The Uncanny X-Men no. 308 Scott Lobdell, writer John Romita, Jr., artist

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Scott Bukatman

X-Bodies
(the torment of the mutant superhero)

1. Origin Stories

I don't read superhero comics anymore. I'm probably not as worried about my dick as I used to be. Well, *that* isn't exactly true—but I no longer deal with it by reading about mutant musclemen and the big-titted women who love them. I still read comics: several alternative titles (*Hate, Eightball, Dirty Plotte*) continue to engage, and there've been *Sandman* and *Swamp Thing* to look forward to, but it's those costumed characters, always fighting (whether for truth and justice, or because it's what they do—and *they're the best at what they do*—or because it beats working), that have lost their charm, their appeal, and their relevance to my life. When I was contacted by the *Uncontrollable Bodies* folks, I wasn't sure whether they were responding to my work on electronic identity or my earlier study of Jerry Lewis.[1] The not-so-hidden moral was that my work was more invested in bodily control, its lack and loss, and the fragmentation of identity than I'd suspected. Meanwhile, here were these hyperbolic, dual-identified bodies that I would ignore each week in my search for more "adult" comics. Those superbodies, it must be said, made me nervous. Clearly it was time to jack back into superhero culture, to see what was happening, and to whom.

Elsewhere I have argued that narratives constitute adaptive technologies: the metaphorical cyberspaces of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* allowed a wholly legitimate envisioning of the invisible spaces of information circulation (Bukatman 1993). In its turn, that envisioning permitted a reconception of human possibility within electronic culture. More than just a mythological reconciliation, an illusion, fiction yields what Jameson has called a "cognitive mapping" of a (possibly reconfigured) subject into an intolerable space (1991, 54). When it's working, narrative can become a testing ground for the conditions of being. Peter Brooks has written that "modern narratives appear to produce a semioticization of the body which

is matched by a somatization of story: a claim that the body must be a source and a locus of meanings, and that stories cannot be told without making the body a prime vehicle of narrative significations" (1993, xii). Admittedly, Brooks is writing of Proust and Lawrence, not of Plastic Man or The Thing; still, I would maintain that superhero narratives do present a significant somatization of modernist and postmodernist social concerns. Superhero comics embody social anxiety, especially regarding the adolescent body and its status within adult culture. Superhero bodies are mysterious, invested with magical abilities and a metamorphic pliability; if they are marginal bodies in the body of high literature, this still should not blind us to their importance. "So far from using bodily magic as an escape," the anthropologist Mary Douglas argues, "cultures which frankly develop bodily symbolism may be seen to use it to confront experience with its inevitable pains and losses. By such themes they face the great paradoxes of existence." (1966, 120).

Superhero comics present body narratives, bodily fantasies, that incorporate (incarnate) aggrandizement and anxiety, mastery and trauma. Comics narrate the body in stories and envision the body in drawings. The body is obsessively centered upon. It is contained and delineated, becomes irresistible force and immovable object. The body is enlarged and diminished, turned invisible or made of stone, blown to atoms or reshaped at will. The body defies gravity, space, and time; it divides and conquers; it turns to fire, lives in water, is lighter than air. The body takes on animal attributes; it merges with plant life and melds with metal. The body is asexual and homosexual, heterosexual and hermaphroditic. Even the mind becomes a body, telepathic, telekinetic, transplantable, and controllable. Brainiac's brain sticks out of the top of his head, on display as part of a visible, external body. The body is an accident of birth, or a freak of nature, or a consequence of technology run wild. The superhero body is everything—a *corporeal*, rather than a *cognitive*, mapping of the subject into a cultural system.

Anyone who thinks that the superhero heyday has passed has only to step into a comics store to see rack upon rack of zingy new titles. The X-Men are TV and arcade game stars; Batman is in the movies and on TV; and new publishing ventures are burgeoning.[2] TV and cinema want to appropriate the mass-market merchandising mega-clout of the superhero genre. Even Superman made it back into the papers (though the reports of his death were greatly exaggerated). The superhero, a popular icon since the 1930s, has become newly, and increasingly, ubiquitous.

At the center of the revival are the X-Men, once relatively minor characters in the Marvel Comics pantheon. The original stories from the middl '60s lacked the cosmic grandeur of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's *Fantastic Four* or *Thor* comics or the nerdy charm of *The Amazing Spiderman* by Lee and Steve Ditko, but there was something of interest in the title's exploration of adolescent alienation. Recruited by the telepathic Professor Xavier, the X-Men are teenaged mutants, powerful but undisciplined. Under the cover of his exclusive School for Gifted Youngsters, Professor X teaches his X-Men to control their powers in order to face the threat posed by "evil mutants" bent (of course) on the domination of humanity. When a revamped and more powerful mutant team was launched in the '70s, however, the title caught on with adolescent readers. Replacing the all-white antics of The Beast, Iceman, Angel, Marvel Girl, and Cyclops was a more ethnically and visually diverse bunch. The Beast became more bestial, Cyclops more tormented; Marvel Girl was reborn as Phoenix, and an African woman known as Storm took over the leadership of the team. The mysterious, violent, nearly indestructible Wolverine became one of the most popular characters in comics. Scripts by Chris Claremont emphasized domestic interaction and introspection. *The Uncanny X-Men* spawned numerous offshoots, including *X-Men, X-Force, X-Factor, X-Men 2099*, and limited series with individual characters (especially Wolverine). The mutants provided enough torment and combat to propel the superhero revival that continues today, a revival fueled by inexhaustible reserves of adolescent angst.

The revival continued, and in the '90s revisionism took a dark turn. Superman died (none-too-poetically—he was *beat up*) and came back with Daniel Day-Lewis's hair, Batman broke his back and returned in a semi-cyborged state, and Marvel unleashed darker versions of its own classic heroes. Most of this was in response to the rise of Image Comics, the fastest-growing company in the history of the medium. Image was formed by some renegade writers and artists from the mainstream houses (mostly Marvel), and its roster includes some of the hotter names in the business. Their titles clog the shelves just as in-house advertisements clog their pages. The Image titles specialize in even more intensely exaggerated visualizations of the (barely) human body; there is a powerful hysteria working beneath the surface of muscles, cleavage, masks, and laser beams.

Superhero comics remain a largely subcultural phenomenon, produced largely by young males for somewhat younger males. The recent boom in comics sales in the United States dates from the early '80s, when

specialty stores arose to cater to an obsessively knowledgeable audience. Titles began to be produced for this "direct sales" market—these were readers who knew what they wanted, and the industry was only too happy to oblige. As in *Trek* fandom, the lines between creators and consumers have been very permeable, and today's fanboy reader may be tomorrow's writer, artist, editor, or publisher (copyright control has shifted somewhat from companies to creators). Most recently, there has been an explosion of so-called collectibles, and T-shirts, caps, action figures, trading cards, stamps, pins, watches, and "special" editions with embossed-foil (or even holographic) covers have provided still more opportunities for unrestrained consumption.

The following does not pretend to be an ethnography of superhero comics culture—I haven't done the research. I have relied on a conjunction of theoretical and ethnographic writings: Klaus Theweleit on the soldier-male, Wolfgang Schivelbusch on industrial shock, Alan Klein on the "comic book masculinity" of bodybuilding subculture (1993, 8), and Mary Douglas on bodily rituals as social symbolism.[3] I want to demonstrate that what the superhero embodies are ambivalent and shifting attitudes toward flesh, self, and society. Where once superhero comics whimsically presented bodies armored against the shocks of industrial society, too many current characters now seem to simply incarnate problematic and painfully reductive definitions of masculine power and presence. In the 1970s and '80s, mutant superheroes gained in popularity, and these *X-bodies* encourage an alternative understanding of the superbody hieroglyph (one that coexists with hypermasculine fantasy). The mutant body is explicitly traumatic, armored against the world outside yet racked and torn apart by complex forces within. The mutant body is oxymoronic, rigidly protected but dangerously unstable. In its infinite malleability and overdetermined adolescent iconography, the mutant superhero is a locus of bodily ritual.

There is also an autobiography entrenched in this essay, and I'm forced to realize that the autobiographical subject isn't me, the adolescent dreaming of bodily strength and cosmic consciousness, but me, the adult academic who feels compelled to write about superhero comic books. At 7 a.m. one Sunday, in bed with someone that I'm no longer in bed with, I opened my eyes and had a magic thought: *mutant superheroes*. A fertile field, encapsulating a striking number of body issues, but the topic was perfect in another way—it was true to my reputation, and when people asked what I was working on, I could wear an expression of embarrassed pride and say, *Mutant superheroes!* People could cluck knowingly, laugh

X-Factor no. 92
Scott Lobdell, writer
Joe Quesada, writer and artist

appreciatively, or leave quickly. *Oh, that Scott!* they would say. I tried it out at a couple of parties.

Beyond the not-so-shocking shock value of comics, though, I *do* like the things. In early drafts of this essay I "sutured" the complex pleasures I derive from comics to the reductive discourses of the academy; the very approach I abhor the most. Academia presented me with an imperfect double of my self—*Bizarro Scott*—and now it was clobberin' time. I had to rediscover my fondness for the medium, and for the genre of superhero fantasy, without surrendering my intellectualism. I needed to recapture my own fragmented experience—my trauma, my anxiety, my hurt, my humor, my play, my intelligence, my body, my grace, my clumsiness, my fantasy, and my creativity. This would be my greatest battle.

