BECOMING SUPERMAN: INTERPOLATING TRANSSEXUALITY INTO THE
SUPERMAN NARRATIVE

By

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A thesis submitted to the Graduate Program in Gender Studies
in conformity with the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts

Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario, Canada
November, 2013

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Abstract

Reflecting the masculine ethos of the larger comic book industry, superhero comics continue to be male-dominated spaces. Within comic studies, superhero scholars problematically normalize this androcentrism by reiterating the genre’s masculinist rhetoric, repeatedly positioning superheroes as stoic figures of whiteness, nationhood, heteronormativity and able-bodied masculinity. Although some intervention has been made to challenge these interpretations, scholars fail to acknowledge how transgender and/or transsexual readers evaluate comic heroes. This thesis provides one such intervention into the field, specifically focusing on the last son of Krypton, Superman. Drawing together the work of trans, queer, feminist, psychoanalytic, and monster theorists, my research attempts to “trans” Superman; thus, (re)reading the Man of Steel in a way that distinctly reflects the experiences of those who are denied access to the figure via their/our own gender “transgressions”. By interpolating transsexuality into the Superman narrative, I rewrite the figure’s place within the genre’s cissexist, masculinist history and while doing so, (re)position him as a more suitable hero for the trans community.
Acknowledgments

Many thanks go to Dr. Jane Tolmie for being a boundless source of invigorating theory, comic book wisdom, and moral support. As well, I thank Dr. Eleanor MacDonald for being a second pair of eyes on the project and whose dialogues have inspired a number of ideas. Lastly, I recognize the importance of my peers in Gender Studies, as well as the department’s faculty and staff who always prove to be a sturdy support throughout the writing process.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Reflecting the masculine ethos of the larger comic book industry, superhero comics continue to be male-dominated spaces. Within comic studies, superhero scholars problematically normalize this androcentrism by reiterating the genre’s masculinist rhetoric.\(^1\) Authors such as Peter Coogan and Danny Fingeroth repeatedly position the superhero as a stoic figure of whiteness, nationhood, heteronormativity and able-bodied masculinity. Ironically, scholars who promote this understanding conclude erroneously that reception theory no longer contributes new criticisms to the field of comic studies.\(^2\) What they fail to acknowledge is how their own privileged reading positions produce such repetitive interpretations. On the other hand, authors such as Jeffry Brown, Trina Robbins, and Richard Harrison undermine normalized explanations of the superhero by foregrounding racialized, female and/or queer reading practices. Though these authors make crucial interventions into the field, one particular sect of readers continues to be negated: namely, those whose gender identities do not fall within a cis-sexist\(^3\) matrix of intelligibility.

To address the erasure of transgender and genderqueer identities within comic studies, my thesis investigates how (my) transsexuality is interlinked with the Superman narrative. I challenge the field’s cis-sexist privileging by documenting how transgender/transsexual reading practices perform a critical reevaluation and expansion of the superhero’s cultural significance.

\(^1\) For more information, see Jane Tolmie “Modernism, Memory and Desire: Queer Cultural Production in Alison Bechdel’s Fun Home” (2009).
\(^2\) Peter Coogan, Charles Hatfield and Ben Saunders expressed this sentiment on a panel called “The Future of Superhero Studies” at the 2012 Comic Arts Conference held at San Diego’s Comic-Con.
\(^3\) The terms cis-sexual and cis-gender refer to someone who is not transgender or transsexual. The prefix “cis-” means “on the same side of”, hence cis-sexual and cis-gender describe persons who identify with their birth-assigned sex/gender (versus trans persons, who commonly resist their birth-assigned sex/gender) (Stryker Trans History 22). The term cis-sexist then indicates a larger system of privileging whereby trans persons are understood and treated as inferior to their cis-counterparts.
Drawing together feminist, queer, and trans theory, my research reclaims the superhero for readers, such as myself, who are denied access to the figure via their/our own gender “transgressions”. By interpolating transsexuality (alongside my lived experiences) into the Superman narrative, I rewrite the figure’s place within the genre’s cis-sexist, masculinist history. Furthermore, Superman is dissociated from previous hypermasculine, normative readings and positioned as a more suitable hero for the trans community.

In stating this, I acknowledge that utilizing my own positionality inherently places limitations on my thesis and the identities it can speak to. It goes against the politics of this project to suggest my experiences are an accurate reflection of all trans, genderqueer, and/or gender non-conforming persons. Instead, I place firm boundaries around my research, limiting my analysis to transgender and transsexual comic readers. Supporting information has been gathered from various online communities that document the affection between trans readers and superheroes. However, even within this subset of identities, more attention is placed on transsexual men particularly because of the distinct life experiences that are produced from their/our participation in a pathologizing medical system. It is the histories of these men – individuals who have historically passed as cis-gendered and have “fit into the woodwork” – that share strong commonalities with Superman. It is my intent that the work, although drawing examples from a specific fan base, registers parallels with and appeals to larger trans, genderqueer and/or gender non-conforming communities.

Since there is no academic research on how trans men identify or resist identification with superheroes within comic studies, I turn to trans scholarship as a theoretical foundation for this project. One primary framework that grounds this project is Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah and Lise Jean Moore’s “Introduction: Trans-, Trans or Transgender?” which advocates for a
method of analysis called “trans-ing”. It is key to establish that trans-ing does not necessarily pursue the same work as queering. Queering, which aims to investigate the dynamics of sexuality within a text, implicitly promises to interrogate conceptions of gender as well. Yet, unfortunately many queer theorists fail to fulfill this latter requirement. Relying too heavily on cis-sexist assumptions of gender, queer theory must now be held accountable for this privileging. Continuing the work left unfinished by queer theory, trans-ing acknowledges that the categories of sexuality and gender are not mutually exclusive, while also suggesting that gender must be viewed as tenuous and fluid. The act of trans-ing, as Stryker, Currah and Moore propose it, is meant to explore and explode the gender dynamics operating within a particular text. Since gender is often misconceptualized as having concrete categories, those that do not conform to its regulations are often erased or concealed. Trans-ing seeks to expose these erasures that occur “within, as well as across or between gendered spaces” (Stryker et al. 13). By trans-ing a text, one is simultaneously advocating for a reconceptualization of gender so that it may have other bodily manifestations (as in the corporeal self) or characteristics (particular traits that are recognized as masculine or as feminine) (Stryker et al. 13). In turn, the result of this process liberates previous unintelligible subjects who continue to be held accountable to cis-sexist definitions of gender; subjects who are continually threatened to compromise themselves and their identities through “coercive normalization, or even bodily extermination” (Stryker et al. 13).

By utilizing this method, I trans the figure of Superman so that he may visualize the transsexual experience onto our contemporary cultural landscape. This visualization is precisely what is at stake in accomplishing this work. Theories of representation and reception operating in a variety of fields demonstrate the importance of seeing oneself reflected in culture. Since the
scope of representation is already limited for trans persons, successfully trans-ing an assumed gender normative character becomes all the more important.

With a limited number of prior examples to guide me in accomplishing this task, I hesitantly borrow from queer theory’s conceptual understanding of subtext. With its many examples of excavating queer subtext from various cultural materials, the field offers a method to expand upon. However, unlike some queer theory that invests itself in highlighting the subtle cues or knowing nods placed by artists into their work, this project admits that there is perhaps no conscious trans subtext within the Superman narrative. Since the Superman narrative predates the political signifier “trans” it is difficult to argue that Siegel and Shuster (along with numerous other authors) actively intended to align the character with this identity. Though chronological history seemingly foils my work, as in any worthwhile superhero story, there is always more than meets the eye. Foucauldian discursive analysis demonstrates that these histories are in fact closely linked. The scientific and medical discourses within which each is produced within weave together throughout time to interlink the/my transsexual body with Superman’s.

To demonstrate this connection, my thesis traces the history of transsexuality alongside the history of Superman (Chapter 2). Since both histories are vast, my genealogy is not exhaustive. Rather it is a concise breakdown of the subjects, allowing readers to see the intersections between them. To limit the scope of inquiry regarding transsexuality, I engage with texts that position this identity within medical and scientific histories of bodily normalization. After documenting these histories, I note how the Superman narrative participates in these same scientific and medical discourses. Created by the sons of Jewish immigrants, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster’s Superman originally served as a triumphant figure against Nazi Germany’s eugenic
genocide. However, in later years, the character came to embody the “über-American”, an idealized specimen of patriotism, whiteness, masculinity and heterosexuality. Ironically, in spite of his origins, Superman became a symbol of eugenic idealism, rather than a counter to it. It is this sentiment of bodily control that links the Superman narrative with the medical and scientific discourses used to “treat” transsexuals.

In order to negotiate the vast amount of creative and historical texts featuring or referring to Superman, my investigation primarily focuses on his appearances in comic books. If necessary, in order to highlight a reoccurring motif or theme, reference is made to other media adaptations. The rationale behind this decision is twofold. Firstly, Superman is originally a comic book creation, even though he has also graced the stages of radio, film and television. Additionally, Superman’s roots are greatly intertwined with the history and popularity of the comic book itself, and must therefore be discussed in tandem with the medium’s own history. Secondly, in the comic book universe, there exists a canon of literature for each superhero that is understood to be the definitive mythos or narrative of that character. Although Superman’s canon has been influenced by alternative media sources (for example, kryptonite was first an invention of radio) there nonetheless remains an important reading list within comic books that is said to define the character. This being stated, some comic theorists place great importance on delineating strict guidelines around each incarnation of the hero. They suggest that each author creates a different version of Superman and thus one cannot be compared to the other. Though this is a fairly accurate assessment, my project purposely disregards this analytical structure. Instead, it intentionally charts how certain themes and motifs remain consistent within various Superman stories and therefore references cross generational and cross authored stories together.
In unpacking the discursive histories of transsexuality and Superman, the end result creates an analytical investigation shaped like a double helix. By weaving together these histories and highlighting their points of intersection, I metaphorically produce the same shape at the root of these scientific and medical discourses. As well, the double helix provides a model for the genre of writing this thesis replicates. As mentioned, this project straddles the boundaries between comic and trans studies, but it also intertwines analytical analysis with life writing.

Combining life writing with trans scholarship is not a new idea; rather it debatably serves as a methodological foundation for the field. The speaking of one’s own autobiography, as Jay Prosser discusses it in Second Skins, is in fact a necessity for any transsexual. Often, we find ourselves speaking our first autobiography to a number of medical professionals attempting to “treat” us. Life writing is thus a medium we are already accustomed to and becomes a familiar genre for us to situate our work within.

Part of this life writing includes incorporating my own narrative as a nostalgic comic fan within larger dialogues of affective attachments to the comic text (Chapter 3). It is important I contextualize my feelings within comic culture in general, nostalgia playing a key role in the foundation of the genre and its proliferation. By disclosing various anecdotal details about my boyhood – a prime nostalgic site often paired with the comic text – I note the points at which Superman’s journey comes to mirror my own and the experiences of other trans men, as documented by James Green and Henry Rubin. The juxtaposition of these two narratives creates two concrete, analytical re-readings. Firstly, it undermines previous understandings of Superman as a hypermasculine male ideal by repositioning him as one who carries the trauma of an ambivalent boyhood and male adulthood. Secondly, it brings to the foreground psychoanalytic questions of nostalgia and its role in understanding time, memory, and trauma as trans males
experience it. Additionally, my work raises questions regarding normative conceptions of time and current scholastic inabilities to explain how the nostalgic experience is distinctly embedded on the body of trans persons, thus affecting their interaction with the comic text. By thinking through these and other problems, I reach the conclusion that nostalgia when paired with the trans body can become a productive tool of analysis, crafting a new interpretation of the Man of Steel’s origin story.

Lastly, positioning Superman alongside the trans body highlights the inherent tension between the figure’s status as “hero” or as “monstrous Other” (Chapter 3). As various Superman narratives attest to, such as Brain Azzarello’s *Lex Luthor Man of Steel*, the figure already treads a fine line between being accepted and being ostracized by society. It is understood that Superman’s alien (read monstrous) abilities are only tolerated (and not feared) because he performs approvable acts of valour that do not jeopardize society’s safety and progress. Yet, when Superman does falter and his heroic status is put into question (most often by Lex Luthor) he is rendered an inhuman monster. The character’s monstrosity is only further exacerbated when contextualized alongside the historical degradation of trans individuals as medical “monsters”. Therefore, it becomes necessary to perform an analysis of these two monstrous identities and their effects on each other. Using a variety of work from monster theorists, I investigate how the figure of the monster has been used to exorcise particular subconscious fears of difference and how these same anxieties are worked through in the Superman narrative via the character Bizarro. If, in following Susan Stryker, trans folks reclaim the monster, I suggest we must also (re)position Superman as a monster extraordinaire and reconcile previous normative interpretations of the figure with his corporeal and psychic monstrosity.
The goal of this project is to challenge contemporary understandings of Superman, and superheroes in general, by reconceptualizing the figure through the lived experiences of transgender and transsexual individuals. By blending anecdotal evidence with analytical analysis I create a text that engages scholars working in both comic and trans studies. It is important that the text be as friendly as possible to each field as not to isolate but rather engage the two in a mutual discussion. In doing so, my research broadens the intellectual horizon of each field, highlighting previous absences and challenging cis-sexist privileging.
Chapter 2

Building A Superman: Sex, Comics, and Eugenics

“Fortunately, what has been marred in the flesh -- can be made perfect in metal...”
- Lutor [sic], (Superman’s Metropolis)

In a retelling of the Superman origin story set within Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), evil scientist “Lutor” is hell-bent on creating the perfect human being – which, due to an “old scar”, materializes itself as “Futura”, a metallic replica of Lutor’s lost love. Although Lutor’s need for Futura stems from a longing for emotional reconciliation, it is overshadowed by his thirst for economic domination. No longer able to sustain his mechanical city of steam and heat on the backs of its human workers, Lutor needs an alternative to the physical weakness of the flesh. It is thus through the birthing of Futura – his formidable woman of steel – that Lutor intends to usher in a new age of efficient production. Where flesh can no longer survive, metal will serve.

