwarting several car-jackings in the city (Johnson & Valdes, 2011). However, in October of 2011, he was arrested on suspicion of assault and stood accused of contributing to an altercation outside a bar. Jones’ presence arguably escalated the incident by introducing a weapon (pepper spray) and further confusion (a superhero) into an already emotionally charged and volatile situation.

Phoenix Jones was later unmasked in court and branded a vigilante. It was revealed that his true identity is that of mixed martial arts fighter, Benjamin Fodor. Fodor was able to maintain his secret identity until his superhero persona ran counter to the institutional constraints that oversee how bodies patriotically behave. Fodor had no reason to withhold his true identity beyond his desire to uphold the ideals of being a superhero. He forgoes personal notoriety in order to stay true to the ideals his costumed body stands for. Not only does Phoenix Jones

transverse lived spaces wherein his body is completely, if not comically seductive, he confronts real world problems that put him directly in harm's way. Comparatively, Phoenix Jones makes Ethnography Man look like a narcissistic hack. One must then ask if Ethnography Man has transcended much of anything.

Again, though Fodor demonstrates a noble attempt at becoming a superhero, he runs into institutional constraints that truncate his embodied superheroism once he is seen as an impediment to justice. Interestingly, there has been one recent incident wherein institutional powers and the police, specifically, have invited a local superhero to join their ranks. The Brazilian military police in Taubaté have invited a 50 year-old retired soldier named Andre Luiz Pinheiro, who is known for dressing up as Batman, to "help pacify neighborhoods suffering high crime levels" (Johnston, 2012). Pinheiro's role can more accurately be summed up as a figure head that provides motivational speeches to young children encouraging them avoid a life of crime. At the very least, this incident highlights institutional recognition of the graphic power contained within superheroes and the derived sense of morality they evoke to help equip us for living.

Power is ultimately exercised through mechanisms that maintain regimes of truth and casts dominant depictions of bodies within the patriotic/graphic norm. Nonetheless, there are instances wherein *real* people play out such graphic/patriotic tensions that can be read as both co-opted and emancipatory. In reacting and resisting such constraints, subsequent body types emerge that call into question discursive powers. The final set of questions will examine the

effects or repercussion of key power relationships and offer broader implications regarding who and what gets included and excluded through such discursive undertakings.

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I have no idea if I made the final cut of the movie. I don't think I did. I imagine I would've heard something by now. It has already been released at several international film festivals and will be mass released to theatres on Friday, April 6, 2012 – the day of this dissertation defense. The answers I gave to their questions were somewhat mundane, but of no fault of my own. The questions were anticlimactic. Again, they first ask for my name and where I am from. After I reveal my true identity and credentials, essentially violating the biggest superhero code in the book, the next question I am asked is, "Why is Comic Con so cool?"

I am initially thrown by the simplicity of its phrasing but quickly recover. Whoever was behind the camera asking me questions had a check list of surface-level talking points. I guess I was expecting more, but I don't know why. Maybe I glamorized my own perception of what I had to offer. Regardless, I do my best to talk to the issues revealed through my Comic Con experiences.

"Why do you think so many people like dressing up here?" I am asked.

"Well, I think the popular perception is that people who costume at Comic Con are trying to escape reality – that it's somehow too painful so they end up living out these fantasy worlds," I respond. "But I've found that it's as much

about transformation and transcendence, or about living out some aspect of a character you want to celebrate and express rather than run and hide with."

"Well, if so many people are that comfortable expressing themselves, why are so many of them so nervous in our interviews?"

I offer some generic answer, something about the pressures of being in the room, the cameras and lights. But as much as anything, in the interview space, the comfort of a costume is removed when one's true identity is revealed. And again, the meta-physical space the camera represents unhinges the safe confines of a carnivalesque space. People are not only asked to play and be on display, but also offer commentary or reflection on their play, which is something they may not be used to.