The writing process has taken its toll. To walk up to the hip chick working the register at St. Marks Comics, a woman who clearly doesn't care whether Wolverine is stronger than Lobo, requires nerves of steel. I had established myself as something of a groove-meister, buying the latest alternatives and Vertigo grunge-horror books, but now I was clutching back issues of *Spawn* and *Cyber Force*. I would ask for separate receipts in a pathetic attempt to separate myself from my "research" purchases, but it was useless. I had clearly lost all hipster credibility. . . .

2. Industrial Strength

I have a picture of myself at about age eight, dressed as Green Lantern. I think (I hope, I *pray*) that it was Halloween. GL was always my favorite of the "classic" superheroes; there was that streamlined costume (no cape!), the power ring, and the secret oath.[4] The ring worked by sheer force of will—thought made physical. In the pages of *Dr. Strange*, Steve Ditko would endow mystical rays and magical incantations with an eerie physical ity all their own, but the world of Green Lantern was more familiar in its fancies. Even as a child I was charmed and slightly mystified by the literalness of GL's power ring emanations: huge green hands grabbed falling airplanes and giant ears eavesdropped on crooks. The power ring also cranked out modern machines: an enormous emerald derrick would pick up the criminals and deposit them in jail, or great green springs would cushion a descent (nor were these the only signs of an industrial consciousness—GL's streamlined look suited his secret identity as jet test pilot Hal Jordan). With the ring, the self was no longer bounded by a body, but only by its own self-conception. I doubt that I realized it then, but here was

Freud's omnipotence of thoughts, gelled into an ornament that could compensate for (my) physical weakness.

There are deep uncertainties operating in superhero narratives that mark a symbolic return to a presymbolic space of primal drives and primal fears, as well as later anxieties that are at once psychoanalytical, social, and historical. Wolfgang Schivelbusch reminds us of the disorienting experience of industrialization and its concomitant trauma, the industrial accident. "It must be remembered," he writes, "that railway accidents have this peculiarity, that they come upon the sufferers instantaneously without warning, or with but a few seconds for preparation, and that *the utter helplessness of a human being* in the midst of the great masses in motion renders these accidents peculiarly terrible" (1986, 143, my emphasis). The human body is not designed for the stresses of mechanical operation. As Gustave Claudin observed in 1858 of his rapidly changing world,

> These discoveries . . . bend our senses and our organs in a way that causes us to believe that our physical and moral constitution is no longer in rapport with them. Science, as it were, proposes that we should enter a new world that has not been made for us. We would like to venture into it; but it does not take us long to recognize that it requires a constitution we lack and organs we do not have. (cited in Schivelbusch, 159)

The superhero, who appears on the American industrial landscape in the 1930s, possesses a new kind of body—only the Man of Steel has the constitution, organs, and abilities equal to the rigors of the Machine Age.

Superman makes his initial appearance following the sustained shock of World War I. Schivelbusch notes the newly unleashed terror of sudden death. Where once a soldier could prepare himself for combat, "from the eighteenth century on, such a state of readiness no longer existed. The wound caused by mass fire occurred suddenly, invisibly; it came 'out of nowhere' " (156). By contrast, the superhero body is a body in a permanent state of readiness (*this is a job for . . .*). What's more, if random death now appears from nowhere, the superbody is more than merely resistant; it bears its own mysterious power. Such powers are often technological (well, *pseudo*-technological) in origin: Superman is "a strange visitor from another planet"; Green Lantern was entrusted with his power ring by the Guardians of the Galaxy; Captain America was injected with an experimental supersoldier serum, etc., etc. As embodied by the superhero of the 1930s and '40s, the "utter helplessness of the human being" in the face of industrial stress has been overcome—technological trauma has produced its own antidote.[5]

The first sign that all was not perfect in superhero-land turned up in the postwar era. In the 1950s, American superheroes were saddled with a mysterious and wholly arbitrary "weakness." Superman had Kryptonite (I think it's gone now) as his *bête verte*, and, okay, I could accept that. At least Kryptonite was some *thing*. But Green Lantern's ring failed to work against anything yellow. *Why?* So, like, was his ring only *partly* effective against orange? Where on the spectrum does yellow *end*, officially? The Martian Manhunter was powerless against things made of wood. Hmm . . . did they *have* wood on Mars? When encountering a new hero, you had to know two things—what was his power, and what was his Achilles' heel? They were concomitant, each the inevitable consequence of the other. Thus a writer's convenience took on the force of an ontology.

It was against this background that the Marvel superheroes of the 1960s appeared "realistic." No arbitrary weaknesses for these heroes, but there were self-doubts aplenty. These more psychologized figures quarreled, got depressed, and questioned themselves. The Marvel heroes were rarely gifted by birth or by choice; they were instead transformed in young adulthood by (sort of) varied forces: radioactive spider bites; cosmic ray bombardment in near-Earth orbit; gamma ray bombardment at a military testing ground; a collision with a truck bearing radioactive waste; and a (nonradioactive) stick that, when banged on the ground, made you into Thor, the Norse god of thunder. These comics presented as obvious an allegory of pubescent metamorphosis as one could imagine—The Hulk, for example, got big and hairy and his voice changed. Go figure.

Identity is the obsessional center of superhero comics, as revealed by endless processes of self-transformation and the problematic perceptions of others—Batman hunted by police, Lois hunting for Superman's secret identity. The secret identity is a major issue for the superhero, but if Hal Jordan is the "secret" identity, why does Green Lantern wear the mask? Writing about narratives from the *Odyssey* to the *Prisoner of Zenda* and beyond, Peter Brooks notes:

> It is on the body itself that we look for the mark of identity, as writers of popular literature have so well understood. . . . The bodily marking not only serves to recognize and identify, it also indicates the body's passage into the realm of the letter, into literature: the bodily mark is in some manner a "character," a hieroglyph, a sign that can eventually, at the right moment of the narrative, be read. (21–22)

The superhero body is marked in at least two senses: The secret identity constitutes the body *secretly* marked—this weenie is recognized (by the reader) as the conquering hero—but costume and logo constitute the superhero body as *publicly* marked. Mask, costume, and logo are marks that guarantee the superhero body passage into the field of the symbolic (the *logos*). Like the golem of Jewish mysticism, we might say that the superhero is constructed in the field of writing (the creation of a golem depends upon a mystical word inserted into the clay creature's mouth or ear, but in the 1920 German film version, the inscription is placed in the center of its chest—logo-position). Thus the acquisition of costume, mask, and logo might constitute a "*symbolic* birth," or *rebirth* into the symbolic, which, as Marie-Hélène Huet argues of the golem and other "ex-utero procreations," transfers issues of birth and identity from the field of maternal power to the realm of the patriarchy (1993, 244 and 239).

Alan Klein observes of bodybuilding that "the hypermuscular body" in bodybuilding "is supposed to communicate without an act; its presence is its text" (274). The superhero body is similarly written, but when read it will yield a secret. Hence the fascination with origin stories in the comics: the secret is a secret history, a story embodied by the mark on the surface of the body. In these postmodern times of emphatic surfaces and lost historicities, origin tales are no longer so stressed: the hyperbolically muscular heroes of Image Comics are nothing more or less than what they look like; the marked body has become an underdetermined sign as issues of identity recede into the background.[6] Most of these heroes seem not to have secret identities at all, which is just as well—some have purple skin and are the size of small neighborhoods. But why are they wearing masks?

Clearly the mask serves to protect the self by placing a barrier between subject and world (Klein: "bodybuilders wind up using their bodies as a mask, a male persona with which to ward off insecurities" [276]). The mask, no matter how minuscule, is a sign of the rebirth as what Klaus Theweleit has referred to as the *armored body*. The disturbingly repetitive and consistent memoirs of German *Freikorps* figures reveal a careful deployment of disciplinary and military apparatuses that turn the body into part of a machine, delibidinalized through the imposition of boundaries drawn from outside the subject. The ego is further severed from the weakness and frailty of the flesh through pain: aggressiveness against "outsiders," killing what is not "them," externalizes the fear of ego-dissolution. Hence the masculinist aversion to the liquidity associated with the monstrous feminine—*Freikorps* males exhibited a desire to annihilate the female and reduce her to a "bloody mass." The woman bears libidinal energies that are not beholden to reason; they exemplify the *flow* that threatens to wash away all that is rational (all that is *the subject*) in a cataclysmic flood. Anti-*woman*

Brigade no. 6
Ripley, writer
Marat Mychaels, artist

becomes a code for anti-*life*.[7] Body and psyche are united as the subject becomes a weapon, an armored figure hiding both the erotic and the mortal truths of its being.