Similar to Lang’s original film, this adaptation is a comment on labour and class within the age of industrialization. The class commentary developed in the comic text is furthered by the implicit intertextual reference to Mary Shelley’s foundational work, *Frankenstein* (1818). As explored by Daniel Cottom in “Frankenstein and the Monster of Representation”, Victor’s monster acts as a metaphor for classist modes of production and the subsequent representation of the labouring lower class. The creature’s “monstrosity”, Cottom argues, is a representational byproduct of the inability to reconcile with the labourer’s body. Just as the monster must work under the cover of night to aid the De Lancey’s, so as not to frighten the family, so too must the labourer remain an invisible subject. Similarly, Lutor’s workers are banished to toil under the ground, their conversion of physical sweat into steam heat remaining unseen by the middle and upper classes. Here, like the body of Victor’s creation, the labourer warrants physical hiding, the act of which is evidence of the working body’s supposed monstrosity.
However, the comic narrative can also be read in more general terms as a commentary on the malleability of the human body and its subsequent “potential”. Potential within the comic and the film is measured in terms of work and capital, how much the body can do in the shortest amount of time to produce the greatest amount of physical and monetary output. Yet, one can argue that “potential” also denotes the potential for morphologic change, in other words what the body can be made into. What is the potential of flesh?

Lutor’s attempt to defy the limits of the human body invokes the image of early- to mid-twentieth-century eugenic scientists who also sought to increase human potential via the study of biology. It is only appropriate to characterize Lutor, as we do eugenic scientists, as extreme, ruthless, and villainous. The connection between Lutor’s actions and the horrific images of genocide, mass sterilization, and non-consenting human experimentation are unavoidable. Yet, what are often overlooked in the popular lexicon of these atrocities are the complex discourses eugenics raise about the body’s ability to be transformed. For instance, within the comic text it is only after Lutor succeeds in building Futura that “Clarc Kent” [sic] discovers his own identity as the literal man of steel. Lutor’s actions allow for discoveries of alternative understandings of bodies, specifically bodies that challenge the connection between the stasis of the flesh and humanity.

A reimagining of the Superman narrative set within the film *Metropolis* creates concrete ties to the eugenic movement, which during the 1920s was gaining significant popularity in Europe and abroad. It is not a coincidence that the Superman narrative can also be used to think through the “non-normative” body of the transsexual, a body that inherently challenges the corporeal boundaries of the flesh. What can be therefore read within the Superman story and the transsexual’s journey is a comparable narrative of “embodiment”, particularly one of difference
relating to the body’s inability to be categorized due to its unique materiality. The pairing of the Superman narrative with the transsexual is made possible by three things: first, a documenting of Superman’s creation as a comic book character; second, a knowledge of the Western history of transsexuality; and third, contextualizing both the former and the latter alongside the knowledge of the eugenics movement. Although this account is primarily a historical one, I do also want to highlight for readers the lasting legacies eugenics and neo-eugenics continue to have on the pathologization and medicalization of transsexuals. What is of foremost concern is how eugenic discourses of the body created and continue to create the language of transsexuality and how that same language can be redeployed in a textual analysis of Superman. In other words, it is principally due to eugenics that we have the proper discourses to “trans” Superman – a method inherently invested in challenging the very historical conditions that allowed for its development.

Such a process will be undertaken using a Foucauldian lens of study. Relying specifically of Foucault’s understanding of discourse and discursive formations, I will explore how Superman’s body and that of the transsexual’s enter into a dialogue with one another. The conversation that will ultimately emerge is one that displays the ways in which both bodies become produced by similar historical, medical and scientific discourses and thus allow them in some respect to speak a common language.

This language is not only based on and within discourse but it is also one comprised of a visual taxonomy. What is also at stake is the materiality of the body, and more specifically, the artistic representation of such material. As George L. Hersey’s notes the comic book is but one of many Western art forms that reinforce a preference for a particularly gendered, racial, and classed ideal. In his exploration of “beauty”, Hersey charts how various bodily proportions have been continually recycled throughout time to reaffirm particular material standards of “idealism”.
Though these standards alter slightly throughout time, their continued proliferation points to an overwhelming need to critically interrogate how we come to visualize and construct the body. To this end, this chapter is concerned not only with language but also with image. Together the two combine to form not only the basis of comic art but also a concrete method of analysis to address how particular bodies get produced and organized in and through culture. It is my argument that the way in which eugenics organizes discursive and visual cultures ultimately produces an on-going dialogue between Superman and transsexuality, particularly one that disrupts normative, chronological readings of the iconic hero.

A Note on Methods

As Foucault makes clear in *The History of Sexuality: Volume One* to analyze a “phenomenon” – such as transsexuality, for instance – is to address a multiplicity of discourses “produced by a whole series of mechanisms operating in different institutions” (33). These mechanisms are intrinsically connected to the technologies that sustain them and thus require an examination of those technologies, their necessity and their employment of power (68-69). What is needed then, within the boundaries of this project, is an analysis of the scientific, medical, and national powers that author the superhero’s and the transsexual’s body in a similar discursive manner.

The selecting of these specific categories is not an arbitrary practice. What will carve these discourses out as integral to each other will be the ways in which they each form a “discursive formation” regarding the topics of transsexuality and of Superman. A discursive formation in the Foucauldian sense is “a social process that organizes the emergence of statements” (Namaste 75). An investigation of it therefore pays particular attention to *how* statements come to be arranged (Namaste 75). Furthermore, what also falls under scrutiny is
how such formations come to be proliferated and ultimately normalized within society. At stake here is observing the ways in which the construction of categories comes to produce particular subjectivities since subjects themselves are always produced by their proceeding histories (Barker and Galasiński 12, 31).

To demonstrate how this process comes to manifest itself in reality, I reflect on both the study and practice of eugenics as distinct mechanisms of organization. Like the abstract discursive formation, eugenics in both theory and practice creates categories for bodies (which act much like statements here) to be grouped in. Arguably, it is largely because of eugenics that the category “normal” even exists in popular lexicons, and as Foucault makes mention, to control the category normal is to control power itself (Carter 25). What will be reflected on is how the power to classify and organize bodies wielded by eugenics creates a system wherein Superman and the transsexual can become historically and discursively linked.

The Role of Eugenics within Comic History

As originally developed in the late 19th century by Francis Galton, cousin to Charles Darwin, eugenics as a theory and as a practice believed that biological factors, not environmental influences, could explain and regulate racial, cultural, and social differences between populations (Turda 19). In Galton’s works, science is a means to an end; by examining both mental and physical hereditary qualities, one can eventually develop said qualities to their utmost advantage (Burke and Castaneda 6). Or, in Galton’s own words, eugenics is “the science of improving the stock” (quoted in Turda 20). The assumption here is that one can hierarchize humanity based on each individual’s biological contributions to the species (Turda 20).

Key to eugenics is its double-fold process. First, eugenics as a theory seeks to describe and quantify particular populations of people as either “ideal” or “inferior” based on economic
and moral “productivity” (Ladd-Taylor 327). During the early years of the movement, those understood to be “pollutants” of the national body were not necessarily racial or ethnic “outsiders” but marginalized “insiders” who were either institutionally or socially marked as physically disabled, mentally ill, and/or criminal (Bashford and Levine 6, Turda 20). Secondly, eugenics as a practice puts forward various tactics towards curbing and multiplying the reproduction of particular populations, namely by improving the fertility of some (“positive” eugenics) and lessening the fertility of others (“negative” eugenics) (Bashford and Levine 5). To accomplish this, eugenic practitioners and lobbyists sought to intervene into both public and private spheres, specifically focusing on educational, governmental, medical, and familial institutions. Programs such as compulsory sterilization and government-funded maternal and child health services, coupled with such legislative maneuvers as the legalization of birth control, systemized reproduction thereby bringing it under eugenic control (Ladd-Taylor 327).

Eugenics is, as Hersey notes, also a practice heavily invested in the proliferation of beauty. For Galton, one’s physical beauty is an overt symbol of one’s superior physicality and moral character, a proper genetic marker of one’s worthiness (Hersey 103). The visual marker of the face is of key importance to Galton whose interest in physiognomy led him to pioneer a photographic technique called “composite photography”. Hersey describes Galton’s method and the subsequent results as follows,

His photographs were made by successively projecting lightly exposed facial images of different people on the same plate. For members of the same family the result was what might be called a family face, one in which the transient or uncharacteristic features of single individuals came out underexposed while the dominant traits, which reappeared in face after face, showed up in exact repetition and thus achieved firm contrast (104).
Galton then uses this technique to characterize and identify various classes of “degenerates”, including criminals, prostitutes, and the mentally ill, as seen in Figure 1.1 below.

![Composite photos](image)

Figure 1.1 A series of composite photos produced by Galton of men convicted of larceny.

In identifying the distinct facial characteristics of each grouping, in this instance of male criminals, Galton attempts to create a visual database of worrisome physical characteristics. The assumed purpose was that the creation of a coherent set of physical properties would allow him (and others) to recognize morally dubious characters at a glance (Hersey 104). The body thus plays a significant role in eugenics, as it becomes another way in which an individual’s worth is appraised.

The ultimate goal of the eugenic movement is to make real the vision of “human perfectibility” (Turda 66). However, during their pursuit for the ideal, eugenic scientists subsequently gave rise to the concept of “the normal”. In his book *The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America 1880-1940*, Julian B. Carter describes “normality” as

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4 Galton’s reliance on the materiality of the body to reveal itself as “degenerate” certainly opens up doors to exploring the concept of “passing” and what it means for the body to reveal itself as “Other”. It stands outside the purview of this chapter to engage in depth the histories of passing as it pertains to the trans community and its ultimate reliance on larger histories of white supremacy. I do, however, touch upon this topic briefly in Chapters 2 and 3, the former regarding the construction of masculine physical ideals and the latter regarding histories of monstrosity.
inherently linked to Galton’s politic. The category, he argues, contains “a distinctly eugenic element of judgment about which human bodies are best” (4). He goes on to state,

It also involve[s] what would turn out to be a productive definitional confusion between what is common and what is ideal: for Galton and many of his colleagues, it was important to know what was ordinary, frequent, or common precisely so that one could shift the norm in the direction of the ideal (4).

Yet, what ultimately resulted was the proliferation of the category “normal” within the popular lexicon of “everyday” citizens. While the discursive boundaries between the two words continued to blur, eugenics became more frequently presented in cultural events as a pursuit for normality and thus an eradication of the “abnormal”.

In the United States, this discursive collapse peaked in 1945 with the unveiling of “Norma” and “Normman” at the Cleveland Health Museum (see Figure 1.2). Created in 1943 by artist Abram Belskie in partnership with obstetrician-gynecologist Robert Latou Dickinson, the statues were composed from the average measurements of 15,000 men and women between the ages of 21 and 25, the vast majority of whom were white. Standing erect within the exhibit walls, the two stood as representations of “normal” America or rather, “America the normal”. Of course, the idea of normality – of Norma and Normman being the “everyday couple” – cannot be unlinked from their race (white), their sexuality (heterosexual), their physicality (able-bodied, cis-gendered) and their age (youthful). Upon seeing the exhibit, anthropologist Harry Shapiro confirmed that Norma and Normman are examples of “what is”, not “what ought to be” (Cogdell 197-8). Here again is the blurring of the fine line between the “normal” and the “ideal”. In coding the statues as average – via their name, their appearance, and the accompanying mathematical and scientific research – there is an effective erasure of the eugenic principles steering Belskie and Dickinson’s work.
Interestingly, the “normality” of the couple was eventually undermined when a local Cleveland newspaper attempted to capitalize on the popularity of the exhibit by hosting a competition entitled “The Search for the Living Norma” to increase the paper’s circulation (no such competition was created for Normman). Beginning in 1945, the paper offered a prize of war bonds to any woman whose measurements matched Norma’s. The search for the “real life” Norma lasted one year, with the winner admittedly failing to meet all criteria perfectly. The competition’s inability to discover a “living Norma” for such a lengthy period of time (and then, not even to meet its own winning criteria) is telling evidence of the statue’s place in eugenic discourses. Norma and Normman are not, as their names may indicate, average American youths. Instead they are the strategic creation of “factual evidence” manipulated by scientific ideology guised in plaster composite. Indeed the very medium in which the two came to fruition is equally revealing of the eugenic influence. Just as an artist may form and mold a sculpture, so too do eugenic scientists attempt to mold human material to their ideological will (Cogdell 198).
The human body, like the lifeless plaster material used for Norma and Norman, can be rendered a malleable, designable object.

Human plasticity is a quintessential theme both in formal eugenic literature as well as in popular, historical discourses of the subject. Eugenics creates an investment in the possibilities of the human body and promises via scientific intervention and modern technology to fulfill its ideal vision of “tomorrow”. Indeed, this abstract time and space of “tomorrow” became a symbol of the movement’s end goal. Tomorrow promises endless possibilities for the human body, while simultaneously demanding dutiful compliance to the modification of today’s people. To this degree, the motif of tomorrow became enmeshed with the theme of human potential (read the potential of the flesh).