In hindsight, this is also the moment that I become acutely aware of my fatal error in revealing my identity. If wanted to transcend into a superhero persona, I should have insisted on maintaining my anonymity while being filmed. In doing so, I would have been able to maintain some power, or at least been able to say I withheld the conventions of a superhero even in the face of powerful institutional pressure not to. For me, a superhero researcher should be able willing to sacrifice the self (even in the form of personal accolades) to do a greater good. Then again, in doing this project I never set out to deceive anyone. Throughout the entire process, I readily gave my real name and contact information to anyone who asked for it. Nonetheless, in this moment it feels as though I had to disembody myself from Ethnography Man to answer the interview questions, and

I wonder if my responses would have been different, perhaps more provocative or utopian had I maintained my alter ego.

Though I let my researcher self override my superhero side, the experience was not a complete loss. After the interview I actually felt exhilarated. I spoke briefly and intelligently about representation and paradoxes, and offered a couple key insights about consumer culture and fanaticism. My answers were to the point, thought provoking, and framed in ways that were easy to grasp. I accomplished what I set out to do and couldn't feel better with the knowledge that I controlled all that I could control. The casting director told me I did a good job as I headed out the room and asked that I stick around to get my picture taken for the supplemental coffee table book.

I fill out another release form and find a comfortable chair in the lobby near the photo shoot. The pictures are taking a lot longer than the interviews because they have to adjust lighting and aperture for each person. There are at least a dozen creatures that have been waiting longer than me and others keep showing up. They get through the initial dozen, but then I realize that the photographer is not taking us in order, but just picking and choosing by whatever costume catches his fancy. In fact, I wait almost three hours while I am continually picked over. I have a hard time blaming them. Each costume is beyond extravagant, of either such high quality or originality that they would stand out even amongst thousands.

I know for a fact that I did not make it into the coffee table book, and again, I have my doubts about the film. I can only speculate as to why, but I feel

my resistance to the splendor and seduction of superhero iconography might have something to do with it, at least visually. Whereas I was surrounded by people who carefully planned, produced, and sometimes spent excessive sums of money on their costumes, mine looked like I may have thrown it together in fifteen minutes. Likewise, on camera I did not give a big exorbitant performance, but rather offered carefully worded academic responses to fluff questions. Though I feel that I spoke wonderfully to the audience who really wants to know what Comic Con is all about, I don't know if my information was provocative enough, or if I was entertaining or outlandish enough to avoid the cutting room floor.

I plan on seeing the movie once it has been released but am in no particular rush. It was enough that I took on the risk and spoke the best I could on the topic. It was enough, for now, that I got to be part of the spectacle and say something about why it matters to so many people. The experience also brought a sense of closure to the Ethnography Man adventures that I had previously been searching for. It felt more so like my journey was complete and I could identify the identity changes in both myself and those around me. I also realized that I am not done changing, and as a genealogy implies, one cannot look at transcendence in the vacuum of the Comic Con space, but as a continual progression that goes above the beyond the boundaries of any single historical constraint. Thus, Ethnography Man has changed me. As I continue to change, my experiences – less as a superhero – but more as a researcher of superheroes and popular culture will be informed by the experience.

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What are the effects of power?

Taken to their discursive extremes the utopian/dystopian tension that suffuses the superhero discourse ultimately emerges as transhuman and inhuman projections of humanity. Thus, we imagine ourselves as being fully capable of transcending our corporeal limits, or as having our humanity reduced to the point that it is overtaken by invasive technologies and mechanical processes. The final set of questions asks us to examine the effects of power relationships that condition and constrain the body as we imagine ourselves into the future, as well as consider what might get left behind:

> In what ways are the effects of super body transformations seemingly totalizing to the degree that certain aspects of humanity are potentially lost? Can human consciousness survive such radical (corporeal/identity) changes if this is in fact a direction we are headed? Who is not accounted for in such transformations? More broadly, what are the effects of power?

My initial thinking behind the totalizing questions was to challenge how far we can project the genealogy and maintain depictions of bodily changes that still ring true to our lived experiences. My concern over 'the survival of human consciousness' very much plays into the evocativeness of the fantasy and science fiction genres, but is nonetheless a primary tension or fear that emerges throughout the evolution of popular culture discourses that equip us to live by imagining our future. To answer the questions based on what has been revealed through the genealogy, broad transformations of the body have the potential to be

totalizing, but are viewed relative to the contemporary conditions that constrain us and are primarily understood as natural progressions of the body.