Superhero bodies, despite their plasticity, are armored bodies, rigid against the chaos of surrounding disorder. While permitted the narcissistic luxury of self-doubt, their power and their ultimate triumph are guaranteed; their stories are already written.[8] We are deep within what Theweleit called "the conservative utopia of the mechanized body" (1978, 162). Writing about the investment that Surrealism and Dada also had in the armored body, Hal Foster noted the "tension between binding and shattering tendencies, the play between sadistic and masochistic impulses." Surrealism was defined by the struggle "between the erotic and the destructive, the one never pure of the other" (1991, 94). In cruder form superhero comics replay this struggle unabated, as the display and experience of power become especially hysterical. Erotic energies are sublimated into (other) bodily traumas, emissions, and flows: Battles or the task of controlling the power are acts of self-protection that channel energy flow into focused blasts of multicolored destruction. Self-protection, though, is a blind for self-annihilation; Theweleit writes that in battle, "The man longs for the moment when his body armor will explode, strengthening his rigid body-ego; but a body such as his cannot atomize, as does the mass, by allowing itself to be penetrated, fragmented, and thus destroyed. His body atomizes only if he himself erupts outward. He desires to move beyond himself, bulletlike, towards an object that he penetrates" (179).

The longing for orgasmic battle begins to account for the appeal of the superhero *team* (Fantastic Four, Justice League of America, Avengers, etc.). Schivelbusch, whose notion of a "stimulus-shield" echoes Theweleit's armored body, notes that, from World War I, "warriors no longer did battle individually but as parts of the new combat machine" (152):

> The new military organization concretized the entirely specific sense of the word [shock]: the clash of two bodies of troops, each of which represented a new unified concentration of energy by means of the consolidation of a number of warriors into one deindividualized and mechanized unit. What was new in this military clash was its unheard-of violence (due to the concentration of energy) as well as the degree of attrition of its elements; the latter occurred in direct proportion to the degree of energy concentration. (153)

Teamups became popular during World War II as a kind of superhero popular front movement against the Axis powers. Thus they were originally

a battle formation, an *Überkorps* of reciprocally reinforcing body armors. But their popularity survived the war, and in the 1960s, teams were rampant. One is tempted to turn to Will Wright's study of narrative structures in the cinematic western: he found that such '60s and '70s releases as *The Magnificent Seven*, *The Professionals*, and *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* were marked by the "organization man" mentality of a newly powerful corporate capitalism. Indeed, the superhero groups not only included frequently fractious[9] members, as did their western counterparts, they also featured jet planes, uniforms, and secret headquarters replete with boardrooms and global communications setups. The Fantastic Four even had their own skyscraper—the Mies van der Rohe–style Baxter Building (all of these headquarters were revealed in panoptic cutaway views detailing the locations of hangars, living quarters, training areas, and missile launchers). It's difficult to imagine corporatist fantasies resonating loudly among ten-year-old readers (*Hey, you got to be the Trilateral Commission last time!*); still, the corporation, the fraternity, the secret clubhouse, and the playground all provide alternative concepts of home and family.[10]

Within the comics' massive pitched battles, obsessively hyperbolized in any number of recent titles from Image Comics such as *Brigade* or *WILDC.A.T.S*, the action is an incoherent jumble of power beams and body parts, and superheroes and supervillains can't be easily distinguished. Although the supervillain may be considered the raison d'être for the superhero, the hero's creation is always precedent, and so the hero summons forth his own nemesis. But these are not battles between individuals, this is *war*: an unprecedented concentration of energy released in an explosion of nearly orgiastic pleasure and hysterical excess. The Image superhero tends toward battlefield (and action film) rhetoric:

> [Wed. 7:02 p.m., Cyberdata Technologies Building, lower Manhattan]
>
> —We've still got to find Velocity, grab Timmie and get out alive. I always knew my S.E.A.L.s training would come in handy someday.
>
> —*Heatwave to all units top to bottom. Rock and roll.*
>
> —*EEEYAA-HEY!*
>
> —You'd think I'd be used to it by now, but Ripclaw's war cry still sends chills up my spine.

The ensuing battle in *Cyber Force* number 3 covers eight densely illustrated pages.[11] Ripclaw leaps into the fray, his clawed hands lunging toward the hapless reader. Where once the heroes respected the classical, clean, six panels per page layout common to American comics, now their pent-up fury overpowers the containing/constraining boundaries of the panel or even the page itself. Theweleit's analysis of the soldier-male is rhetorically tailored to that fantasied soldier-male, the superhero:

> War is a function of the body of these men. . . . In war, the man appears not only naked, but stripped of skin; he seems to lose his body armor, so that everything enters directly into the interior of his body, or flows directly from it. He is out of control and seems permitted to be so. But at the same time, he is all armor, speeding bullet, steel enclosure. He wears a coat of steel that seems to take the place of his missing skin. (192)

In *one* panel, Heatwave stands in the foreground, firing his translucent pink energy beam out the bottom of the frame (*BZZZAK!*), while some armored guy with glasses fires his automatic weapon to the left (*BRAKAKAK!*). An enormous character in the upper left midground is being shot at (*KRAKA BOOM! BOOM! BOOM!*) by about four guys with mobile armor spread out along the right background. The big one is saying: "I got ya covered, Heatwave, but that dude with the cannon's gettin' to be a real pain in the *butt*." The background is a purplish field, pierced by energy beams, explosions, smoke, and debris. The bodies become both armored and flowing in combat, as the seething energies repressed by the elaborate body-armors of the superhero spurt from all directions and every orifice.

3. Androids on Steroids

It seems that every Image Comics character (Maul,™ Heatwave,™ Void,™ Ripclaw,™ Impact,™ Velocity,™ Grifter,™ Spartan,™ and the others) has been, is, or will be part of at least one superhero team (Team Youngblood,™ Brigade,™ WILDC.A.T.S,™ Cyber Force,™ Freak Force,™ Stryke Force,™ Bloodstrike,™ StormWatch,™ and so it goes). The editor's page in *Doom Force*, a parody scripted by Grant Morrison, perfectly described this kind of title (although the real targets were Marvel's *X-Factor* and *New Mutants*):

> Grant breathlessly painted a vivid word-picture of a colorful band of super-outcasts who bravely battle the world's most powerful menaces on behalf of the very same human race that rejected them. Ironically, these youthful warriors have much more in common with their enemies than with those they fight to protect, but their basic decency leads them to struggle for the cause of justice in a world they barely understand. Their grim, wisecracking demeanor and their good-natured bickering may fool you, but when the chips are down, they're prepared to sacrifice their very lives to protect the innocent—and each other.

(Morrison also copyrighted names for future superhero use, so watch for Gridlock,™ Campfire,™ Eight-Track,™ Rim Shot,™ Mimosa,™ and Spatula.™)

The Image books are a fanboy wet dream.[12] The art is replete with extensive cross-hatching—the tiny lines that have dominated superhero comics since Rob Liefeld introduced the style. In his recent, indispensable formal analysis, *Understanding Comics*, writer/artist Scott McCloud notes that "in the mid-1960s when the average Marvel reader was pre-adolescent, popular inkers used dynamic but friendly lines. . . . But when Marvel's reader base grew into the anxieties of adolescence, the hostile jagged lines of a Rob Liefeld struck a more responsive chord" (1993, 126). Liefeld, once featured in a Levi's commercial by Spike Lee, was a founder of Image Comics, where those "hostile, jagged lines" are deployed in the service of an ever increasingly exaggerated bodily presence.[13]

The Image body is massively muscled, locked into a "dynamic," heroic pose. Despite accouterments such as logos, masks, gauntlets, epaulets, and other superhero accessories, the bodies are essentially presented as nudes (costumes are more coloration than cover-up). The team books feature an assortment of freakish figures either frozen in a group pose or locked in prodigious battle with characters on the other side of the embossed wrap-around cover. Where comics art once emphasized a vigorous flow of line that would lead the eye from panel to panel, recent comics turn each page into a stiffly posed pinup of flexed muscles and dramatic shading. The narrative, not very important to begin with, is further devalued against this fetishism of the superhero's overstated iconographic status; always spectacular in superhero comics, the body is now hyperbolized into pure, hypermasculine spectacle. The superhero body becomes auto-referential and can only be compared to other superheroes' bodies, rather than the common world of flesh, blood, muscle, and sinew.