One New York Times article, originally published in 1929, reveals how interrelated the two subjects are. Entitled, “Science Pictures a Superman of Tomorrow” the article gives a synopsis of the various technologies eugenic scientists utilize to alter human genetics in the pursuit of biological, anatomical, and social perfection. It is worth quoting this article at length in order to visualize the extent to which this publication summarizes the discursive forces that create a concrete link between Superman and transsexuality. In his opening, author H. Gordon Garbedian states, “From the dawn of history, when the primitive man strolled from his cave […] mankind has dreamed of achieving the superman. […] Now science provokes serious thought by envisioning real probabilities of a superior race of human beings” (xx8 [sic]). This “superior” human, Garbedian goes on to suggest, is coming to fruition through “brilliant” experiments which have brought about startling revelations regarding how the “form, color [sic], size, structure, habits and sex of certain animals may be changed or reversed” (xx8 [sic]). He goes on to elaborate on such possibilities, citing a case from Dr. John A. Abel of John Hopkins
University, an institution that will later go on to be one of the first to perform sex reassignment surgeries in the United States.

The example may be cited here of the case of a young woman under the observation of [Dr. Abel] whose sex characteristics of a woman were changed to those of a man by excess secretions of ductless glands caused by a tumor. Dr. Abel points out that all her secondary feminine characteristics, physical and psychological, were of the opposite sex. Her normal sex characteristics were restored by an operation on the tumor.

Although this one caption gives us a rich number of topics to investigate, what is important for the purpose of this paper is the way in which technologies of the body, specifically regarding one’s sexual morphology, are explicitly linked to the production of “tomorrow”. More specifically, it is the ambiguously sexed body, and its subsequent performance of gender, paired with medical and technological practices of “care”, that act as gateways for achieving the “ideal”. Therefore, a discussion of “tomorrow” and the future “superman” is subsequently incomplete without addressing categories of normality that are – as this example makes clear – both explicitly and implicitly based on the eugenic movement’s assumptions regarding the properly sexed and gendered body.

The language around tomorrow and the chosen case study Garbedian explores are further highlighted by the image that accompanies the article’s text, seen below in Figure 1.3. Appearing in the image’s foreground is a scientist bent over, working at a microscope. Various tubes and jars surround him, while an array of human skulls lay organized on a shelf in the background. Looming above the scientist, at the image’s centre, is as Cogdell describes, “a massive Hellenistically-styled, nude male sculpture, almost in the pose of Rodin’s *Thinker*, which presumably was to be the eventual ideal outcome of the scientist’s efforts” (200). Where Cogdell sees an explicit connection to the Ancient Grecian representation of human perfection via the medium of sculpture, I interpret a Gothic Promethian creation rising out of the
metaphorical fire with a clenched fist in conquest or rage (an interpretation inspired by Susan Stryker’s work, which will be explored in Chapter 3). The monstrous figure lacks the refinement and tranquility associated with Rodin’s sedate thinker, instead it is a body clenched and tensed in shame (as it hides its face), pain (as its abdominal muscles contract), and/or anger (with fist held high). Washed in black and white, and foregrounding the laboratory tools of a calculating scientist, the image could substitute as a moment from Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus*.

Predating the idealistic aspirations of the eugenic movement by nearly a century, Shelley’s novel, written in 1818, is accredited as being the first work (in the “modern”, Western world) to develop the concept of the “superman” (Andrae 86, Coogan “Superhero” 126). In addition, the novel is also credited as being the literary cornerstone of the “superhero” genre (Coogan “Superhero” 126). What is interesting here is to observe how the themes of
“tomorrow”, technology, and morphological malleability do not suggest a betterment of society – as the eugenic movement describes – but rather a deterioration of humanity. Unlike the Hellenistic-inspired man accompanying Garbedian’s newspaper article, Frankenstein’s monster is a markedly horrific outcome. The “superman” of the novel is not a remarkable cog in the “pure” and “strong” national body but rather a piercing thorn in its side.

Shelley’s text suggests that the man of “tomorrow” exists far too outside the social norm to act as a successfully “productive” member of society. Comic scholar Peter Coogan points directly to the moment in which the monster demands a mate as the point of no return regarding the creature’s salvation. In asking to “procreate” the monster poses an explicit threat to humanity through its potential to replicate, to populate the world with extraordinary beings (128). The symbolic death of humanity as symbolized by the monster, who itself is composed of dead flesh, is only fought off via the physical alienation of the creature (Coogan “Superhero” 128).

By the end of the narrative, the monster is forcibly banished to live forever in the wilds of the Artic, in a location akin to Superman’s “Fortress of Solitude” (traditionally located in the Artic, the ice fortress is built by the hero as a necessary retreat and refuge from humanity). If Shelley’s *Frankenstein* begins the generic convention of the “superman” it also establishes particular generic rules for the character that are subsequently broken and reshaped. Unlike those who will follow, Shelley’s “superman” is not an upholder of law and order, or a national symbol of progress and modernity. The monster here is instead a threatening menace that should be killed, and if not, isolated and robbed of its power (Andrae 88).

Although rarely figuring into the explicit history of Superman, Shelley’s ideas regarding extraordinary beings – which would be subsequently built upon by the rising eugenic movement – implicitly informed a number of texts that historians do credit as the central inspirations for the

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For a deeper analysis of the politics of monstrosity and Superman see Chapter 3.
Man of Steel. Two of the most notable texts are Edgar Rice Burroughs’ *Tarzan*, which came to Siegel and Shuster in the form of Hal Foster’s comic-strips of the same name (1928), and Philip Wylie’s *Gladiator* (1930). The accredited impact *Tarzan* had on Siegel and Shuster is most commonly attributed to Shuster’s own interest in bodybuilding (Jones 70). A popular pursuit in the 1920s, bodybuilding offered young boys the ability to obtain a physique much like that of their comic-strip heroes. More importantly though, bodybuilding became one of the many mechanisms that sought to discipline and control the body on behalf of the nation. Under the banner of eugenics, the body became something to regulate and control. As Fae Brauer and Anthea Callen note in their introduction to *Art, Sex and Eugenics*, movement, gesture, exercise, posture, and speed all came under surveillance through inspections, reports, surveys, measurements and imaging (6). For eugenicists, a healthy body signaled one free of physical and moral contamination; it was therefore imperative to encourage citizens to radiate such health by participating in proper nutritional and hygienic habits, and in physical cultures such as bodybuilding (Brauer and Callen 23). The dispersion of promotional imagery of the physically fit, often male body, in visual culture served to normalize and naturalize the radiantly healthy white body. Additionally, such imagery sought to inspire citizens to emulate such fitness goals in order to “accelerate evolution and enhance Western civilization” (Brauer and Callen 7, 24-25).

Some of the most commonly photographed and displayed bodies were those of white male athletes, often posed in various stages of undress. The popularity of the athlete’s body in 1920s visual culture could be seen in various popular publications of the time, eventually culminating a decade later in 1930 with the publication of *The Superman* magazine (see Figure 1.4 below). Founded by Lt. Col. Graham Seton Hutchinson, the magazine used revealing photographs of men posing alone and together as a means of “heroizing and aestheticizing the

6 See Chapter 3 regarding continuing legacies of surveillance and trans bodies.
male body” (Brauer and Callen 27). The overt sexuality of such images were tempered by the scientific lens in which they were presented; nudity was crucial in assessing and celebrating the healthy, white body (Brauer and Callen 26).

![Superman Magazine Cover](image)

Figure 1.4 Front cover image for *The Superman* magazine (Volume 1, Number 2), published November 1930.

The frequent parading of male bodies has not decreased with time; although the overt discourses of ideal racial purity and genetic stock may have faded from immediate sight. For instance, human physiologist Greg Wells is well known for the book *Superbodies*, which explores the genetic and physical makeup of top athletes. The content of the book was

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7 A more recent example of this phenomenon was released in 2013. Written by John Romaniello and Adam Bornstein, the lengthy entitled *Man 2.0 Engineering The Alpha: A Real World Guide to an Unreal Life: Build More Muscle. Burn More Fat. Have More Sex* walks through particular training techniques for men in order to gain a more masculine, athletic physique (and assumedly with that a more dominant social status). It is worth quoting at length the back cover that reads, “Men want to be ripped, confident, and successful. We want to look great and enjoy the very best that life has to offer. But we can’t do that if we’re feeling fat, unhappy, weak, or overwhelmed by life. You have the chance to achieve greatness. You have the potential to build an empire, to singlehandedly cut down a forest, or to conquer a nation. You are a man, and there is no limit to what you are capable of doing” (Romaniello and Bornstein). Continuing with this eugenic, essentialist, racist rhetoric the authors pen a short excerpt for Men’s Fitness
subsequently converted into an informative television series and aired during Canada’s national broadcast of the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. In one episode, Wells describes Olympian athletes as “rare and amazing species” (“Greg Wells”). Action shots of the competitors are inter-spliced with computer-generated microscopic close-ups of their muscles, lungs, hearts, and blood cells at work – showcasing the external and internal superiority of the pro athlete’s body. Positioned much like the men in *The Superman*, Wells’ athletes act as model figures one should emulate. Indeed, he even encourages readers at the back of his book to adopt his “easy-to-follow plan that shows how everyone can learn from the pros to improve their health and performance” (Wells).

Here again we see the recycled investment of policing and subjecting the body to rigorous control and critique under the banner of health and physical culture.

With the pervasive imagery of elite, athletic bodies on display for consumers’ gazes, coupled with eugenic discourses of beauty, cleanliness and physical conditioning, it is understandable why young Shuster may have been attracted to Tarzan, a quintessential model of bodybuilding culture (see Figure 1.5 below). Foster’s drawing of the figure – bare chested with a neat loin cloth covering the genitals – exposes Tarzan’s body in a similar manner as the men in Hutchinson’s magazine. It allows readers to gaze at his body, carefully inspecting his ideal physicality. Interestingly, Tarzan is referred to in the original pulp novels as a “superman”. His physique is not only a testament to a heroic regiment of physical activity, but also to the figure’s eugenically ideal white, colonial ancestry (Coogan “Superhero” 159). The character’s “super-ness” is then a result both of his well-formed body and of the marked racial superiority associated to with it (as juxtaposed against the wild, uncivilized apes he shares his environment

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Magazine that reads, “You can’t deny it – part of the appeal of lifting weights and building muscle is to look and feel more powerful than the next guy. To be the alpha male among your buddies. But to do this, you have to be willing to work harder and more ferociously than you are. [...] This is highly evolved fitness” (Romaniello and Bornstein “Alpha” 71).
with). The overt racial overtones thus discursively suggesting, as the eugenic movement did, that bodily perfection is a task only afforded to whiteness.

Relying heavily upon popular tropes of imperial expansion (tropes that still linger heavily in contemporary culture), *Tarzan* relies on the extreme exoticising of Africa and its social cultures. Depicted by Burroughs, and subsequent comic artists, as a place of “wonder, mystery, and danger” Africa became a convenient backdrop associated with “ant-men and weird beasties”; its “primitive” geographies and peoples becoming fertile territory for playing out the once noble calling of the “White Man’s Burden” (Mautner 1-2). Undoubtedly, powerful echoes of the civilizing project can be detected in the Superman narrative. For instance, in John Byrne’s 1986 reboot of the Superman title, Lara – Superman’s Kryptonian mother – describes Earth as wild and uncontrolled, with the very sight of its “savage” habitants forcing her to recoil in horror (see Figure 1.6).
However, Jor-El reassures his wife that Earth’s yellow sun will provide their child with immense power, in time allowing him to become “the supreme being on that planet, almost a god” (6). It is understood then that with this power Superman will grow to rule humanity, eventually instructing them in “proper Kryptonian ways” (6). It is thus the job of Superman, as presented by the patriarch Jor-El, to bear the burden of his Kryptonian superiority and subsequently civilize Earth’s people.

Although great detail will not be provided here, Wylie’s *Gladiator* also plays a key role in laying the foundation for Superman to emerge. Wylie’s work is, unlike *Tarzan*, a satirical, science-fiction tale focused on Hugo Danner who, via his father’s experimentation, is turned into an invincible man. Key here is the repeated use of science to achieve the perfect specimen, whereas Tarzan’s perfection is presented as an innate quality of his race, of which he is regarded as a supreme specimen. Through his father’s technologies, Danner is given the propitiative strength of an ant and the leaping abilities of a grasshopper – the same abilities Superman is afforded in the first published incantation of the hero (Jones 78-79). Again, an explicit link to
eugenics can be made via the presentation of technology as necessary to facilitate the birth of the ideal – quite literally here, as Danner is experimented on in-utero.⁸

It is suggested by historians that both these generic examples form the basis for Siegel and Shuster’s work on Superman. The common themes of racial and technological perfection reach a climactic fruition in the creation of Superman’s home planet, Krypton (as noted early in Byrne’s reimagining of the planet). Although Krypton only registered as a minor blimp in the first publication of Superman, Siegel and Shuster further developed its importance in their 1939 newspaper strip. Described as, “so far advanced in evolution that it bears a civilization of supermen – beings which represent the human race at its ultimate peak of perfect development,” Krypton is the visualization of the eugenic dream (quoted in Tye 40). Although Siegel and Shuster are certainly not proponents of the movement, it is my argument that the cultural influences at the time already had elements of eugenics infused within them. Comic scholar Chris Murray accounts for this process when he argues that the comic text is not solely “the work of writers, artists and editors,” but is rather “a ‘multi-dimensional’ space” where meaning is made (147). In other words, comics are not only crafted through words and pictures, but by the discourses that circulate in and through culture. The acts of reading and viewing them then become processes of engagement with these discourses and an understanding that the two – comics and discourse – are implicitly acting with each other to produce meaning (Murray 150). It is therefore understandable how one can perceive popular eugenic sentiments in Siegel and Shuster’s work. Superman is thus not solely their creation but a product rendered through a variety of discursive forces, which ultimately produce a multiplicity of readings for the character.