This is not to say we are immune from profound changes of the body, or that we will one day we not be recognizable to our former selves. We may even one day resemble something out of a comic book. In fact, we sometimes amaze ourselves in the present when we find instances where it appears like we already do. More to the point, because power flows through us we are compelled to adjust *with* constraints so that such transformations are always ongoing; and through the effects of bio-power, these changes are seen as natural progressions of the self and body. In the past couple decades we have witnessed significant changes in the ways we communicate on global and personal levels, and how the ease, access and immediacy of information is changing the ways we cognitively process information. These changes likewise have profound effects on the way bodies are inscribed with meaning and perform in relation to new, ever-evolving mechanisms and technologies. Nonetheless, what we understand a human to be is ultimately informed by the present conditions in which it is situated.

Transhuman/inhuman tensions are understood relatively to what bodies are being called into question, as well as how and when they are examined. In other words, a person from 30,000 years into the future may look as foreign to me as I look to a Cro-Magnon, but are any of us more or less 'human' because of it? In this way, our sense of human consciousness will never be 'lost,' but most certainly has the potential to evolve into something different. One possibility is that it will exist as part of a network or system *without* a corporeal body to host it.

But before we ever reach that point, we are likely to already reconcile the body as an obsolete or wasteful infringement on progress and 'human' development.

Critical concerns come into play when we realize that the totalizing effects of body transformations are also products of dominant and exclusive regimes. The transhuman ideal becomes dystopian when 'progressive' transformations are criticized as being the product of dominant power, turning the practice of body transformation into a practice in eugenics. In transforming the body in ways the privileges certain body features and discourages others, we further subjugate bodies outside the norm and risk rendering them completely absent or invisible.

Throughout this project I have identified ways we envision the body in relation to the superhero body types that function as discursive mechanisms that constrain what can be known. It is now appropriate to look beyond such constraints and imagine what might not be accounted for, or rendered absent because it does not fulfill any of the utopian standards. Though strides have been made to eliminate problematic representations in superhero comics, as well as provide narrative space for marginalized experiences and perspectives to be played out, an absence and imbalance nonetheless exists. In part, this has to do with the reluctance of industry manufacturers, writers, and artists to challenge the discursive assumptions that situate bodies in these privileged ways. More experimentation is needed to play out the tensions of paradoxical and problematic representations. Though it is not hard to imagine a rendering of Wonder Woman that more so aligns with feminist ideals (perhaps a single-breasted Amazon

warrior who wears a full body suit and rallies against patriarchy), this is no guarantee that anyone would actually buy it.

As previously noted certain bodies are disfigured, mutated, or abject yet still accomplish the utopian ideals of the patriotic body. Despite not 'looking the part' they are nonetheless considered superheroes. However, there are other bodies that fail to fulfill these ideals, and are also graphically rendered dystopian. These bodies take shape as ill or diseased bodies. Super villains and mutant body accounts for ways in which these bodies are graphically expressed as morally flawed (super villain) or physically deficient (mutant), but are inadequate in capturing the how certain body constraints, like diseases, render the body vulnerable or potentially helpless regardless of desires to engage utopian ideals. Thus the body is both graphically marked and functionally performs in dystopian ways that render it invisible in Bolton's formulation and in the superhero discourse.

In 2006 a French AIDS awareness campaign used depictions of Superman and Wonder Woman as having HIV-positive bodies as a means to disrupt the utopian imperatives of the discourse and call attention to the disease. The images depict the heroes in a hospital setting, in full costume, but having emaciated bodies that are hooked up to intravenous tubing and oxygen tanks. The image disrupts our popular notions of ideal and utopian bodies and uses the iconography of something that is splendid and seductive as a powerful, disruptive tool when juxtaposed as being ill and in a hospital setting. Because the very idea of a superhero runs in direct contrast with ways so many lived bodies desirably

function, one must also question the usefulness of the discourse to equip us in practical ways the ring true to our experiences.