This spectacle of the body resembles other such spectacles in contemporary culture. The hypermuscled body has moved closer to mainstream culture, whether in the videos of Madonna (remember Madonna?) and "janet" Jackson, the bodily obsessions of academic cultural studies, the movie stardom of Arnold Schwarzenegger, "American Gladiators," the underwear ads of Marky Mark, the increased coverage of bodybuilding events on cable TV—*stop the insanity!* The exaggerated musculature of the Image books suggests the parallel phenomenon of bodybuilding. As Klein and Samuel Fussell have both noted, "One doesn't so much admire bodybuilders for what they can do as far as what they *look* like they can do. The look of power, virility, prowess, counts for more than function, and has

Supreme no. 10
Rob Liefeld, writer
Brian Murray, artist

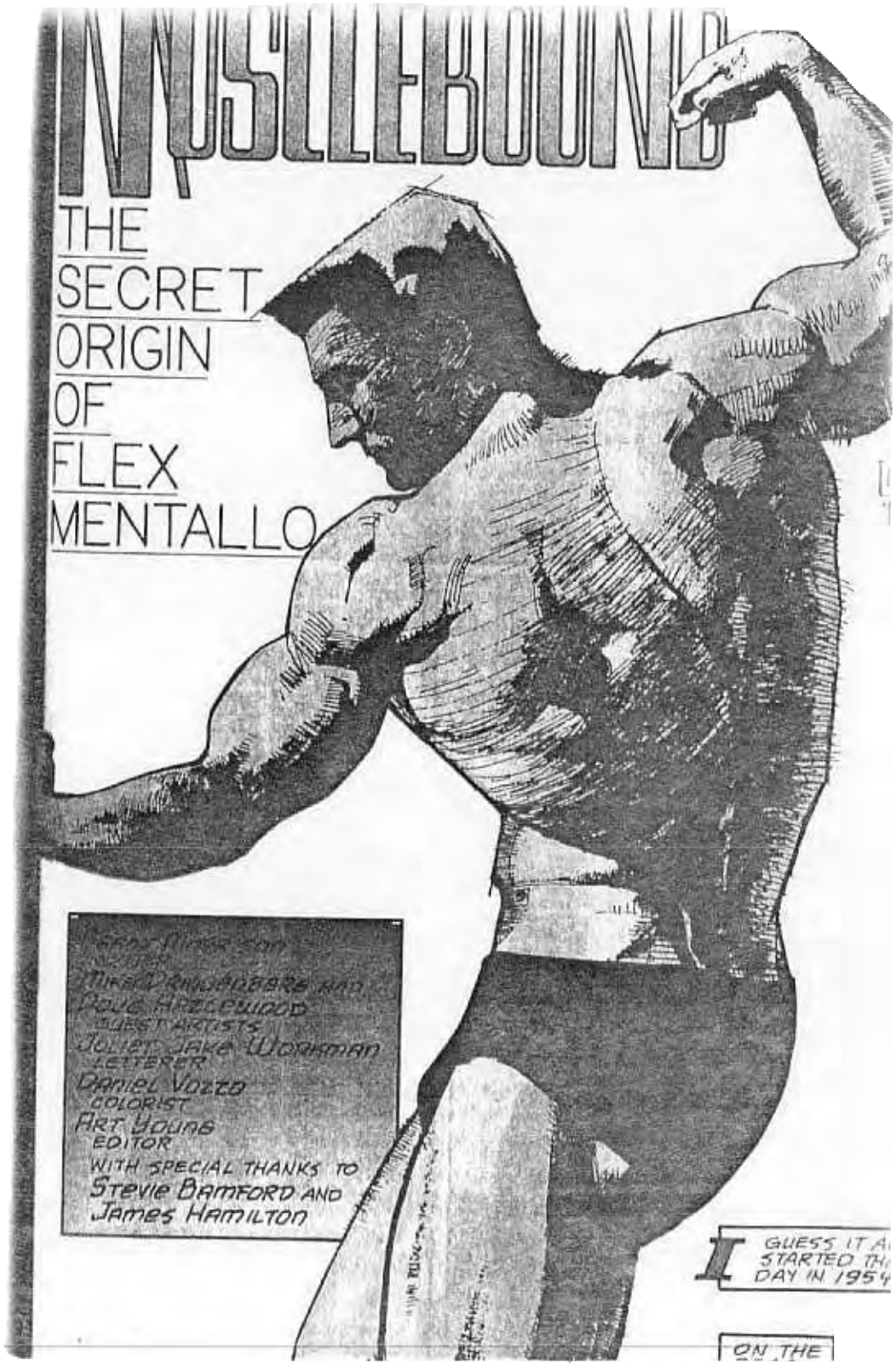
more in common with the world of modeling, beauty contests, or cinema idols than that of sports heroes" (Klein, 215). The *look* is the thing—to emphasize their supersolidity, bodybuilders adopt The Walk: "They burrowed their heads slightly into their shoulders to make their necks appear larger. They looked bowlegged, absurdly stiff, and infinitely menacing" (Fussell 1992, 55). Bodybuilding contests present the body frozen into a set of poses that make the body *appear* powerful, and the final confrontation between contestants is the simultaneous "pose-down," in which each presents his body in as visually compelling a manner as possible. Superheroes present an image of active power, but being imaginary characters their power is also only an illusion.[14] The Image heroes are locked in a permanent pose-down of aggressive appearances and fetishistic display.[15]

It isn't surprising that the bodybuilder's body should emerge most consistently in the arena of superhero comics—comics and bodybuilding have been closely aligned for decades. Arnold came to stardom playing Conan the Barbarian, and Lou Ferrigno was The Hulk for a few years. Bodybuilding articles mentioned by Klein even *sound* like superhero names: "Destroyer Delts"; "Nuke Legs" (Klein, 141). Bodybuilders *like* comics: "Comic-book depictions of masculinity are so obviously exaggerated that they represent fiction twice over, as genre and as gender representation. But for bodybuilders these characters serve as role models" (267). And let's not forget "The Insult that Made a Man Out of Mac": the one-page adventure of a skinny guy with sand in his face who takes a course from Charles Atlas and exacts his revenge. *Oh Mac*, his frighteningly fickle gal coos, *You ARE a real man after all!* Fans will be glad to know that Mac was reborn in Grant Morrison's Techno-Surreal *Doom Patrol* as Flex Mentallo, the most famous superhero of all time (and, truly, who could argue the point?). "I learned how to refine and manipulate the secret vibrational wavelengths of each muscle, each tendon. . . ." A battle against a government conspiracy spelled Mac/Mentallo's doom:

> I thought if I flexed hard enough, I could make it happen. I thought I could turn the Pentagon into a circle. . . . I just flexed. In all the apartments in my building, people began to experience unusual phenomena: spontaneous, uncontrollable orgasms; visions of worlds folded into empty envelopes; astounding new ideas for leisure footwear. There were reports of bizarre dreams, all containing the word "obviously." . . . And I kept flexing.

Doom Patrol no. 42 Grant Morrison, writer Mike Dringenberg and Doug Hazlewood, artists

By pitting the spiritual powers of "muscle mystery" against the articulate hierarchies of the military, Morrison exposes the emptiness at the core



of bodybuilding fantasies—the lack of power that belies its emphatic appearance.

Klein describes something called *roid rage*: aggressive behavioral outbursts that follow sustained steroid use (151). I think of Maul from Image's *WILDC.A.T.S*, my favorite goofy new character—"Maul can increase his body-mass exponentially," the *WILDC.A.T.S Source Book* reports on the purple and green behemoth, "becoming bigger and stronger when necessary. He suffers a corresponding loss in intellect and self-restraint, though, which causes him problems." Maul is a close relative of Bruce Banner, a scientist who, when angered, transforms into that green-skinned, uncontrolled monster from the id known as The Hulk (*Is he man or monster . . . or BOTH?*). We are confronted with an aggressive hypermasculinity, a compensation for psychosexual anxiety that depends upon a ruthless suppression or (in the case of the *Freikorps*) an *obliteration* of the feminine. Thus "the formidable bodies are responses to a shaky psyche. . . . Physique and psyche were different words for overdevelopment and underdevelopment. What bound them was compensation; the bodily fortress protected the vulnerability inside" (Klein, 3). Superman is the hypermasculine version of Clark Kent (Jules Feiffer pointed out that we all know that Superman is *really* Clark, although supposedly Clark is *really* Superman).[16] The hypermasculinity of bodybuilder or superhero-fantasy represents an attempt to *recenter the self* in the body; a reductive conflation of body with subjectivity.

While outsiders see a blatant narcissism in the mirrored gymnasiums and unrestrained body worship of the bodybuilder, Klein finds something else: "Narcissus fell completely in love with his reflection. The bodybuilder would like to, but can't. Inside that body is a mind that harbors a past in which there is some scrawny adolescent or stuttering child that forever says, 'I knew you when . . .' The metamorphosis is doomed to remain incomplete" (41–42). That "scrawny adolescent" is surely a close relative of the one with his arms filled with five copies of the latest Image slugfest. The act of bodybuilding only represents a more activist dedication to the same compensatory, hypermasculine, anxious armored forms that superhero comics present to their similarly insecure readers.

In recent comics, muscular obsession reaches a new pitch. I'm continually struck by the attention to *neck muscles*. In his experience of male gym culture, Samuel Fussell noted that straights and gays preferred to work on different body parts—specifically, hets wanted mega-developed lats (gays preferred a leaner, more classical neck and shoulder line). This is interesting, if true, because the Image heroes have the biggest lats on the *planet*. Indeed, with their thick necks, bulging veins, and protruding tendons tightly swathed in colored skintight hoods, these heroes really become enormous *dicks* sheathed in an array of distinctly baroque (and somewhat painful looking) condoms—an effect both menacing and comical.

The women I know express the same revulsion toward images of bodybuilders' bodies (*thank goodness*), and in fact men find these male bodies to be more "acceptable" than do women (Klein, 216). Superhero readers are also a very male and heterosexist group (with some exceptions for *X-Men* fans), unwilling to directly confront more nuanced definitions of masculine identity. The self-pity that underlies so many superhero titles since the 1960s (the sensitive new age mutant syndrome) indicates an awareness of emotional need, but only within a hypermasculine context. A continuing character in *Eightball*, an alternative comic by Daniel Clowes, is the popular superhero artist (and total geek) Dan Pussey. In "The Origin of Dan Pussey," we visit him in high school as he withdraws ever further into fantasies of muscles and mutants . . .