⁸ The motif of “birthing” as indicated to here and in the chapter’s introduction is one that will be further analyzed in Chapter 3, specifically regarding “medical monsters” and gender politics.
Technologies of Eugenics and the “Creation” of Transsexual Bodies

For many of the artistic works previously mentioned, their selected medium often reveals additional discursive links. The science fiction genre, and comic books in general, owe many of their generic origins to pulp magazines. Pulps, which derived their name from the cheap wood pulp paper they were printed on, were known for their sensationalized stories and over-the-top cover art. As well as printing science fiction narratives (Amazing Stories, Wonder Stories), pulps also published horror (Weird Tales, Terror Tales), hero or crime stories (The Shadow, Doc Savage), and erotic fiction (Focus). Although pulps often became the quintessential medium for outlandish and often-problematic narratives, they also created a space where flying men, monsters, caped crusaders, and sexual “deviants” could mingle in textual (inter)play (a space that would translate itself into the comics it inspired). It is no coincidence then that the one of the first publishers of pulp science fiction magazines, Hugo Gernsbeck, was also the founder and publisher of Sexology – a magazine that often presented the “stranger side” of sex to a popular audience (Meyerowitz 32).

Sexology as a study is the interdisciplinary, scientific investigation of human sexuality and what are now known as gender identities. The exact origins of the discipline are contestable but are commonly attributed to Richard Freiherr von Krafft-Ebing who in 1886 published Psychopathia Sexualis. Although largely paired with Krafft-Ebing’s work, sexology is also deeply linked to the eugenic movement, which sought to make public discourses of sex (Stern 184). In its quest to certify “fit” and “unfit” individuals through systemic, scientific measurements, eugenics opened up the possibility to study sex as a “legitimate” scholarly pursuit and also allowed public individuals an opportunity to discuss the often-taboo subject. In “ outing” sex, eugenics sought to “take control of human existence by exposing individual sexual
behaviour and reproductive capacity to public intervention” (Burke and Castaneda 7). It is unsurprising then that Krafft-Ebing’s work in sexology took on a pathologizing lens of “sexual inversions” (including homosexuality and/or sadomasochist practices, as well as cross-gendered identification) in an attempt to identify, diagnose, and treat “deviant” individuals and behaviours. As Pat Califia puts bluntly, “In the world of Krafft-Ebing, there is no such thing as a benign sexual variation. Everyone who departs from reproductive, monogamous, male-dominant heterosexuality is described as criminally insane” (13). However, his work ironically created the frameworks for conceptualizing and articulating transsexuality and subsequently allowing individuals to transition genders medically and technologically (Prosser and Storr 75).

Amongst this first generation of sexologists, which includes Krafft-Ebing, were individuals such as Magnus Hirschfeld – a pioneering physician and activist – who attempted to pair some of the core eugenic beliefs regarding biology, hereditary, and society with progressive attitudes of sexual diversity. As a eugenicist, Hirschfeld believed in biological explanations for human behaviour and “sexual intermediaries”. He was often at odds with colleagues who viewed sexual nonconformity as Krafft-Ebing did, as a disease (Rudacille 37). Typically viewed as “an organic defect that should not be passed on to future generations”, sexual “deviants” were labeled as degenerates, as individuals who possessed weak or damaged genes (Rudacille 38). This category was of course not limited to homosexuals, transsexuals, or fetishists, but was also actively applied to the sexually promiscuous (particularly women), alcoholics, and the mentally ill. Using the same scientific principles as his detractors, Hirschfeld argued instead that so-called deviants were simply natural evolutionary variations within the human species (Stern 175). Interestingly, it was through his work in eugenics and sexology that Hirschfeld adopted his activist title, espousing to eliminate the persecution of “sexual intermediaries”, otherwise known
as individuals who did not conform to heteronormative and cis-normative identities and performances of sex and gender (Rudacille 34).

Hirschfeld’s work on sexual intermediaries would lead him to classify four different types of individuals that he believed could be suitably articulated by such a category. The first type deals specifically with ambiguous genitalia wherein he places “hermaphrodites” and “pseudo-hermaphrodites,” now known as intersex individuals. In the second he describes individuals with cross-gendered secondary sex characteristics including men with mammary tissue and women with “manly” beards. Under the third heading he lists persons with “divergent” sexual preferences, including homosexuals, bisexuals and sadomasochists. In the final category Hirschfeld begins to sketch out a rough understanding of individuals who will eventually be known as “trans”. He describes in this group “transvestite” persons who “more or less dress themselves as [the opposite sex/gender] or live totally as such” (Hirschfeld 36-37). It is here within his work *The Transvestites: The Erotic Drive to Cross-Dress* (1910) that the term “transvestite” is coined, simultaneously beginning a language for thinking and articulating trans identities.

Hirschfeld continued to work on the topic of “transvestism” throughout the 1910s into the early 1930s. During this time, he established the Institute for Sexual Science where he performed and subsequently publicized a number of sex reassignment surgeries on patients self-identifying as “transvestites”, the majority of whom were birth-assigned males (Meyerowitz 15). Hirschfeld, working in tandem with other medical practitioners at the Institute, offered a number of different procedures to his patients including hormone therapies to alter secondary sex characteristics, as well as various surgeries to alter chests or genitals. The first noted genital
transformation was indeed arranged through Hirschfeld’s Institute in 1922 and was performed on German-born Dorchen Richter (Meyerowitz 19).

In Weimer culture, before the Nazis gained power in the 1930s, Germany and particularly Berlin where Hirschfeld worked, was a scientific center that also housed a visibly gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender community – which was in some respects tolerated by the majority of citizens (Rudacille 31). So although Hirschfeld’s work proved somewhat anomalous within the broader eugenic movement, his temporal and spatial positioning allowed for a unique and fortuitous culmination of social, scientific, and medical factors that enabled his work to flourish. According to Joanne Meyerowitz there are three key historical reasons why Hirschfeld’s work in Berlin regarding “transvestites” manifested when and where it did. Firstly, new developments in medical technology allowed for the (re)construction of genitalia particularly in individuals either born without the “appropriate” member or for those whose sexual organs were injured in the war. Secondly, the invention of synthetic hormones to treat various glandular diseases made it possible to alter one’s secondary sex characteristics. Thirdly, the development of the theory of bisexuality – namely that humans consist both of masculine/male and feminine/female biological characteristics – sparked a number of campaigns for depathologizing sexual and gendered minorities. Within this paradigm, homosexuals, bisexuals, cross-dressers, transvestites, and sadomaschisitics were seen to be natural variations within a range of sexual and gender-related activities and behaviours (Meyerowitz 21-28). The culmination of these cultural and scientific activities and behaviours (Meyerowitz 21-28). The culmination of these cultural and scientific

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9 “Transsexualism” as defined – in part – by the desire to change one’s sexual morphology “did not appear as a medical category until the late 1940s and early 1950s, when doctors David O. Cauldwell and Harry Benjamin first coined and publicized the English term transsexual and when Christine Jorgensen first appeared in the press” (Meyerowitz 15).

10 Phalloplasties (the reconstruction of the penis) were rarely attempted before WWII, which increased the “necessity” for the procedure (versus vaginoplasties, the reconstruction of the vaginal canal, which had already been available to the public for some time prior). This creates an explicit link between the technologies of transsexuality, (dis)ability, and war which certainly requires further exploration.
forces certainly paved a semi-stable foundation for Hirschfeld to work with trans-identified individuals, oftentimes as he medically oversaw their transition.

Only a few months after Hitler assumed power in 1933, Hirschfeld’s work was halted when the Institute in Berlin was vandalized and looted by a mob of Nazi students. Three days later the students returned to burn the Institute’s archives in public, which included “thousands of books, photographs, questionnaires, and other memorabilia accumulated by Hirschfeld during his thirty years of research” (Rudacille 49). The burning of Hirschfeld’s institute proved to be a significant shift in the cultural landscape of Germany, radically silencing the once-public discourses regarding sex and gender. Eugenics, which offered sexologists potentially liberatory methods for conceptualizing sexual and gender diversity, was immediately mutated and absorbed into the Nazi ethos (which remains the most common political movement to be associated with the practice). It was then only a matter of time, after the establishing of the Nazi dictatorship and police state, that radical eugenic proposals regarding human sterilization and experimentation began to take mass scale effect (Bachrach 25). The overwhelming synthesizing of eugenics with Nazi dogma creates an eternal mark on the movement that cannot and should not be removed. However, we should not completely dismiss how prior to (and during) this era the eugenic movement also opened up a number of discursive doors to allow for the emergence of transsexual identities.  

Although the conditions in which such an identity began are not without fault – namely, that they are grounded within a pathologizing and patriarchal medical system that relies heavily on diagnostic categories of mental “affliction” to “treat” patients – they prove immensely instrumental to the technologies and the sciences that aid in an individual’s transition.

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11 According to Carla van Crist, a transsexual woman living at the time, “sex changes became a rather every day occurrence” in Germany during the years of Nazi rule (quoted in Meyerowitz 48).
Hirschfeld’s deployment of eugenic rhetoric for the recognition and acceptance of trans individuals still remains a rare one. Contemporary culture has shown numerous examples in which the language of eugenics is used to argue against the validity of transgender and transsexual identities. For example, in 1979 Janice Raymond claimed, “What we are witnessing in the transsexual context is a science at the service of patriarchal ideology of sex-role conformity in the same way that breeding for blond hair and blue eyes become a so-called science at the service of Nordic racial conformity” (149). Much more will be said about Raymond’s extreme views of transsexuality in Chapter 3. More than two decades later, reviewed as the most inflammatory book since Raymond’s publication, Bailey’s pseudo-scientific work *The Man Who Would Be Queen: The Science of Gender-Bending and Transsexualism* claims that sexual and gendered minorities are “evolutionary mistakes”. To this end, he goes so far as to justify the screening for and aborting of “gay fetuses”, and to assert this practice as a parent’s right (Park). Most recently Sheila Jeffreys argues that the “transgendering” of young children is akin to eugenic practices of social engineering. Attempting to create a feminist intervention into the field, much like Raymond, Jeffreys asserts that hetero-patriarchal ideologies are “treating” gender variance amongst children through sex-reassignment procedures and thereby ensuring the sterilization of young “deviants” (384). The above examples are just some of the many ways in which eugenic discourses continue to be proliferated in regards to the trans community.

**World War II**

Prior to this section I have attempted to create a brief account of how the eugenic movement touched both the histories of Superman’s creation and of transsexuality, as it is conceptualized in the contemporary Western world. In this following section, I will document how the movement came to fuse these two different objects of inquiry together, discursively and
permanently. It is a process that culminated during the Cold War, specifically as it became visualized and enacted on Christine Jorgensen’s body.

It is an obvious point to make that World War II proved an ideological fighting ground between American militarism and Nazi fascism. In part, this could only happen through America’s erasure of its own history of eugenic experimentation and its public highlighting of Hitler’s extreme investment in the movement. Eugenics then, on which both countries shared strikingly similar ideas (Turda 38), became an entrance point for the American nation to create an ideological fantasy of itself as a tolerant, benevolent country of strength and morality. No such iconic character came to symbolize this notion more than Superman, the pinnacle of “truth, justice and the American way” (*The Adventures of Superman*).

The first comic character to respond to the war in *Action Comics #10*, Superman became a quintessential figure in America’s cultural and ideological fight against the Nazis. Interestingly enough, Superman himself never actually saw combat “over there” within the comic panels. In an attempt to honour the real troops and not provide false hopes to readers, Siegel and Shuster relegated the character’s involvement to “battling the saboteurs and fifth columnists who [would] undoubtedly attempt to wreck [America’s] production of vital war materials” (quoted in Tye 60). Superman, it would seem, would remain a local hero, making sure any underhanded scheming did not interrupt America’s war efforts.

Inevitably though, Superman would catch small glimpses of the war abroad through special issue publications and various comic cover tableaus. In 1940, for example, Siegel and Shuster printed exclusively in *Look* magazine a detailed depiction of the hero’s intervention into the war (see Figure 1.7). Titled “How Superman Would End the War”, the comic depicts Superman single-handedly fighting the Nazi army, grabbing both Hitler and Stalin, and taking
both men to the League of Nations to face sentencing. After its publication a copy of the comic eventually found its way to the writers of Das Schwarze Korps, the weekly newspaper of the SS. In their “review” of the piece, the writers make explicit anti-Semitic references to Siegel’s Jewish heritage and criticize Superman as being an oafish buffoon. The piece ends with the statement, “Woe to the American youth, who must live in such a poisoned atmosphere and don’t even notice the poison they swallow daily” (quoted in Bytwerk).12

Figure 1.7 An exclusive comic by Siegel and Shuster revealing Superman’s theoretical intervention into the war.