Two other effects of power give shape to this project and also take form as emerging implications. First, the relational influences that bind fictional and lived bodies together through equipment for living are not always free of obstructions and inconsistencies. On November 14, 2001, Marvel released their latest edition of the serialized *The Amazing Spider-Man* (Straczynski & Romita Jr, 2001). In it, the ongoing fictional narrative arch of the series was put on hold in order for Marvel to contend with the events that transpired two months prior on September 11. The issue was one of the only mass-distributed serialized comics that explicitly engaged the 9/11 attacks within its storyline.[137] At the time of its release, the United States was still in the early stages of coming to terms with the tragic events. Rescue workers and investigators continually scoured the debris at Ground Zero in attempts to unearth victims and procure evidence from the carnage. Though a culprit and enemy had been named, the full consequences and long-term ramifications of the attacks were still largely unknown and broadly speculative.[138]

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[137] This was mainly due to the fact that Peter Parker does not live in a fictional city such as Metropolis or Gotham, but actually readily inhabits lower Manhattan.

[138] Real world reactions to 9/11 at this time were also varied. Although most evident in the U. S., however, was a mass swell of patriotism evoked by the nation's collective sense of pride and togetherness in facing an uniquely profound tragedy. As noted by Cloud (2004), during that period it was impossible to do mundane, everyday tasks without being sucked into the imagined unity of American nationalism. These pro-American sentiments pervaded many of the

The specific issue in question is unique for a couple key reasons. First, it is graphically inscribed as a disruption from the norm in that it has a black cover, evoking death and sense of mourning. Inside, we see that Spider-Man is just as shocked as us to see the towers fall. As he swoops down to ground zero, passersby ask him "Where were you?" and "How could you let this happen?" Spider-Man's response is one of dumbfounded disbelief. He attempts to speak but then stops himself and watches the couple continue to run past him. Spider-Man then walks into a thick cloud of smoke and debris as the reader takes in the text, "How do you say we didn't know? We couldn't know," and "We couldn't imagine" (p. 4-7).

Soon after we see depictions of the superheroes using their super-powers to lift massive pieces of rubble and cut through giant steel beams. Superimposed over the images are statements explaining the presence (or lack thereof) of the superheroes in light of the tragedy:

> We could not see it coming. We could not be here before it happened. We could not stop it. But we are here now. You cannot see us for the dust, but we are here. You cannot hear us for the cries, but we are here. (p. 7-9)

More so than anywhere else in the book, these statements eerily echo the inadequacies and illusory nature of real world superheroes; and in doing so purposefully ruptures the narrative's fidelity in justifying why the superheroes were not *literally* and *physically* there to save us. The fact that the superheroes

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9/11 narratives that emerged immediately after the disaster, and in that regard, the Amazing Spider-Man was no exception.

could not prevent the 9/11 attacks both humanizes and confuses them. First, it points out the fallibility of the superheroes, reminding us that behind the masks are 'humans' who are potentially as vulnerable and flawed as the rest of us. Likewise, the narratives 'rules' are further disrupted when about half way through the comic we are given images of Magneto, Dr. Doom, and the Juggernaut standing amongst the rubble. The frame moves narrowly in on Dr. Doom's face and we can see that tears are welling in his eyes. Such an overt expression of compassion is never depicted on super villains who we are accustomed to seeing as cruel and uncaring.

This issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man* ultimately demonstrates how superheroes are incapable or inadequate in equipping us for certain dystopian hardships. Instead we must look beyond the superheroes discourses to examine ways in which bodies emerge as more adequate reflections our abilities and fallibilities in relation to what gets fantastically imagined.[139] Likewise, we must move beyond spaces that constrain us into fixed categories (such as the walls of the convention space) to examine the more ambiguous, fissured, and messy aspects of transcendence.[140]

Regarding genealogy, I have done my best to avoid reducing events down to universal truths. Once again, it is best to look at the phenomena under

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[139] Throughout the comic book, the Marvel superheroes remind us to look to police officers, fire fighters, rescue workers, and ground zero volunteers for true acts of heroism.