> See, at this point, now that the Ultimate Wars are over, Metallox is starting to feel like the other members of the Vengeance Battalion don't respect him as much because he's a Synthezoid. Okay, so here he is holding his arm with all the wires coming out of it and he says: "You have fought long and hard in your galaxy to see that no man is judged by the color of his skin . . . Is this any different? I, too, have wounds! I, too, feel the stinging loss of our courageous compatriot Heatgirl. My tears may be artificial, but my pain is no less real!"

Eightball no. 12 Daniel Clowes, writer and artist

"Wow," his friend says. "I guess you're right! I never knew comics could be so . . . you know, like a real book!" "It really isn't all just BANG POW ZOOM stuff," Pussey complacently replies.

This tension between hypermasculinity and (a disavowed) emotional complexit

finds its most complete figuration in what I like to call "the really, really big guy" in contemporary superhero teams. This phenomenon began with The Thing in the Fantastic Four ("This Man . . . This Monster" was one story), continued through The Hulk in the Avengers and The Beast (later, Colossus) in the X-Men, and has reached a peak in recent titles.[17] Maul, Beast, Coldsnap, Impact, Strong Guy, and Brick are the really big really, really big guys at the moment. These are the most explicitly monstrous bodies in the superhero canon, and are often objects of self-pity—they are the strongest team members, but do they not bleed? Physical strength only *hides* the emotionally complex inner subject; power is not self-aggrandizing, it is rather a cross to be silently borne (fortunately, thought balloons grant expression to this private torment). Morrison's *Doom Force* even managed to parody the "big guy" phenomenon, as Shasta the Living Mountain (*I'm useless . . . everyone hates me because all I can do is turn into a mountain*) sacrifices her life for the team—superhero deaths being another terrific occasion for easy emotionalizing (turns out the team really *didn't* like Shasta, so they just go get something to eat).

Hypermasculine fantasy is also revealed, with unabashed obviousness, in the approach to female superheroes. The spectacle of the female body in these titles is so insistent, and the fetishism of breasts, thighs, and hair so complete, that the comics seem to dare you to say anything about them that isn't just redundant. *Of course* the female form has absurdly exaggerated sexual characteristics; *of course* the costumes are skimpier than one could (or should) imagine; *of course* there's no visible way that these costumes could stay in place; *of course* these women represent simple adolescent masturbatory fantasies (with a healthy taste of the dominatrix).[18] One might note that women participate more fully in battle than they once did. It's worth observing that they're now as powerful as their male counterparts—women no longer have to suffer such wimpy powers as invisibility or telekinesis (*great*—they weren't seen, but they could move stuff around like Samantha on "Bewitched"). They no longer need protection; they are no longer victims or hostages or prizes.

Which isn't to say that all problems have been solved. Zealot, with her swords and razors, for example, "is superhumanly strong and skilled in the arts of killing with her hands and with any and all weapons." The notable lack of castration anxiety here lasts until one reads her origin story: She "was one of the three original founding members of the Coda, an ancient Sisterhood of assassins based in Greece." After centuries of service, "when she grew weary of killing for no reason other than money, she left the Coda and devoted her life to battling its values." Score one for our side—the

Deathmate, September 1993 Brandon Choi and Eric Silvestri, writers Brandon Peterson and Scott Williams, artists

demon woman is possessed and contained, killing for *its* (our) values. Then there's Void (with the Invisible Girl, the female superhero as *absence*) with a predictable array of telekinetic and teleportational skills, plus "a certain degree of clairvoyance." She has the liquid-metal sheen of the Silver Surfer and *Terminator 2*'s T-1000, but they never looked quite so damn *naked*.

The rise of women's bodybuilding provides a limited parallel to the new prominence of female superheroes, since the practice has been read by some cultural theorists as resistance to traditional female iconography. Alan Klein, though, adds a valuable corrective to this uncritical embrace by arguing that women's bodybuilding is *still* bodybuilding (191). The overdeveloped body remains a compensation for an underdeveloped ego, a way of hiding inadequacy behind an armored body. Klein may be underestimating the political significance of this gender shift, but his point is nevertheless well taken. Of course, female superheroes *are not* female bodybuilders—they aren't even *real women*, nor are they created by women. There isn't a single Image title starring a female superhero.[19] Female desire is absent—when male creators design women characters, they continue to indulge male fantasies. The new power of the female hero is cosmetic surgery, and the halo of power just adds a further level of exoticism to the spectacle of the female form.

Overall, the trend has been toward masculinized, even phallic, women—armed to the teeth and just one of the boys. Meanwhile (as they say in the comics), Grant Morrison has pointed to the disappearance of "the feminized superhero" (McEnery 1993, 101). The DC comics of the 1950s and '60s often subjected Superman to a dose of *Red* Kryptonite, an unpredictable substance that never worked the same way twice. Inevitably, the effect would be a temporary metamorphosis—Superman would gain the head of a giant ant, or he might be unable to control his powers. The armored body became fluid, shifting in irrational and uncontrollable ways. Comics no longer "feminize" their heroes in this whimsical manner, a further sign of the repression marking the hypermasculine construction.

Hypermasculine trauma reveals itself through the incoherence and hysteria of endless combat: explosions, exposed flesh, and extraterrestrial invasions speak to the terror of the armored body.[20] Klein's evocation of bodybuilding is as applicable to superheroics. "We see men trying too hard to come across as invulnerable and in command," he writes, "because to be less than that is not living up to our advance billing as leaders, dominators, controllers—in short, masters of the universe" (9).

When the body engages in the violence of battle, the armor slips. Energies are no longer so thoroughly contained. Similarly, the *mutant superhero* presents itself as a problematic figure. Mutants are genetic accidents; their powers are neither products of radioactive ingestion nor interplanetary travels. They are the aliens among us; to avoid prejudice, mutant superheroes hide their abilities. Mutant powers are stigmata that must be kept hidden from the unreasoning mob of mere normals. Mutant superheroes are not invulnerable; not only are they distinguished by (a frequently maudlin) emotionalism, but their first and most dangerous enemies are their own bodies. Optic blasts shoot from the eyes of the X-Men's Cyclops; he must shield them at all times. Cyclops was the first star of the X-Men; with his ellipsoid yellow and ruby visor covering his deadly eyes he was at once statuesque and sleekly streamlined. But the fashionable mask of Cyclops is more than a mark of his superheroic status: this mask cannot be removed, for to do so would be to unleash death and destruction upon the world. The visor's deadly secret evokes such figures of the monstrous feminine as Medusa and Pandora's Box. But the struggle of Cyclops involves holding back this energy, containing it within himself; to release it would be to destroy his own sense of being (the woman he loves can never see his eyes, he realizes).

These are traumatized, eruptive bodies; the energies that are normally unleashed only in battle now continually threaten to overspill their fragile vessels. The mutant superhero is both armored and flowing. The armored body enforces categories of being by buttressing self against nonself, but mutant heroes are explicitly presented as "categorical mistakes." Theweleit's dissection of the structures that reinforce the subject against the disorder of a chaotic reality echoes Mary Douglas's arguments regarding ritual and somatic meaning. Douglas defines ritual as a metaphorical system for maintaining and communicating ideas of social order: "The magic of primitive ritual creates harmonious worlds with ranked and ordered populations playing their appointed parts. So far from being meaningless, it is primitive magic which gives meaning to existence. This applies as much to the negative as to the positive rites. The prohibitions trace the cosmic outlines and the ideal social order" (1966, 72). Rituals establish and preserve categories and hierarchies; they perform rules of social interaction. Those organized around the familiar space of the body constitute a narrow field of

meaning: "The range of situations which use the human body for expression . . . derive essentially from the quality of social relations" (1970, viii). Following Mauss, and rejecting more psychoanalytically based readings, Douglas maintains that the body is always an acculturated body, an always metaphorical body. Where it figures prominently within cultural rituals, "the human body is always treated as an image of society. . . . There can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension" (1970, 70).

More specifically, Douglas argues that the body and its boundaries mark a concern with social boundaries and hierarchical order:

> Interest in its apertures depends on the preoccupation with social exits and entrances, escape routes and invasions. . . . The relation of head to feet, of brain and sexual organs, of mouth and anus are commonly treated so that they express the relevant patterns of hierarchy. Consequently I now advance the hypothesis that bodily control is an expression of social control—abandonment of bodily control in ritual responds to the requirements of a social experience which is being expressed. Furthermore, there is little prospect of successfully imposing bodily control without the corresponding social forms. And lastly, the same drive that seeks harmoniously to relate the experience of physical and social, must affect ideology. (1970, 70–71)

Thus the body can serve as a sign of disorder; a categorical mistake: "When a monstrous birth occurs, the defining lines between humans and animals may be threatened. If a monstrous birth can be labeled an event of a peculiar kind the categories can be restored" (1966, 39). While they want to fit in, mutants know their birthright is to exist "outside" the normative. They are categorical mistakes of a specific type; they are, in short, *adolescents*. The first mutant superheroes were the X-Men: "The Most Unusual Teen-Agers of All Time!" Such "marginal beings" (1966, 97) pose a question and a threat to the social body, which must somehow reincorporate this "ambiguous species" (1966, 73) or brand it (*with an X?*) as taboo.