On comic covers Superman was given small snippets of combat narratives that saw him “joining war dills, battling ‘Jappteurs,’ and standing up to ‘Mr. Schickelgrubber’ and his ‘so-called master race’…” as Larry Tye describes in his “high-flying” history of the Man of Steel

12 Superman would face similar critique – albeit one free of overtly racist rhetoric – by psychologist Fredric Wertham in the 1950s. In his now infamous Seduction of the Innocent, Wertham argues that comic books are corrupting American youth, increasing teenage violence and delinquency, adolescent sexual promiscuity, and homosexual bonding. Wertham in his campaign against the genre also orchestrated numerous comic book burnings, providing a visual strikingly parallel to the Nazis’ destruction of Hirschfeld’s Institute (as discussed above).
The author notes that these frozen action sequences “[made] the case without having to say it that the real Übermensch was on our side” (60, author’s own emphasis). Tye’s analysis points to interesting discursive collapses whereby America can subtextually reassert its stake in the eugenic goal towards “human perfection”. Superman, who overtly stands against the principles of eugenic idealism through his fight against Nazis powers, is subsequently converted (if he was not already) into a symbol of eugenic goals fully realized. Thomas Andrae aptly summarizes the paradoxical nature of this representation when he suggests that Superman “foreshadows mankind’s highest potentialities and profoundest aspirations but whose tremendous powers, remarkably, pose no danger to its freedom and safety” (89). It is assumedly only because Superman has learned down-home American morals (from the Kents) that he has chosen to use his powers for social betterment. In this respect, Superman became a testament to the power of American ideology and the “goodness” it embodied.

This symbolic meaning is certainly a profound canonical shift as Siegel and Shuster’s character was conceived to be a pain in the establishment’s side (Andrae 99-100). Originally intended to struggle against larger systemic injustices in an attempt to aid disenfranchised members of society, Superman by the mid-1940s had become a cog in the national war machine (Eco referenced in Andrae 100). His battle against “evil” which began against corrupt politicians and violent domestic partners became newly redirected against larger, national targets threatening the American people. Before acting as an operator outside the law, Superman during the war years became an “honorary policeman”, and his previous “radical individualism” was

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13 The Übermensch, translated from German to mean “Overman”, “Superman”, or “Super-Human”, is a concept developed by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883). The übermensch, for Nietzsche, is the ideal in which humanity should aspire towards – although much debate remains as to the particular qualities and characteristics associated with this would be embodiment of perfection. The term would later be picked up by the Nazi Party in the 1930s and became frequently used by Hitler to describe the biologically “superior” Aryan race.
transformed into a “wholesale identification with the state” (Andrae 100). It is then no coincidence that during this same time Superman’s chief archenemy becomes Lex Luthor, “a mad scientist bent on world domination” (Andrae 100). Lex Luthor acted as a perfect symbol for the Nazi state, which had already become synonymous with extreme scientific and technological experimentation in its quest for world dominion. Yet, what is perhaps even more fitting (and ironic) about this pairing is Superman’s struggle against a scientist who participates in creating the same discourses regarding “perfection” and “idealism” that allowed the figure to rise to iconic national status. In an odd harkening back to the original generic convention of Frankenstein’s monster, Superman seeks to resist and attack the very scientist that gave him (metaphorical and discursive) life.

While Superman’s positioning as a symbolic national hero was part of a strategic effort to use popular culture as war propaganda (Murray 141), his relationship to the military also served to boost the longevity of the comic book industry. During the war, the army singlehandedly became the largest customer of comic books, shipping out single issues to GI’s training at home and fighting abroad (Gabilliet 22). This was not the first time militarized masculinities and the cultural imagery of “supermen” had forged an economic and discursive bond. Hutchinson’s magazine The Superman stemmed specifically from his own experience of WWI and the need to (re)glorify the white male body after it had met an unprecedented amount of physical and psychological trauma on the battlefield. In this instance however, the army’s economic investment in comics not only served to uplift soldier morale it also managed to rescue a dying genre that had been worsening in popularity (Gabilliet 34). It was therefore “against the Nazis and the Japanese that the superhero comic,” as well as Superman “came of age” (Costello Secret Identity 5).
Cold War Conclusions

If wartime saw Superman rise to unchallenged heights of glory, the Cold War would solidify the figure’s place in American culture. Additionally, the 1950s would also see the first public American transsexual, Christine Jorgensen, step out of the closet and rise to fame, before a subsequent collapse. The aligning of these historical moments is not coincidental but rather the outcome of building discursive forces regarding science, technology, and medicine throughout the twentieth century. It is not the goal in this concluding section to greatly detail Cold War-era politics and histories. Instead I present one key historical moment that appropriately summarizes the argument of this chapter: namely, that the deployment of eugenic discourses throughout the twentieth century merged particular understandings of the body that allowed for Jorgensen to become a living embodiment of a “trans” rereading of comics.

Christine Jorgensen made headlines in 1952 when the New York Daily News ran the front-page headline “Ex-GI Becomes Blonde Beauty”. Announced as the first American to undergo sex reassignment surgery, Jorgensen rocketed into the American media making “sex change” a household term (Meyerowitz 51). In the accounts of her transition, via radio, television and newspaper interviews, Jorgensen repeatedly presented science as her saving grace. She celebrated her doctors, with their sophisticated understandings of the body – greatly gleaned from Hirschfeld’s work at the Institute – and praised them for restoring her to her natural gender (Meyerowitz 56). The elevation of science in Jorgensen’s story is one element among many that allowed her to paradoxically occupy a safe spot in the public light during an era infused with rigid gender boundaries (Serlin 139). By deploying the “space race” rhetoric wherein science and technology are paired with salvation, Jorgensen crafts a narrative familiar to her public and one that positions her as staunchly American, thus allowing her to avoid national scrutiny.
The same rhetorical politics of the era were often deployed by comic book writers and artists, who in part attempted to capitalize on growing ideologies to rescue a failing medium. Steadily declining in popularity after WWII, the space race – with its renewed vigor in the myth of American heroism – provided a fortuitous backdrop for the medium and its quintessential heroes to regain their popularity (Gabilliet 53). In his analysis of comics as popular propaganda, or “popaganda”, Chris Murray, describes the 1950s space race as a time of heightened utopian ideals, specifically regarding the “atomic age” and its explicit investment in technology and science (149). Where technological and scientific invention were previously the mother of all consuming evil – as embodied by Luthor’s own villainess – the two were now seen as tools of moral “good”. Murray notes how the terrain of comic book covers again worked to solidify these ideological links. He draws specifically from *Action Comics #101*, published in 1946, which lays the groundwork for the coming atomic age. On the cover (Figure 1.8), Superman is seen filming an atomic blast from on high. Murray argues that Superman’s direct association with atomic power serves both parties equally, whereby Superman’s documenting of the blast legitimates atomic power as a necessary defense against tyranny and Superman, in turn, is legitimated as a proper defender of American democratic values (149).
The underscoring of one’s Americanness, via the support of science, technology and militarism, is one that is continually reiterated in Jorgensen’s narrative – predominantly by outside reporters. In his must-read article “Christine Jorgensen and the Cold War Closet”, David Harley Serlin traces how Jorgensen and her transition were positioned within the larger cultural trope of the soldier’s story, which due to the Korean War continued to have a strong hold on America’s public imagination. As he explains, headlines such as “Miss Jorgensen Returns from Copenhagen: Ex-GI Back ‘Happy to be Home’… made explicit the connection between Jorgensen’s arrival back in the United States and the soldier’s return home from war” (143). Indeed, he goes on to note,

even Christine’s parents framed the discussion of their (new) daughter’s transformation in terms of military service. In a Daily News piece, “Folks Proud of GI Who Became Blonde Beauty,” father George declared that “[She] deserves an award higher than the Congressional Medal of Honor. She volunteered to undergo this guinea pig treatment for herself and to help others.” Florence Jorgensen expressed the delight and frustration similar to that of many army mothers when she explained that, “You send a person over [to Europe] and you have a completely different person coming back” (145).
Couched within the grand narrative of American militarism, the potential anxieties Jorgensen’s story and her transition could evoke become tempered by larger nationalist frameworks of duty, independence and survival. Furthermore, the language of Jorgensen’s journey captured not only the “step from man to woman,” as Meyerowitz points out, “but suggested a larger cultural leap from 'ex-GI,' the quintessential postwar masculine representation, to 'blonde beauty,' the hallmark of 1950s white feminine glamour” (62). The gendered aesthetic projected by Jorgensen was further heightened by the press which used a number of understood cultural conventions — such as fashion photography, “behind the scenes” reportage, and the reprinting of personal letters — to glamorize her life in a manner akin to Hollywood starlets (Serlin 141). Indeed, Jorgensen herself suggested that in order to prove her authenticity she had to in many respects surpass cultural idols of femininity, becoming “super-female”, so as to remove any masculine traits that may arouse suspicion (Meyerowitz 79). The discursive outcome of these various reporting styles and Jorgensen’s own gender presentation effectively normalized her in the public’s eye and “secured her reputation as a sterling example of what constituted a ‘real American woman’” (Serlin 141). In other words, Jorgensen’s gender identity was perceived as nonthreatening because it conformed to larger socially acceptable standards of femininity rooted in national ideologies of whiteness and heteronormativity.14

Yet, despite the positive attention Jorgensen’s fame would not last. Six months after the first breaking headline it was reported that she did not undergo a “complete” sex reassignment surgery. Medical experts testified that Jorgensen did not receive a vaginoplasty in Cophenhagen but underwent an orchidectomy, which solely involves the removal of the testes (Serlin 140). As Serlin notes, in less than a year Jorgensen abruptly went from “[American] ‘glamour girl’… to medical oddity and psychological subject” (140). No longer able to support herself through

14 This observation enters into larger histories of surveillance briefly touched upon in Chapter 3.
television, radio and newspaper interviews, Jorgensen agreed to headline in a prominent Las Vegas supper club-cabaret. And it is here where I must draw the reader’s attention to the interesting act Jorgensen would perform. After entertaining guests with comedic stories and autobiographical details of her transition, Jorgensen would end her number “parading around on stage dressed in a Wonder Woman costume and knee-high boots while holding ignited sparklers” (Serlin 159). As Serlin notes, though the costume can be read as a nod to her former military identity – Wonder Woman herself being the All-American female comic heroine that assisted the Allies in WWII – it is instead more salient to understand this performance within larger histories of displaying cultural and medical oddities for entertainment (159). Dressed as an “exaggerated cartoon” Jorgensen became a “freak” on display (Serlin 159).

Although Wonder Woman has her own history apart from Superman, what I propose here to readers is the fittingness of the costume imposed upon Jorgensen. What other result could there have been? Atop her body, the histories of comics and transsexuality merge in a tangible visceral way that confirms a meaningful link between the two that cannot be ignored. Jorgensen, in her moment as Wonder Woman, performs the first trans-ing of a comic hero. She physicalizes the building discursive histories of science, technology, eugenics, militarism, and transsexuality and reveals how ultimately all are coded within the comic text. This moment opens the door for us to move into contemporary comic scholarship and to begin reevaluating previous androcentric, cis-sexist interpretations of the Man of Steel.
Chapter 3

The (Super)Man Complex: Trans Males and Superhero Ideals

“When men are growing up and reading about Batman, Spiderman, and Superman these are not fantasies, these are options.”
- Jerry Seinfeld

I spent the majority of my childhood fantasizing I was a superhero. In my make-believe world, I transformed from a clumsy kid to a swift crime fighter. Armed with a trusty steed (a couch) and a tactical backup squad (a team of action figures), I was unstoppable. And so I entertained myself like many young boys do, play fighting through imaginary obstacles to rid the world of evil ne’er-do-wells. However, being born female, I became a slight wonder to my parents, who assumed my tomboyish behaviour would be a passing phase. Ironically, it was. Twenty years later I abandoned the label tomboy, realizing I was in fact a man, or rather a transgender man. With this insight I began an ongoing journey of transitioning, jumping through medical hoops and psychological evaluations, to access a body I felt entitled to since childhood.

The process of transitioning for transsexuals is not solely a physical journey. Lost amidst the sensationalized “before” and “after” images splashed across media outlets and internet image databases (a quick Google search of Chaz Bono, Fallon Fox or Lana Wachowski all turn up hundreds of such images) are the intense psychological explorations trans individuals undergo to acclimatize to their new social genders.\(^{15}\) Transitioning therefore requires one’s body and one’s mind to grow and stretch, both in unison and apart, throughout time to produce a coherent self finally recognizable to and by the trans individual. For transsexual men, part of the ability to recognize the self is to authenticate one’s masculinity and manhood. Given different, but certainly not inadequate “tools of the trade”, transsexual men must learn to navigate masculinity

\(^{15}\) More on this topic can be read in Julia Serano’s *Whipping Girl*. 
in ways both akin to and different from their cis-sexual counterparts. This may include, but is certainly not limited to, the analysis and then reproduction of normative social scripts, as found within the dominant culture, as a means of legitimizing one’s male gender (Noble 35). Though trans and non-trans men alike may use this tactic, the position transsexual men may read from can produce some unexpected and extraordinary results. For example, while readjusting to my new gender identity, I relied on my childhood hero, Superman, to guide me in understanding the complexities of masculinity. The (re)turning to a childhood figure is, as S. Bear Bergman explains, a common practice among trans men (31). Yet, the longer I studied the “Superman script”, a “bizarro” outcome unfolded whereby the figure began to reflect and embody my own transsexual journey and masculinity.