[140] As was the case when I encountered the veteran dressed in military fatigues on the light rail.

investigation as discursive relationships or tensions that interrelate to constitute our lived experiences. Rabinow (1984) notes how Foucault consistently works to "historicize grand abstractions … [and] does not take a stand on whether or not there is a human nature. Rather he changes the subject and examines the social functions that such concepts have played in the context of practices" (p. 4). Likewise, in answering if we have the potential to become superheroes, I have somewhat 'changed the subject,' to give history or context to the social, political, and personal functions that constitute and give meaning to the issues of body transcendence. In doing so, I may have avoided answering *if* we will become superheroes, but have hopefully demonstrated how we are always in the process of becoming.

And finally, we must be open to the possibility that our understanding of the superhero and self are always changing. We should continually redefine the superhero in relation to real world tensions that resonate with our genealogy of super body transcendence. Likewise, the possibilities and probabilities of real world transcendence are written into the dominant discourses that serve to condition and constrain us. Bolton's eight body types and the emergent genealogy provides a means through which the tensions, seductions, and fears of transcendence are played out in relation to co-opted and emacipatory possibilities of what we might become. We are then left with is a greater understanding of how bodies function at locally inscribed and ideologically produced levels, and how we continually reinvent the body in relation to culture and power.

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As of today, I have largely hung up my cape, but this has not prohibited me from becoming a superhero researcher. I have since submitted my research on Bolton's eight body types to the San Diego Comic Con and have presented it there for the Comic Arts Council at 2011 convention. This experience further brought things full circle for me, and added yet another layer to the embodied experience. I love that every time I have attended Comic Con there is a new adventure waiting for me and hope that these adventures continue. But again, I cannot look at my own aspects of transcendence as being isolated in one specific place or time.

Following my Comic Con presentation, a Phoenix area educational outreach director got me a consultation position for the Arizona Museum of Popular Culture. Since then, we have formulated our own not-for-profit outreach group called "The League of Extraordinary Academics." We are currently comprised of Kelly Ann Bonnel (the founder and education outreach director), Erik Francis (a primary education curriculum coordinator), and myself. The goal of the group is to provide educators with instruction on how to better incorporate popular culture into the classroom. We provide academic guidance in the form of workshops geared to schools at all levels to help promote active, engaged, and critical understandings of popular culture artifacts and perspectives. As such, the League hopes to help remove the canonized stigma that reduces popular culture to junk culture, and instead give apprehensive teachers the tools to help students make sense out of Superman as well as Moby Dick.

In talking with educators at conferences and conventions, we have found a growing divide between what young people are interested in and the content that teachers are comfortable teaching. The intention is not to replace any given curriculum, but rather empower educators to make 'equipment for living' links with popular artifacts students are bombarded with on a daily basis. Thus far the responses are preliminary but good. At the end of May we will be organizing the academic wing of the Phoenix Comic Con. In other words, we are responsible for programming all the academic panels at the convention. We also hope to present at the San Diego Comic Con International in the summer as well. Ultimately, we hope to entice educators and students, as well as industry leaders, writers, and artists to get involved through our presentations and workshops, and create a dialogue so that the League can better serve producers, consumers, and educators of popular culture.

So as things turn out, though I no longer graphically inscribe myself to play out the perils and pitfalls of being a superhero, I am perhaps more so embodied as one in my *real* life as I ever have been. I hope to continue to do so, and am not adverse to the possibility that I may one day don the cape and mask again. For now, however there are other masks to try on, other adventures on the horizon and new challenge to confront. But I sincerely hope, and wholeheartedly believe, that the work contained in this project is part of a larger dialogue about bodies, transcendence, and our relationship to what we read while waiting in line at the supermarket or book store. As the boundaries that separate our fictional encounters with our lived experiences continually blur, there will always be a

need to equip ourselves with knowledge of how and why. This in itself is a noble enough enterprise. For me, it almost feels heroic.

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