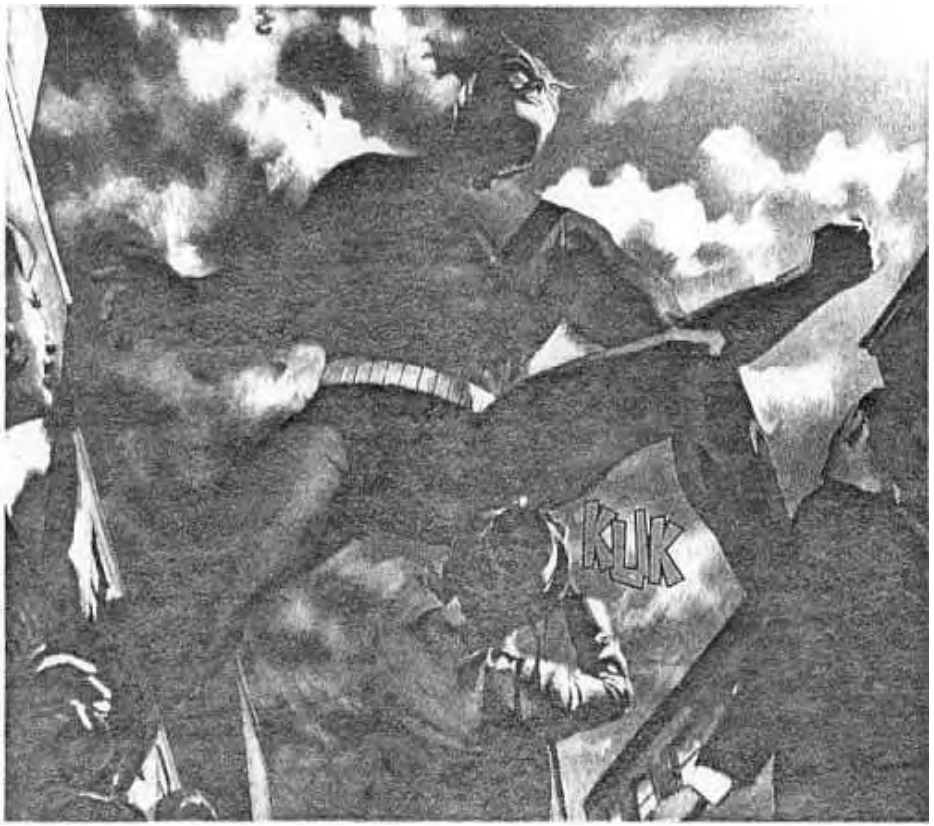
The audience for mutant superhero comics is clearly targeted: an issue of *X-Factor* featured a comics-style ad for Stridex, an acne medication—it seems that Cyclops isn't the only one who suffers the trauma of red facial eruptions (Stridex even *sounds* like a mutant superhero). Where once Cyclops lamented his impossible desire for normalcy in one brief panel per issue (*I've no right to try to date Jean* [Marvel Girl]—*not while my eyes make me a potential danger to anyone near me!*), later Claremont issues might feature a *five-page* conversation between young ex-lovers, culminating in a panel of the girl crying herself to sleep (*Shut up, Peter, please! Don't say any more! It hurts too much!*). It must be said that this infusion of romance comics discourse did, in fact, extend the appeal of the X-Men beyond the confines of the superhero subculture.

The appeal to adolescents immediately connects to Douglas's hypotheses regarding power hierarchies and structures of authority within cultures. In her studies of religious ritual, Douglas has located a correlation between the control of spiritual powers and the position within the social hierarchy. She distinguishes between internal powers that reside within the subject and external forces subject to mastery. "This distinction between internal and external sources of power is often correlated with another distinction, between uncontrolled and controlled power. According to widespread beliefs, the internal psychic powers are not necessarily triggered off by the intention of the agent" (1966, 98). Like the eruptive body of the mutant superhero (Havok, Storm, Random), internal powers are uncontrolled; where once superheroes guaranteed social stability they now threaten to disrupt it. Douglas further correlates controlled power and social authority:

> Where the social system explicitly recognizes positions of authority, those holding such positions are endowed with explicit spiritual power, controlled, conscious, external and approved—powers to bless and curse. Where the social system requires people to hold dangerously ambiguous roles, these persons are credited with uncontrolled, unconscious, dangerous, disapproved powers—such as witchcraft and evil eye. In other words, where the social system is well-articulated, I look for articulate powers vested in the points of authority; where the social system is ill-articulated, I look for inarticulate powers vested in those who are a source of disorder. (1966, 99)

At issue is not whether our social system is well- or ill-articulated; at issue is the mapping of the adolescent subject onto a social order that is *perceived by that subject* as arbitrary, exclusionary, and incomprehensible. "What supreme irony!" Professor X muses in a couple of thought balloons. "The Sentinels had been created to destroy the X-Men—and yet, it was necessary for *us* to smash *them* in order to save humanity—the humanity that *hated* us!"[21]

Douglas suggests "that the contrast between form and surrounding non-form accounts for the distribution of symbolic and psychic powers: external symbolism upholds the explicit power structure and internal, unformed psychic powers threaten it from the non-structure" (1966, 99). The mutant superhero, like the adolescent, is inarticulate within the social system—a categorical mistake that upsets notions of order and hierarchy



Marvels no. 2
Kurt Busiek, writer
Alex Ross, artist

through an investment with dangerous, disapproved, and uncontrollable powers. The body of the mutant superhero is, in fact, a ritualized body, "a symbolic system, based on the image of the body, whose primary concern is the ordering of a social hierarchy" (1966, 125). Under the tutelage of Professor X, the mutants are sited both inside and outside society; their powers move from uncontrolled and eruptive to controlled and articulate. By constructing such an alternative social order, the categorical mistake is resituated as a fundamental force of social cohesion. "The rituals," Douglas notes, "work upon the body politic through the symbolic medium of the physical body" (1966, 128).

A recent series called *Marvels* retells the history of the Marvel universe by shifting attention to the citizens of New York who can catch only brief glimpses of Thor as he rockets by a D train stalled on the Manhattan Bridge. Superheroes are the stuff of legend, and Captain America is sublime: "Just to catch a glimpse of him—always in motion. Always moving forward—like a force of nature in chain mail. Never a hesitation or a backward glance. We were in awe of him. Of *all* of them." The narrator is a middle-aged, gray-mustached photojournalist named Phil who lives out in the 'burbs with his wife and two daughters. Kurt Busiek's careful script and Alex Ross's painted artwork perfectly supplement one another. The colors are real-world muted, while the heroes' costumes are rendered in impossibly vivid tones. The faces are not the generic ciphers worn by most comics characters, but instead have a kind of lumpy individuality. Fashions and hairstyles are appropriate to the New Frontier period, and even the cars are accurate. Such details evoke a vague nostalgia for a comfortably quotidian past sometimes glimpsed in aging issues of *Life* magazine. Into this reality of bad haircuts and littered streets, the "Marvels" gain an understandable power to astonish.

The second issue of *Marvels* concentrates on the mutant problem. The unveiling of the mutant-exterminating Sentinels is retold from Phil's point of view as he watches events unfold on a black and white TV in a bar. Phil, the normal guy, gives voice to the articulate structures of authority. "They were the dark side of the Marvels," Phil reflects. "Where Captain America and Mister Fantastic spoke to us about the greatness within us all, the mutants were death." A mob scene is lit only by the infernal red glow emanating from the visor of Cyclops. Phil learns to whistle a different tune when he finds that his daughters have been harboring a small mutant girl in their basement (doesn't *everybody?*).[22] The li'l mutant is nearly hairless, with enormous wet eyes brimming with tears (*"A-are you going to send me* away?")—her victimized vulnerability combines Walter and Margaret

Keane's waif drawings, ET, starving Ethiopian children, and Cindy-Lou Who. In these sequences, sad to say, the story loses its edge. Nevertheless, Busiek effectively mythologizes the relationship between the freakish "muties" and the glorified (if rather white-bready) "Marvels."

The bodily torment of the mutant superhero expresses a desire, a *need*, to transcend the confines of the body, to exist as pure spirit. As usual, however, such desires are fraught with ambivalence, hence the heightened transgression of corporeal boundaries is accompanied by the hardening of the body. Still, the eye beams of Cyclops, the telekinetic powers of Marvel Girl, the elemental forces controlled by Storm, even Wolverine's extensible adamantium claws—all of these pull the body past its margins. Douglas emphasizes that "the orifices of the body . . . symbolize its especially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body" (1966, 121). Mutant superheroes bear overdetermined inscriptions of marginality revealed in every bodily trauma and transgression. The saga forms a massive passing narrative, as these stigmatized bodies attempt to hide behind a veil of "normalcy."