This chapter explores how the synchronization of Superman and I came to materialize. I suggest that this could only occur through a particular trans reading of superheroes that intentionally challenges normative understandings of reader responses to the comic text. To read comics from a trans male position is to invoke a particular psychological and corporeal history that rethinks manifestations of boyhood, a supposed beginning of one’s manhood and stereotypical origin of one’s passion for comics. Inspired by Bobby Noble’s work regarding the disruptive categorical power of “trans” I seek to reevaluate normative embodiments and temporalities associated with boyhood and by proxy the male body.16 Trans experiences of boyhood – as a boy/boi/tomboy/girl – as well as the individual’s subsequent reflection upon this time – as a grown female-to-male (FTM)/trans man/transsexual man – has the capability to rethink previous logics of time as they are tied to the gendered body. What is particularly at stake is the articulation of this disruption and its subsequent place within understandings of

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16 See in particular “Refusing To Make Sense: Mapping the In-Coherences of Trans” (2007) and “Making It Like a Drag King: Female to Male Masculinities and the Trans Cultures of Boyhood” (2009).
nostalgia. The contentious temporal space of boyhood (for do trans men really have a boyhood?), coupled with the nostalgic response, will undoubtedly affect contemporary comic scholarship, as both categories remain integral aspects of the superhero’s appeal.

Of course, this is not the only possible trans reading of superheroes. Mine is simply one story amidst many of trans individuals who share similar revelations. Though there does not yet exist an extraordinary number of documented stories on the topic, some can certainly be found within online fan communities, personal blogs, and magazine websites. For instance, one blogger “Rachel”, who identifies herself as “a post-operative transsexual woman”, describes the history and appeal of Superman’s underrated counterpart Supergirl (“About Rachel’s Blog”, “Supergirl 101”). Although she makes no explicit reference to her gender identity and her attachment to the character, her post makes clear the existence of trans comic readers and their investment in superhero narratives. Riley Chattin, on the other hand, has published a piece on the Advocate’s online website about his identification with Superman, The Hulk, Wolverine and other such heroes as a transgender man. Discussing, for example, his childhood bond with Christopher Reeve’s Superman, Chattin highlights the acute awareness of difference he and the character share. Both their “otherness” and the social isolation associated with being an “other”, bonds Chattin to the hero (1-2). What both Rachel and Chattin reveal implicitly or explicitly are their attachments with comic characters based on a shared sense of experience, particularly rooted in their individual trans identities. It is within these conversations that I situate my own experience.

Additionally, while I resist suggesting this reading can be generalizable to all trans males, I must also admit that this type of work belongs to a particular academic project that nonetheless involves some generalizations. The generalizations in this context are that there are particular
ways of experiencing one’s gender identity that get erased in mainstream or popular culture, but that also simultaneously offer alternative ways of being and understanding. It is my goal to employ these assumed commonalities in an accountable method that accurately attests to the multiplicities of trans lives as well as to the shared challenges and joys that bond us together.

**Superheroes**

A superhero, as defined by Peter Coogan, is a heroic individual who uses their extraordinary abilities in a selfless, pro-social manner. More so, through their narrative exploits, superheroes like other fictional genre characters come to represent the dominant cultural values of the society they are produced within. In this respect, the metaphorical and symbolic meanings of superheroes remain continually in flux, constantly affected by the social and political conditions of the era (Coogan “Definition” 77, Harrison 122). Most often, superheroes come to represent hegemonic, normative and, at times, conservative or neo-liberal values. Through their actions, they often ensure a stable social power structure that draws an unwavering line between those who are included (and thus saved from harm) and those who are not (and thus become assumedly “proper” targets of violence). How these lines come to be drawn are of course mediated by the nation state of the comic narrative, which acts as a symbol of real world political conditions. Superman, who stands for “truth, justice and the American way” (*The Adventures of Superman*), is perhaps the most iconic hero in which to discuss the role of the nation within superhero comics. An alien from Krypton, Kal-El is renamed Clark and “properly” assimilated into American culture – or rather into the nation’s racist and misogynistic roots that form steadfast ideologies of “safety” and “threat” – through his parents Martha and Jonathan Kent. It is only because of these roots that Superman, having the capability to fight for humanity, wants to and more specifically, knows – and importantly, *learns* – how to distinguish good from evil.

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17 For a more in-depth discussion on nation and superheroes please refer to Chapter 1.
(Engle referenced in Fingeroth 47). Here, it is through national ideologies that Superman can achieve his heroic status.

Though most superheroes tend to conform to the moral, lawful and political boundaries set forth by their affiliated homes like Metropolis, Gotham City, or Star City, it should be noted that there are also those heroes who lean further left, and at times further right, than is socially approved of. For example, in the DC Comics’ Universe (DCU) Green Arrow/ Alexander McQueen is often portrayed as a staunch anti-capitalist whose political compass points towards communist affiliations. Furthermore, the Green Arrow franchise has a significant reputation for tackling “raw” or “controversial” stories that are often outside the acceptable purview of comic narratives; one of the most famous stories occurring in 1971, in the two-part series “Snowbirds Don’t Fly/ They Say It’ll Kill Me… But They Won’t Say When” (*Green Lantern/Green Arrow* #85-86), where McQueen discovers his young protégé Roy “Speedy” Harper addicted to drugs (see Figure 2.1 below). Through this series, DCU comic writers and artists attempted to push the boundaries of acceptable superhero plotlines and by proxy, what can be discussed in popular culture at large. Yet, in the same instance it also served to reposition Green Arrow as a strong, anti-drug moralist who echoed conservative, political sentiments of the era. In this respect, superheroes are not always clear-cut representatives of dominant cultural mores but can sometimes oscillate between challenging and/or reinforcing dominant ideologies, this back-and-forth motion being a dynamic that enables (re)serializations.
Yet, regardless of how a superhero may be crafted to embody, reject or question certain political or moral values, he almost always represents a normatively gendered individual. Embedded in the comic page is an androcentric subtext that deploys the figure as a quintessential male subject based both on his hypermasculine physical attributes and his social interactions with the persons around him. The super-body’s presentation of hegemonic masculinity comes to define how male-bodied and assumedly male identified individuals should look. These images and narratives condition readers to assume the only worthwhile body a male should strive for is one of peak physical condition. Emphasis is placed specifically on the musculature achieved by the superhero physique (see Figure 2.2), which serves as the clearest signifier of masculinity and legitimizes their bodies as suitably masculine (Bordo referenced in Brown 27). Their steel-hard bodies (Superman being the literal “Man of Steel”), accompanied by a mandatory pair of bulging tights, are quite literally drawn from phallocentric notions of masculinity that suggest a flaccid or...
soft body is shamefully weak, both literally and figuratively. As discussed in Chapter 1, this fascination with “superbodies” is a poignant echo from the eugenic movement’s quest to sanitize the larger national body. Within physical cultures promoted by the movement, the visual image of the healthy, white, male body acts as a symbol of perfection towards which a dutiful citizen should aspire. As it appears in contemporary Western comics, superheroes’ bodies behave very much the same way as the forms of peak-performance bodybuilders did in the 1920s and 30s. It is through both images that readers learn to identify “true” (read acceptable) masculinity and in turn come to measure their often failed performances of replication (Pecora 62).

Figure 2.2 Kenneth Rocafort’s Superman, drawn for DCU’s relaunch “The New 52”, which reboots each character’s story with a new aesthetic and narrative trajectory.

Even though not all superheroes are male, and by proxy not necessarily masculine, the genre itself remains infused with a masculinist ethos that attempts to carve out specific gendered understandings of bodies. Therefore, as well as appealing to the male gaze of most comic book readers, the explicit femininity of most female superheroes serves mainly to solidify the masculinity of their male counterparts, whose bodies are consistently more overpowering. There are of course certain anomalies, such as Wonder Woman, whose own masculinity can exceed that of most of her male and female peers. Yet, within the DCU, Wonder Woman’s body remains consistently heterosexualized (made often available to Superman himself) in an attempt to diminish her own masculinity and potential queerness. The cover for *Justice League #12* (2012) featured below in Figure 2.3 is once such instance. Given the chosen perspective for the image, Superman’s body is sizably larger than Wonder Woman’s, making his embrace all the more forceful, as if locking her in his arms. In return, Wonder Woman and her slight body are positioned in a submissive manner, assumedly signalling her acceptance of her role as the passive object of Superman’s lust. The image serves to (re)assert Superman’s masculinity through his heteronormative posturing and performance of sexual dominance, while simultaneously diminishing any agency Wonder Woman has in the erotic exchange. As revealed, there continues to remain little opportunity for superheroes (both male and female) to transgress gendered norms of the body and because of such they serve as conservative time capsules of Cold War era gender aesthetics.
Figure 2.3 Jim Lee’s Justice League #12 front cover art, published October 2012.

Within the comic book industry, and also within comic and cultural studies, it is largely assumed that the main receivers of these messages about gendered bodies are cis-sexual boys. Though there is some scholarship that explores the relationship (assumedly cis-sexual) girls and women have to comic books and superheroes in general, it remains implicit that readers have a stable or coherent gender identity. However, as my experience and that of “Rachel” and Riley Chattin show, this is not always the case. Comic theory must reevaluate how it defines and visualizes its readership if it aims to produce more nuanced understandings of the superhero. Part of this work entails rethinking such prevalent conclusions as highlighted by Richard Harrison that suggest, “…the superheroic body represents the body some boys wish they could have, [and] the secret identity represents the selves that some boys want to show the world but cannot – and there are a lot of those kinds of boys” (Harrison 127). Though Harrison critiques
the simplicity of such accounts, offering that superheroes appeal to the outsider in us all rather than to our specific gender (129), the definition for boy (or man) nonetheless remains unopposed. Indeed, as Harrison’s statement opens up, what kinds of boys are we speaking about? Perhaps they are female bodied but male identified. The syntax of Harrison’s final line (“those kinds of boys”) leaves enough ambiguous space to allow for the possibilities of trans identities in comic theory.

Before exploring the potential psychological and emotional impact superheroes have on trans men, let us first come to understand their importance for cis men and boys. As Harrison notes, for cis boys superheroes may come to represent potential ideals they too are capable of reaching. Much like Harrison’s comment, Jerry Seinfeld’s joke about fantasies being options, which opens the chapter, acknowledges that superhero narratives are often very real experiences for boys. In his structural analysis of the literary genre, Tzvetan Todorov explains the fantastic as a hesitation, a pause, which causes character and reader alike to rethink their positioning within reality (25-26). We can make room to understand Seinfeld’s joke in a similar manner. For the boy as comic book reader, the narrative of the superhero opens up a fantastic moment in which a breakdown of the acknowledged order of “the real” occurs (Caillois referenced in Todorov 26). In other words, the reading of comics for this particularly gendered reader may lead to a breakdown in the laws of “nature” and confrontation with the “supernatural” in the form of the superhero (Todorov 25). The momentary pause, that may last a second or a decade, in which the young boy determines the lived possibility of becoming a superhero is precisely what constitutes the fantastic. The fantastic is an undisturbed moment in which one makes a choice, and as soon as one does, the fantastic evaporates (Todorov 31). In the instance of the male comic book reader, the possibility of becoming a superhero is almost always already
overdetermined by his body, which as he grows typically falls drastically short of the superhero standard. This process of acceptance, of coming to terms with the realization that one is not Superman, is an evitable step of maturation before reaching adulthood. After making this realization, a man may not necessarily abandon his interest in comics but he may lose the imaginative, fantastic element associated with the medium that allows him to believe, at some point in time, he could have become Superman. In this respect, superheroes become markers of childhoods passed, of dreams well-spent, and of first forays into masculinity and manhood. A particular nostalgia accompanies these characters, one that is often times found on the very comic pages they inhabit.

Opening John Byrne’s six-part mini-series *The Man of Steel* (1986) is a letter from the inker and DC Comics’ Vice President and Executive editor Dick Giordano. In his forward, Giordano reflects on the times he, as a boy, listened to the adventures of Superman on the radio while eating his favorite cupcakes. He calls these “[f]ond memories of another time, another age” (i). He goes on to note how the series’ (all male) writers and artists equally share in these nostalgic connections to Superman, referring to the team simply as “ex-boys”. Immediately, it is clear that Superman evokes for these men their lost boyhoods, providing them with an appropriate portal in which to revisit childhood; and therein lies the potential appeal of the superhero. Amidst the rough and tumble nature of the superhero story is a delicate thread of nostalgia that allows male readers to access times of childhood joy, when superheroes were still thrilling realities they one day could take part in.

As will be discussed further in this chapter, nostalgia itself is not necessarily an idealistic reaction to an object. Nostalgia is layered with complexities that require us to understand the power of temporality, memory and the psyche. In Lynda Hutcheon’s exploration of the subject,
nostalgia is presented as a “rejection of the here and now”, produced when an individual determines the present as sufficiently problematic in opposition to a more ideal (often falsely imagined) past (3). For Hutcheon nostalgia is thus a reaction to avoid the teleological progression of the present time, it is “an attempt to defy the end” (3). It is here where I must make my intervention. I use nostalgia as a means of describing a profound psychic disturbance that forces one to acknowledge a rupture between past and present but does not necessarily seek to escape the latter. Unlike Hutcheon’s paradigm that aligns nostalgia with a linear trajectory of time, moving ever forward, abandoning the possibility of return, “trans nostalgia” as I will claim it, actually requires a complete rethinking of normative, organizations of time. A trans individual, in having a nostalgic response to an object, implicitly evokes a unique teleology that disturbs properly gendered understandings of time (ie. in their movement from girl to man or vice versa) and subsequently reorganizes measures of temporality in unfamiliar manners. In other words, I wish to call out the assumption that time, specifically as it manifests on and in the gendered/sexed body, is always a stable chronology of events.

With this said, I should clarify that my understanding of nostalgia is inherently situated in my own life experience. Not all trans men, for instance, may feel nostalgia in general or feel a similar temporal and psychic disruption between their present and their past. Similarly, not all cis men may have strong nostalgic reactions to Superman like Giordano does or experience a nostalgic reaction to comics in a similar manner. However, what is important for the purpose of this chapter is understanding how nostalgia creates a markedly different connection to the comic text for trans men because of their differing experiences of boyhood and masculinity.

Boyhood for the trans male is an ambivalent time of pleasure and frustration. To therefore think “back” on this time requires the acknowledgment that we were often not
Recognized as boys. Interestingly, though we may have been barred from adopting this gender identity because of our birth-assigned sex, the period of childhood—where one is encouraged to imagine and play—provides us with the freedom and liberty to “imagine” ourselves as young boys. In *Becoming a Visible Man*, Jamison Green offers one such instance. While playing with a neighborhood boy (in the early 1960s), Green offhandedly exclaims he will one day grow up to be a man, to which his friend remarks “Yeah, I can see that” (15). It is within the safe space of childhood that trans boys can momentarily forget or dismiss the inevitable experience of “womanhood” and take solace in the belief they can defy their own physiology. However, within the same moment of nostalgic recollection comes the painful awareness that as trans men, we have been robbed of our boyhood and in turn, the life of a cis-sexual male. In “Reading Like a (Transsexual) Man” Henry S. Rubin echoes a similar lament when he expresses resentment over the time of adolescence when young boys typically hold a carefree demeanor towards their bodies (32). Boyhood, as Rubin understands it, is a time of bodily exploration wherein the child feels a certain amount of freedom in his own skin and is most often given social approval to explore his body in a visceral, messy way. Trans boys, on the other hand, are often times confined to social understandings of feminine behaviour and because of such are discouraged from exploring their bodies in a similar fashion.

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19 “Trans boys” as used within this chapter denotes female-bodied children who either identify as masculine or as male at a young age and/or transition to a male identity later in life. This includes trans men who as children may not have “known” themselves to be male but upon transitioning and reflection came to see the formation of their masculine identity in their childhood. “Trans boys” does not signify young children who during their childhood or adolescence begin to transition. Although there are an increasing number of children who transition, it goes outside the purview of this work to speak to this identity. As well, since this phenomenon is quite recent there exists little research authored by such individuals because, for the most part, they are still young teens/adults. Additionally the research I rely on in this essay stems from adult trans males, who because of the eras in which they grew up, were only able to transition later in life.
Since boyhood is such an emotionally and psychologically complicated time for trans men, it is not enough to state that superheroes simply allow men to reflect on their childhood in a leisurely, pleasurable manner. In order to fully flesh out a more detailed understanding of the superhero’s meaning for trans men we must first explore the concept of nostalgia in more depth and how it is in fact an intimate part of the transsexual’s life. Second, we must come to understand how trans male experiences of nostalgia and boyhood interlink to form a unique position from which to read Superman, and how such a reading position reconceptualizes the figure’s narrative to reflect a distinctly trans journey.

Nostalgia

Originally coined in the late seventeenth century, the word nostalgia described an acute medical condition of extreme homesickness requiring clinical intervention (Davis 1). Today, nostalgia has been de-pathologized and is no longer as intensely related to feelings over one’s lost (physical) home. Nostalgia is now often characterized by both pleasurable and anguished feelings of recollection centred on an (idyllic) “experience one does not expect to have again” (Dickinson and Erben 223). Yet, the exact specificities of what constitutes and evokes nostalgic experiences still remains ambiguous territory.

In Yearning for Yesterday, an early text to develop a politic of the subject, Fred Davis suggests nostalgia to be a individual-based emotion centred on a personally experienced past rather than being focused on a time one did not live within or a place one had never been (Davis 8-9). This differs from the triggering device of the nostalgic response, which for Davis is either a personal object of great significance or a highly public symbol (122). Scholars Janelle L. Wilson and Andrew Wernick, in their own respective studies of the topic, come to disagree with Davis and conclude that one can long for a collective or historical time that one was never
present within. The reason for such an intervention is the evolving nature of our cultural sense of home, which no longer may revolve solely around a geographical place and the tangible objects associated with it (Wilson 23, Wernick 219). If one is homesick, Wilson offers, one can often return home (22). Undoubtedly this calls into question the meaning of nostalgia for diasporic or displaced migrants, who due to social, colonial, civil, militant, imperial, and/or political upheaval cannot, under most circumstances, return to their homeland. Perhaps then Wilson’s and Wernick’s agreed upon conclusions are only applicable to a particular category of individuals who have not experienced a violent separation from their home. However, one can also rationalize that Wernick’s understanding of nostalgia as a longing for a particular time (a “home time”) is perhaps doubly salient to such individuals, who may long for particular moments in time in which they were physically home (if at all) (219).

The act of remembering one’s home, whether it is a particular place or period of time, involves false, accurate, and reconstructed memories of one’s past (Davis 10-11). The nostalgic moment recollected by our psyches in turn manufactures a moment of “unreal time” that is a spectral shadow of our past, lived realities (Wernick 221). However, how conscious one may be of the accuracy of one’s memories may oscillate with each encounter. Unlike Hilary Dickinson and Michael Erben who suggest nostalgia always involves a personal contemplation of one’s own experience (224), Davis postulates that one’s level of self-reflexivity may be ranked into three different “orders”. In the first order, named simple nostalgia, the subject makes the unequivocal assertion that the past was better than the present (18). In the second order, or reflexive nostalgia, the subject additionally questions the truth or accuracy of the memories they may recall and thus of the nostalgic claim (21). Lastly, in the third order, or interpreted nostalgia, one renders the very nostalgic reaction problematic (24). What is clear about each tier
of the nostalgic feeling, whether it incorporates an element of awareness and self-reflection, is that the act of remembering finds its value through the juxtaposition of an ideal past with a problematic present (Davis 13). It is only by seeing the present as lacking in the particular, pleasurable elements that made the past more appealing (this can range from claims of simplicity, civil obedience, “proper” gender divides, etc.) that the nostalgic claim gains its weight. To acknowledge the past as somehow better than the present moment requires a linear conception of time most affiliated with Western cultures (Dickinson and Erben 224, Chase and Shaw 3-4). In other words, nostalgia is a side effect of the teleology of progress; we become marked by the passage of time and modernity in a profound way we may come to resent and regret (Boym as cited in Radstone 112).

A fitting example of this particular trauma – a trauma rendered by the inescapability of forward moving time – is the transition from child to adult, where nostalgia becomes part of the “natural” maturation process (Dickinson and Erben 241). Here, we can return to the example of Giordano’s forward to The Man of Steel series in which he reminisces over the Superman radio shows of his childhood. For certain men, superheroes and the paraphernalia they are associated with, can act as nostalgic triggers, allowing them to access their boyhoods in the face of stressful adulthoods. This may explain why some men compulsively collect comics or superhero merchandise, as it is a means of literally holding on to their pasts. In these instances, these individuals (and I will include myself) come dangerously close to fulfilling Amy Lawrence’s understanding of nostalgia, wherein the subject desires to live permanently in the past (referenced in Radstone 149). However, it is most often the case that these men simply view the comic object as a meaningful token of boyhood. Yet, as Giordano’s nostalgic recount evokes, the boyhoods many of these men may be fondly (re)collecting are also extremely gendered pasts.
We may question who is making Giordano’s cupcake that he so happily eats while listening to the radio adventures of Superman. Though the author clarifies that these are Drake cupcakes and that both his parents work, the cupcake or any other baked good is often a classic nostalgic trigger, leading one to remember mother or grandmother’s talents in the kitchen, akin to Proust’s episode of the madeleine in *In Search of Lost Time*. It is a strikingly similar moment to Giordano’s; a grown man eats a tasty treat, here a madeleine, and is reminded of childhood afternoons at his aunt’s. The baked treat serves as a quintessential object of associative memory specifically for men, within this paradigm, in that the pleasure of the treat triggers a series of fond recollections of boyhood (Satran). Nostalgia, Gayle Greene claims in “Feminist Fiction and the Uses of Memory”, can be viewed as a response perhaps more readily available to men because of the social and cultural structuring of gender roles and responsibilities. As she emphasizes, nostalgia is a gendered experience, which allows us to forget the misogynistic and racist social structures of the past (the same that prohibited mothers from doing little else but tending to the family and the home) (296-297). For this reason women might find little to be nostalgic about since the past is not necessarily a time or place they want to return to (296). In this respect, nostalgia comes to be a gendered experience that potentially operates in different ways for (cis) men and women. If we accept this premise, we must in return agree that nostalgia will also operate differently for trans and non-trans individuals alike, yet little work explores these divides.

If, for cis men, superheroes have the power to evoke an emotional, nostalgic response, one can imagine that trans men who are equally attached to such figures have a comparable nostalgic experience. However, as discussed above, trans men cannot simply return to a time of euphoric boyhood because they/we were, in essence, never “boys”. The “home time” of
boyhood for trans men is an obscure psychic space that requires grappling with the fact that one was not born male and hence that one was denied access to a particular corporeal self that would have been more authentic or aligned with the interior gendered self. Within this mental space/state comes the acute awareness that one’s physiological home is forever lost and replaced with an ideal of what might have been. An attempt to return to this ideal and to locate “the body […] that should have been” is what fuels transsexuals to physically transition (Prosser 83). Jay Prosser explains this process as follows:

[i]n the case of the transsexual the body constructed through sex reassignment surgery is not one that actually existed in the past, one that is literally remembered, but one that should have existed; sex reassignment surgery is a recovery of what was not. The body of transsexual becoming is born out of a yearning for a perfect past – that is, not memory but nostalgia: the desire for the purified version of what was, not for the return to home per se (nostos) but to the romanticized ideal of home (84).

Therefore, the nostalgic experience is one that is written onto the body of transsexuals; carved into each surgical scar is the individual’s understanding of home, of a body that will legitimize their identity. However, while transitioning, one also comes to the sad realization that one will never acquire the cis body one may be longing for. In a sense, the nostalgic experience becomes the trans male’s kryptonite. It wounds us, just as it does Superman, through the realization that we have been deprived of something incredibly meaningful. For us, it is our home body; for Superman it is his home planet, Krypton. Both trans men and Superman are thus held at the mercy of time and memory, haunted by a specter of a past we should have had.

Yet, while Superman’s struggle to access his home may be seen as valiant and noble – consider here his numerous missions to unleash the bottled city of Kandor stolen from Krypton by the maniacal, space alien Brainiac – the transsexual’s journey home continues to be devalued and pathologized. In comparison to other nostalgic encounters, which have since been de-
medicalized and rendered mundane, the transsexual’s nostalgic experience continues to be viewed within scientific and medical discourses as an illness. It is unacceptable, even socially harmful to the “natural” order, for us to yearn for alternative bodies and therein lies our monstrosity. We seek to defy the borders of time and “get back” what is rightfully ours through the surgeon’s scalpel or the endocrinologist’s needle. We should not be able to “go back”, but we do, or at least we attempt to, and this attempt will always be a failure. We cannot occupy a cis-sexual body. That body is lost; and the nostalgic experience serves as a perpetual reminder.

The monstrosity of transitioning is that it physically marks one’s attempt to “get back”. Through its scars, the body reveals its inner most desire to return to a home time it can never actually retreat to. Brian Cremins’ brief article, “Nostalgia and Strange Tales #180” is useful here in that he makes the explicit connection between monstrosity, nostalgia, and the personal desire to return home. Although Cremins later goes onto to disagree with his own categorization, it is worthwhile to note his proposed understanding of nostalgia as itself being a monster. Linking to Susan Stryker’s work on the monster as prophet, as one who warns (to be discussed further in Chapter 3), Cremins describes nostalgia as a “shape-shifting embodiment of some sort of revelation” (1). Nostalgia, in other words, is an indication or notice of our own desire, specifically one to replenish a lack. Citing Bart Beaty, who in turn borrows from Freud, Cremins suggests that the comic book becomes a fetish object, one in which the owner seeks to psychically fulfill this lack, attempting to overcompensate for a missing wholeness (1).

The experience of emptiness is, in the instance of the trans male, undoubtedly connected to the psychic trauma of having been born in and with the “wrong” body. As Cathy Caruth points out, trauma ruptures normative notions of time in that the past exists as an ever-looming

\[\text{For a deeper investigation of monstrosity refer to Chapter 3.}\]
specter in the present (4). For a trans man, one’s own body acts as the ghost of its own self as it could have been, linking our materiality with a ruptured sense of temporality. Trauma’s ability to reorganize time and memory in a way that causes a sense of loss and lack is arguably captured by the formal techniques of the comic book (or graphic novel). As Brandy Ball Blake suggests, comics inherently defy chronological constructions of time through their fragmented narratives and physical panel constraints (2). It is the reader’s task to make sense of time and in doing so, piece together the narrative that exists inside the panel gutters and between the pages. Although Blake’s study is much more in depth regarding trauma narratives and the graphic novel Watchmen, this cursory summary of her work already provides a sense as to why the comic book as object may speak to readers who undergo trauma. The comic book inherently exists in the same sense of disjointed time that its reader does – they are both temporal monsters.