Douglas's model of social hierarchy contains clear gender correlations, although she doesn't address the issue.[23] Theweleit's terminology is useful: controlled and external power corresponds to the masculine armored body, while uncontrolled, internal power is analogous to the fluidity of the feminine. Articulate power is therefore the province of the masculine with the feminine relegated, by definition, to the inarticulate power operating outside systems of social authority. The mutant is thus a feminized figure, and the construction of an alternative social order acquires an ideological relevance that begins to transcend adolescent narcissism. The emphasis on uncontrolled powers that exist beyond the articulate structures of social authority points to a preference for the spiritual rather than the material aspects of reality, and in ritual and myth, Douglas argues, "to insist on the superiority of spiritual over material elements is to *insist on the liberties of the individual* and to imply a political programme to free him from unwelcome constraints" (1970, 162, my emphasis).

It's worth considering the recent popularity of the X-Men in the context of Generation X, the group of twenty-somethings that constitute a significant part of the mutant superhero audience. Generation X walks a fine line, ferociously absorbing (and regurgitating) popular culture while performing a self-conscious marginality that mixes historical eras. The modern primitive fascination with such body arts (or rituals) as tattooing

and piercing fetishizes the body as a spectacle of marginality, not to mention the body in pain—mutant stigmata.[24] Marvel *and* Image advertised upcoming mutant titles called *Generation X* (Image has since appropriated the other grunge-culture book title, retitling its comic *Gen 13*). The alternative community represented by the mutant band, combined with the pop nihilism and colorful violence of the superhero comic, makes these titles perfect light reading for homesick slackers who envision themselves unstuck in space and time, lost in an America in which all the good stuff has already happened.

In *Natural Symbols*, published in 1970, Douglas continually returns to the issue of student rebellion and the assault upon cherished hierarchies: "His teachers live in one universe, they cherish boundaries and smell conspiracy against sacred forms; he lives in another universe in which no particular form is sacred; form as such is distinct from content and inferior to it; he opposes classification as the expression of empty form, the very emblem of evil" (xv). Thus the arch-enemy of the X-Men is Magneto (which is *not* pronounced "mag-neat-o"), the self-proclaimed leader of the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, who believes that mutants, Homo superior, must subjugate Homo sapiens once and for all.[25] Magneto has become something of a dark (and not unsympathetic) deity in recent years, but his obsessions are precisely with power, definition, and hierarchy. On the other side are the government representatives who want to exterminate mutants or at least institute a Mutant Registration Act. Again, social structure is advanced as an empty emblem of evil.

Mutant bodies are explictly analogized to Jewish bodies, gay bodies, adolescent bodies, Japanese- or Native- or African-American bodies—they are, first and foremost, subjected and subjugated and colonized figures. If they are victims, however, they are also valuable sources of disruption and challenge—transgressive, uncontrollable, and alternative bodies. As on "Star Trek: The Next Generation," issues of gender, ethnicity, and sexual preference have received remarkable attention (and is the resemblance between patriarchal, bald Professor X and patriarchal, bald Captain Picard only coincidental?). *Trek* and *X-Men* present ethnically, sexually, generationally, and genetically diverse companies of humans, mutants, and aliens taking their places within flexible structures of cooperation and tolerance. The group is something more than a battle unit, and clearly takes the form of an idealized, alternative society—one in which all members, and therefore no members, are outcasts.[26] In the rejection of traditional political thought which marked American student rebellion in the late '60s, Douglas

observes that "the young radicals of today express contempt for the physical body, read the mystics and cultivate non-rationality" (167). Mutants just wanna have fun.

The seething, mutated, cyborged, and ceaselessly flowing bodies of these superheroes "express contempt" for the physical body, but in a deeply ambivalent form. If the flowing body is also an armored body, if its physical presence is protected and exaggerated, then that physicality has itself become a symbol for the (teen) spirit lodged within. As I argued in my study of postmodern science fiction, the body may be "simulated, morphed, modified, retooled, genetically engineered, and even dissolved," but it is never entirely eliminated: the subject always retains a meat component (1993, 243 and 259). As in cyberpunk a profound ambivalence, and even hysteria, regarding the status of the body in contemporary technoculture is revealed. And so: *X-Bodies* as in taboo; *X* as in impure and polluted and under erasure; but also *X* as in *X*-rays, with their power to reveal; *X* as in extreme; *X* as in ex—the *ex-men*.

5. Now Our Weird Heroes Each Remain Eccentric

Doom Patrol, scripted by Grant Morrison for nearly four years, recrafted comic book trauma, moving well beyond the defensive postures of the hypermasculine. In the first Morrison issue, Cliff Steele (Robotman: human brain in metal body) immediately demolishes armored body fantasies

> Can you imagine how crude robot senses are, compared to human ones, huh? All I have are memories of the way things used to feel or taste. You know, they say that amputees feel phantom pains where their limbs used to be. Well, I'm a total amputee. I'm haunted by the ghost of an entire *body*! I get headaches, you know, and I want to crap until I realize I don't have any bowels.

A friend tries to help: "I can't stand by and watch you destroy yourself." Steele replies, "Me? How *can* I destroy myself?" He pounds his head through a wall to emphasize the point, but still cannot feel *anything*. We are past the neurotic self-involvement of teen mutants here, and are nearing complete psychotic breakdown: these folks were *never* normal.

Aside from Robotman, the Doom Patrol included Negative Man, who was possessed by a radioactive spirit that flew from his body to perform superdeeds, and Elasti-Girl, who could make isolated parts of her body grow or shrink. Morrison rebuilt the group by ditching Elasti-Girl, remaking Negative Man as Rebis (a hermaphroditic blend of two human bodies

and that spirit), and adding the fabulous Crazy Jane—who suffers from sixty-four multiple personalities, each of which has its own "meta-human ability." Morrison never imposed normative values on his team: Jane is not "cured" by developing a unitary sense of self, by "controlling" her multiple personalities; instead she learns to permit each of her personalities to dominate when appropriate (McEnery, 99). The struggle in *Doom Patrol* is not to be accepted, but to accept oneself.

The psychic and physical traumas of the group are matched by the slippages of reality to which they are continually subjected. An early enemy was the Brotherhood of Evil, now reformed as the Brotherhood of Dada, whose first act is to trap Paris within a recursively structured painting. One enemy, the Quiz, has "every superpower you haven't thought of." To fight her involves thinking of lots of superpowers *really quickly* (unfortunately, nobody thinks of "the power to create escape-proof spirit jars"). In later episodes they befriend Flex Mentallo and the sentient Danny the Street (*Sometimes it's an alley in Peking, sometimes a back street in Toronto . . .*) and battle the Men from N.O.W.H.E.R.E., whose every utterance is based on the same acronym: *Naked old widows hover earlier round Easter. Never open William's head evil reptiles emerge.*

Perhaps *all* of this is occurring inside Jane's head; perhaps the entire concept of superheroes is only a psychic formation in the first place (*gasp*). Protesting the trend toward more "realistic" approaches to superhero comics, Morrison argued that "the idea that you could bring something as ridiculous as superheroes into the real world seemed to me completely insane. . . . I was more interested in comics as what they were, as ridiculous garish combination[s] of words and pictures about people with ludicrous talents" (McEnery 98). Nothing could illustrate Morrison's point better than the Fantastic Four stories of the 1960s. The FF were typical of Marvel's characters in that they were both weirder *and* more human than their forebears. The rubbery Reed Richards (Mr. Fantastic); Sue Storm (the Invisible Girl), his bride; her brother Johnny, the Human Torch; and gruff, lovable, but deeply traumatized Ben Grimm, transformed into an odd pile of orange rocks known as The Thing, collectively formed one of the most affectionate of superhero teams—and why not? They were family.

Their adventures took them to hidden lands, other dimensions, and the edges of the universe; Jack Kirby's baroquely cosmic creations never again seemed either as perfect or as true. The comic reveled in juxtapositions of galactic scale with human banality. Kirby's humans were stylized, simple, and dynamic, and the visual flatness of the characters was enhanced by Joe Sinnott's clean, clear inking. But Kirby's cityscapes were so many

Doom Patrol no. 33 Grant Morrison, writer Richard Case, artist

abstract geometric shapes piled atop one another, and the vast machinery and elaborate costumes that were hallmarks of his art were detailed, obsessive, and faintly psychotic. In his best work, machinery seemed to merge with the human (or alien) figures; the biological was stylistically severed from the world. The FF pages fairly vibrated with color, drama, and dynamic movement, and even the word balloons and sound effects added to the overall effect. Readers of my generation can hardly forget the thrill of turning the page and finding Kirby's classic six-panel pages supplanted by a grand one- or two-page spread, replete with exploding suns, surging nebulae, a massive alien figure, or perhaps a "psychedelic" photomontage. Meanwhile, Stan Lee's dialogue ranged in style from Ben's Brooklynese ("Can'tcha see I'm tryin' ta dislike ya?!!") to the faux-Shakespearian flights of the Silver Surfer, herald of Galactus, eater of planets ("Incredible? Nay, it is *supremely* credible! Earth is but a twinkling dot . . . a paltry pebble . . . in the vastness of space!"). Hyperbole? "The World's Greatest Comic Magazine!" the covers proclaimed ("The Brutal Betrayal of Ben Grimm" was "possibly the most daringly dramatic development in the field of contemporary literature!"). Cultural studies academics please note: nobody took this stuff too seriously. It was playtime, and it *was* fun, and it was sometimes moving, and it provided the dizzying shifts of spatiotemporal scale and perspective that make science fiction a genre to consider.

The Lee/Kirby *Fantastic Four*s are perfect examples of the "garish" and "ludicrous" entertainments to which Morrison referred; one issue of *Doom Patrol* featured an affectionate parody (*And Men Shall Call Him—HERO!*).[37] Forgoing angst for absurdism, *Doom Patrol* stories elevate and enhance the conventions of the genre to construct darkly liberating cut-ups that infect the readers' reality and open doors of illogical possibility. The traumatic body of the superhero now signifies a traumatized *reality* rather than an inadequate psyche. In a world where our government feeds radioactive cereal to unsuspecting test subjects, the Doom Patrol make nicer comrades than the solipsistically suffering X-Men—and why not? They're family.

6. To Be Continued . . .

Writing "X-Bodies," I dream: I'm in a comics shop and discover lots of new *Green Lantern* titles. I'm obligated to buy them all, secretly glad of the excuse. GL . . . my old alter ego has returned. In the Dreaming, I'm the academic reader, the adolescent comics fan, and the high-flying superhero. Clearly, some early anxieties are not completely behind me.

Confronting the autobiography that underlies "X-Bodies," I see that my battle against the evil forces of academia is neatly designed to keep me on the margins. With no permanent appointment, I stand peering over the fence and wonder, *what do academics want?* but the real question I keep ducking is, *why won't I give it to them?* For one thing, the academy keeps refusing to tell me about *my* self. My reclamation of my own experience is part of a very appropriate struggle to legitimate the personal, the physical, and the aesthetic within a field that has privileged the authoritative, the cognitive, and the textual.[28]

Very heroic—but then there's my irrational fear of losing my self by joining a community (*any* community). My writings validate my own past, and thus my own self. Superheroes, science fiction, and Jerry Lewis—I'm the emperor of the nerds, the god of geeks. I rescue the terminally trivial, make it respectable and perhaps even sexy. Yet have I arranged to be taken unseriously? Am I engaged in a continuing activity of careerist self-sabotage: a cartoon anarchist being blown apart by his own bomb, Professor Kelp blowing up his lab? Is the real rescue I'm trying to make that of my terminally trivial, maybe respectable, and perhaps even sexy *self*? Well past adolescence, I lead a double life—inside and outside academia, inside and outside superhero subculture. I'm loving and duplicitous, a wreck and in control, armored and flowing, I'm Professor Kelp and Buddy Love. I'm a mutant superhero, asserting my phallic invincibility, fighting old battles against people *who aren't even alive anymore.* Perhaps it's time to hang up the cape. . . .

And perhaps not. Really, this self-mythologizing is getting out of hand. The fantasy to surrender is the one with the monolithic entity of academia tearing away at my own unified, noncontradictory (and still wacky) self. I'll stand by the work I've done. I'm a proud academic—still committed to rigorous intellectual inquiry and supportive pedagogy despite the narrowness of so many of the "approved" academic discourses. The *uncontrol* that marks marginalized mutants and Professor Kelp is only mine to a point—I'm also, after all, Professor X, the mutant *in control.* If life as a mutant superhero is mine, then I'll wear the cape proudly. Keep the cape *and scrap the armor* (my official superhero oath). Then I can decide which way to fly (my shrink said it, not me).

(And the Silver Surfer said this—) *I was born to soar . . . to ride the currents of space . . . not to be confined within a barren structure!* [29]

Notes

Special thanks to Sandy Rubin and Sara Franses for the self-understanding. Valuable suggestions and criticisms were provided by Nancy Graham, Cindy Fuchs, Barbara Miller and Toby Miller (no relation), David Samuels and Larry Kramer (not *that* Larry Kramer)—they've got my appreciation and my friendship. I'll give them some comics. . . .

1 See Bukatman 1993 and 1991.

2 DC has teamed up with Milestone Studios to produce a line of comics about and by minority figures, especially African Americans. One of these books, *Static*, is perhaps the most entertaining superhero comic currently published.

3 Both Theweleit and Douglas extend their analyses well beyond the scope of their initial researches. Theweleit's study of *Freikorps* fantasies reveals the more pervasive masculinist fantasies that underlie certain traditions in Western representation, while Mary Douglas uses her structural methodology to emphasize some broad, but important, connections across cultural experience: "All I am concerned with is a formula for classifying relations which can be applied equally to the smallest band of hunters and gatherers as to the most industrialised nations" (1970, viii). While I should perhaps be more interested in some of the significant *differences* between cultures, I nevertheless believe that these analyses retain considerable value when applied to contemporary American popular culture.

4 *In brightest day / In blackest night / No evil shall escape my sight / Let those who worship evil's might / Beware my power / Green Lantern's light* —science fiction writer Alfred Bester

5 It might be worth noting that the first Mr. America contest was held in 1939.

6 A contributing factor to the decline of origin stories might also lie in the repetitive nature of the genre—we *already* pretty much know where these characters came from.

7 Theweleit even recognized a class relationship in which the working class became a flowing mass of aggressive, libidinal women.

8 The extensive illustrations that accompany Theweleit's text include several of such characters as Thor, Captain America, and Spiderman.

9 I admit that writing about superhero comics makes me annoyingly alliterative and appallingly adverbial.

10 Further, the bickering yet supportive superhero team represents a fragmented projection of a self-contradictory subjectivity.

11 The typical superhero story is between twenty and twenty-five pages in length. Japanese *manga*, by contrast, are hundreds of pages, and an eight-page battle, with little dialogue and few panels, would be surprisingly brief. *Manga* are not only longer than American comics, they read far more quickly.

12 Characters cross over into each other's titles, creating elaborate continuities that only the most dedicated readers can unravel. The comics are lavishly produced with heavy, glossy paper, vivid computerized color, and pinups galore. Artist photographs and fan sketches adorn the back pages, and promotion for comics, caps, clothing, and cards is incessant.

13 *Doom Force* parodies the tone of aesthetic self-congratulation: "Our pencillers and inkers and penciller/inkers seemed inspired to artistic heights they had never previously reached. If you doubt that, go back and look again at the sheer number

of lines they put into each panel and onto every figure . . . then sit there and tell me they didn't work harder than they ever have in their lives."

14 This was a major problem for Superman's creators during World War II: Superman could hardly ignore the war, but neither could he win it.

15 In Howard Chaykin's *Power & Glory* (Bravura Comics, 1994), superheroes are engineered by a U.S. government project because "*nobody* makes a hero like the U.S.A." In an interview published in the first issue, Chaykin remarks that the book "is a reaction to the emptiness of content in most super-hero comics lately. There's no action in contemporary comics, only poses." The theme of the new comic, Chaykin says, is "Why *be* a hero when you can just *look* like one." For more on Chaykin's work, with which I feel an ongoing affinity, see Bukatman 1993, chap. 1.

16 In Jerry Lewis's *The Nutty Professor*, Buddy Love is the hypermasculine version, the *armored body* if I may, of the vulnerable "little man," Professor Kelp. In Richard Lester's *Superman III*, Superman turns evil and ultimately battles Clark, whose morality provides its own kind of armor. The physical split between the characters makes *The Nutty Professor* analogy all the more compelling.

17 And all owe something to cinema's hulking golem of 1920, as well as the Frankenstein monster of 1931.

18 Of course the parodic *Doom Force* is on top of these tendencies as well—the villain castigates his scantily clad partner for covering herself up "like some old woman on a day trip to Alaska."

19 There are no prominent women writers or artists working for Image. DC's Vertigo titles (targeted to older, non-superhero reading audiences) feature Karen Berger (editor), Nancy Collins (writer), Jill Thompson (penciler), and others.

20 My not-very-thorough sampling suggests that the ratio of battle to nonbattle pages in the Image titles is about 3 to 1 or 4 to 1. By contrast, in Marvel's *Uncanny X-Men* no. 310, admittedly one of the chattiest superhero books going, that ratio was exactly reversed.

21 By the way, would we even *know* what irony was if not for comic books?

22 Phil recalls, "There was something in her—in *its* eyes—and I couldn't help thinking of the liberation of Auschwitz—and the look in *their* eyes."

23 Thanks to Sarah Berry for drawing my attention to Douglas and gender.

24 Douglas's studies are particularly relevant in relation to such rituals.

25 Of his family, only Magneto survived internment at Auschwitz, an experience that apparently sensitized him to the issue of discrimination based upon genetic difference.

26 At their worst, however, both "ST:TNG" and *X-Men* tend to wallow in over-obvious emotional allegories.

27 More recently, Alan Moore (of *Watchmen* fame) and a number of artists have produced a more sustained return of those halcyon days of Marvel in their *1963* series, published by Image. The pastiche is so lovingly accurate that some readers, including myself, felt an overwhelming sense that this was how comics were meant to be. The initial *1963* series ended with the members of the Tomorrow Syndicate suddenly finding themselves in the far more brutal and textured universe of Image Comics.

28 My terms are derived from the excellent introductory chapter of Barbara Maria Stafford's *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (1991, 5).

29 Jack Kirby, the creator of the Silver Surfer and so many other heroes, passed away on February 6, 1994, as I was finishing this essay. It is to his memory and his accomplishments that "X-Bodies" is dedicated.

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