The understanding of the comic text as a nostalgic trigger requires one to grapple with the immense weight nostalgia, as an emotion, carries for transsexual men since it is embedded within a larger experience of psychic trauma. It is this weight that potentially shapes the reading position from which some trans men approach comics. Reading comics through this lens often evokes feelings of inauthenticity because we acknowledge on a raw, fundamental level that we cannot become Superman. Since we do not want to reconcile with these (transphobic) feelings of self doubt – “if we are not Superman we are not men at all” – we read the figure in a manner that reduces our dis-ease. This is perhaps why we may choose to (re)read the figure’s origin story21 in a manner that legitimizes our own masculinity and manhood.

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21 Superman’s origins, although seemingly consistent in the minds of most peripheral viewers, has undergone some reconfiguration throughout the figure’s history. Within the DCU canon, time is broken up into two different periods: pre-crisis (which includes the Golden, Silver, and Bronze ages of comics) and post-crisis (the Modern and Post-Modern ages of comics). Separating these two canons is the 1985 Crisis of Infinite Earths story-arch, which sought to simplify fifty years of complex narrative
Boyhood, Masculinity, and Superman

To a degree, it is perhaps no coincidence that the Superman narrative is central to this exploration of nostalgia and boyhood. Aside from my own personal attachment to the figure, embedded into the Superman narrative is a meditation on the cultural and personal nostalgia for simplicity, authenticity and cultural power. This is demonstrated in Geoff Johns and Kurt Busiek’s *Up, Up and Away!* (2006) where post-*Infinite Crisis* Superman loses his powers for a year and must instead fight crime as mild-mannered Clark Kent. In this series, focus is shifted away from Superman’s extraordinary powers to Clark’s journalistic prowess as a hard-hitting, uncorrupted, highly ethical reporter (this style being, in part, cultivated by the Daily Planet’s editor-in-chief Perry White). This portrayal of journalistic integrity carries with it a nostalgic harkening to a supposed time of reporting innocence, when the printed word still contained cold hard facts and reporters resisted exploiting the truth for political gain. To emphasize the “bygone days” of journalism, artist Pete Woods consistently accessorizes Clark with an old-time newsman’s hat to signal his staunch, individual adherence to this “old code” of principled reporting (see Figure 2.4).

continuity. Until then Superman’s character history had become largely convoluted and difficult to follow. To simply the franchise, DC hired writer John Byrne to reboot the Superman title. Inspired from a diverse range of source material, Byrne’s 1986 mini-series *The Man of Steel*, rewrote aspects of the hero’s origins story that continue to play a vital importance to contemporary narratives. Since 1986, two other origin stories have replaced Byrne’s edition. Recently, the 2009 mini-series *Superman: Secret Origin* has been canonized as the definitive origin story of the Man of Steel. For the purpose of this work, I will explore story plots that take place post-crisis. I select these texts because a) they provide the clearest parallels to trans boyhood and b) they are the plots that informed most of the Superman stories I consumed as a young child (either when reading comics or watching television’s *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*). It is only fitting then, since this chapter meditates on the impact of nostalgia and boyhood, to use the same stories that are infused into my own lived experiences as a boy and as a Superman fan.

22 In regards to the latter, a spokesman for DC Comics once claimed “Superman literally created [the comic] industry”. Evidently, gone are the days of the hero’s single-handed triumph as the industry’s one and only leading man (Wright 14).
Adding to the nostalgic undertones of Johns and Busiek’s text is Woods’ artistic choice to consistently clothe Clark in his Smallville Leatherman jacket, signaling the character’s own nostalgic feelings for his hometown and boyhood. It is perhaps fitting that Clark now turns to “simpler” days, when his powers did not necessarily “interfere” or “commandeer” his day-day to routines. He regresses to a time pre-Superman, where he had the freedom to be himself and to be unconstrained by sacrificial and heroic commitments. In essence, *Up, Up and Away!* depicts Clark as he “should have been”, the “natural” progression from Smallville citizen to Metropolis ace-reporter. The Leatherman jacket is a signal of a changing point, where Clark’s powers and dutifulness forced him to abandon this uniform for another. Superficially, Clark’s time pre-Superman seems simplistic, but as other narratives attest to, it is anything but ideal. Clark’s time in Smallville is marked by feelings of isolation, loneliness and anxiety as he begins to navigate his new body and a potentially new identity. Though this reads like any other individual’s transition through puberty, a more in-depth exploration of trans boyhood will reveal how the Superman narrative portrays the same distinct frustrations experienced by trans men as they navigate masculinity during and after their childhoods.
In his sociological survey of female-to-male transsexuals, Henry Rubin identifies three different types of trans boys as based on his participants’ responses. First there are boys whose bodies and interests approximate other “normatively” gendered young males. During childhood these boys may face more stigmatization because of their inability to conform to expected social norms dictated by their birth-assigned gender. Second there are tomboys who tenuously fit into “girlhood” (albeit on the fringes), yet feel a definable difference from female-bodied girls. Though temporarily inhabiting an approvable social space during childhood, tomboys may find themselves isolated for their steadfast masculine attributes after puberty. Third there are boys who fit into girlhood because of their preference for typically “girly” activities, but know themselves to be different from other girls. These boys arouse little suspicion of “deviant” gender behaviour as children, but as trans adults find it increasingly difficult to explain or justify their gender identities (“he always liked doing girl things”) (“Self-Made” 98-99). What is common about each set of boys is that at some point, either as a child or eventually as an adult, comes the desire to be recognized as male. This is perhaps a similar plight most young boys experience during childhood, in that they feel the urgency to assert their claim to masculinity.

For cis boys the time of puberty, though daunting and embarrassing, signals the temporal and physiological shift that allows them to “come into their own” and to acquire the mental and physical characteristics needed to read as male in society. As part of their maturation, cis men are commonly socialized to forget the fear and anxiety of puberty in order to smoothly transition into manhood (Noble 49). However, for trans men puberty becomes a time when the body betrays the authentic masculine self, disallowing the individual to identify (both to himself and to others) as masculine (Rubin “Reading” 11). Similarly, within the Superman narrative, puberty also becomes a time of anxiety for Clark Kent, who begins to experience his body in

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23 As noted by Rubin, there is no hierarchal value of legitimacy attributed to any one set of boys.
In Jeph Loeb’s *Superman for All Seasons*, Clark reacts in fear to these changes, telling his father, “Pa. I’m scared” (27). And while Martha explains that this is “all part of growing up” (95), Clark remains distraught over a body he no longer recognizes as his own.

![Figure 2.5 Tim Sale’s Clark confronts his father Jonathan about his changing body.](image)

In both instances, the body becomes the focal point of discomfort and signals that one is distinctly different from other young males. For trans boys, their female physiology acts as the primary marker of their illegitimacy, that they are not “authentically” male (Rubin “Self-Made” 124, 141). As Rubin points out, one of the most important ways a man asserts his masculinity is through his body. If his body conforms to phallocentric, often hypermasculine standards, his manhood will go unquestioned. It is the failure to approximate this normative body that often forces men, both trans and non-trans alike, to feel grief over their “lacking” qualities (Rubin “Self-Made” 166). However, for trans boys/men, these feelings of distress cannot be easily soothed. Even as adults, trans males are always barred from entering into phallocentric (read normative) understandings of masculinity. Due to the surgical options available to transsexual men, the construction of a “functioning” penis is largely inadequate, often unsuccessful, and also quite painful. For these and other reasons, including the medical risks and surgical expenses,
most trans men elect not to have “bottom surgery”. This means that the bodies of most trans men – which may have breasts or post-surgical scars, a vagina or a neo-phallus, differing patterns of fat distribution, a larger hip to waist ratio, a smaller stature in height and muscle mass, and a higher voice range – are directly at odds with accepted notions of masculinity and the ideal, male physique. In this capacity trans male bodies, from puberty to adulthood, are always marked by their difference.

Again, such is also the plight of Clark/Superman, who too shares a body marked by its own “otherness”. In Superman For All Seasons, Jonathan tells Martha, “He’s changing. The boy. He’s… different now,” suggesting Clark’s body can do things “that other boys can’t” (17-18). Clark is positioned through his father’s description as outside of the acceptable “norm” for boys. Though Clark may supersede these other “normal” boys in physical ability and might, his body is too much for the town of Smallville to contain. As his father’s words foreshadow, “We knew he was special, but… People will talk” (9). Since, “Clark knew them all and they all knew Clark” (22), there is nowhere Clark can retreat to; Smallville seems to act as a containment for the young man who must eventually seek the freedom of the big city, Metropolis, in order to truly flourish. Further highlighting the otherness and “strangeness” of Clark’s body within the town is Tim Sale’s art, which continually depicts Clark as being too big for the panel (see Figure 2.6). His body is often drawn towering over that of other Smallville citizens suggesting he is both physically different as well as spatially (both in Smallville and in the frame) out of place; his body does not belong.
The motif of containment and exposure, of having to hide one’s true identity is elaborated and expanded upon in the television series *Smallville* (2001-2011), which focuses primarily on Superman’s adolescent years in the town. A striking example is provided by the episode “X-Ray” (season 1, episode 4) when during gym class Clark becomes aware of his ability to see through things, namely through the school’s walls and into the girls’ locker room. Although x-ray vision is explicitly positioned here as a metaphor for male sexuality and the power of the gaze, it also speaks to the inherent predicament of leading a double life – that one can always be “seen through”. Upon revealing his new super-power to his parents, Clark is instructed to learn how to control his ability in order to detract suspicion, making sure he is never caught looking too long at other people or objects. Ironically, Clark attempts to evade the gaze of others by controlling his own vision. However, the pressure of continually having to monitor the outer world’s perception of himself proves exhausting to Clark. The trauma of living in disguise (coded here as a characteristic of male adolescence) and of having to continually curb one’s visibility is revealed as a nonnegotiable plight of the double life.
The newfound power of Clark’s body is positioned within Smallville as having the ability to “out” his true identity as Superman. While Clark’s body forces him to remain a marginalized outsider (Shyminsky 294), it does not necessarily prevent him from “passing” as “normal” within society. Likewise, transsexual men, upon transitioning, often find it “easy” to be read as cis males. For this reason trans men have historically been the “invisible” population of transsexuals (Rubin “Reading” 321). Though not all transsexuals strive to “fit into the woodwork”, there are those, such as myself, who live a life where their gender identity goes unquestioned. However, though we seemingly perform man correctly, we are inherently at odds with the normative understandings of this identity. Our bodies will always expose us as “others”. Transsexuals then, like Superman, experience a constant tension between belonging and not belonging; ours are the bodies that simply do not fit anywhere (MacDonald 6). And is Superman not always seen as “the impossible man”? The impossibility of Superman’s body ironically gives him the nickname “The Man of Tomorrow”. Though this name undoubtedly shares a strong connection to eugenics as demonstrated in Chapter 1, it also shares an interesting connection to trans male identities. The men of tomorrow, in other words those who differ from the men of today (not necessarily in politic but merely in physical form) are FTMs.

However, being a man of tomorrow often places us in a position to question our legitimacy. If we are not recognized as men today, are we men at all? As a means of answering this question and concluding this chapter, I offer another anecdote. One night, in an attempt to impress a date, I chose to “play up” my boyish charm by wearing a Captain America (Marvel!) t-shirt to one of our more casual dinners. The shirt was met with a small, sweet chuckle – not an insulting reaction but curious nonetheless. It was not until later that evening that she offered to explain her reaction to my shirt. She laughed, in part, because her previous partner had been
nicked named Captain America due to his muscular and toned physique. Additionally, she laughed because I, an unfit, unremarkable, transsexual man wore a Captain America t-shirt assumedly worshipping this hypermasculine image (the one I, in fact, actively resist). Assumedly, she saw a failure of embodiment. But what exactly was I failing at becoming? Captain America? A man? Perhaps I was indeed a silly, soft little boy in a t-shirt and nothing more. Surely, I cannot consider myself to be a man, let alone a “superman”, when my body lacks the very signifiers of masculinity associated with the superhero image.

This self-doubt is regrettably a common experience for transsexual men. Bergman aptly summarizes these feelings of illegitimacy and inadequacy when he states,

... the great and terrible truth of transgender life, [is] that they will never let you be real, ever again. [...] I didn't know it when I signed on - maybe I should have, but I didn't - but the transperson is always a knock-off, as in, 'Why would you date a fake man when you could have the Real Thing?' (72-73).

After being bombarded with cultural images of “real men” (such as superheroes) is it a wonder why trans men may question their manhood? The superhero idol makes it nearly impossible for transsexual man to believe he is real. That evening I posed a similar question to my date. I asked why she would bother with a trans man wearing a Captain America t-shirt when she could (and did) get “the real thing”. She responded simply, “You are the real thing.”

If this is true, and I assure you it is, what does this mean when I wear a superhero t-shirt? When invoking the superhero, am I not simultaneously recoding him as trans? Is this not what I am doing when I (re)read the Superman narrative? Through this interpretation, I do not fail at embodying Superman; in fact, I am perhaps a closer replication of him. By re-reading the meta-texts of the Superman narrative (Battis 12, Yockey 41), I ironically succeed at Seinfeld’s quest: I become Superman.
Chapter 4

Of Monsters and (Super)Men: Trans Monstrosity and the Outing of Superman

“So far he’s been kept in complete darkness. Wait till I bring him into the light.”
- Dr. Frankenstein (Frankenstein, 1931)

As a child, I looked forward to Toys R’ Us trips, knowing my father would often offer to purchase one reasonably priced toy for me. With a licensed freedom, I would “b-line” my way to the “boys” area, searching the shelves for a particularly coveted Ninja Turtles action figure. I was (and admittedly continue to be) a fond connoisseur of these toys, admiring specifically the detailed mini-pizza replicas each comes with. One year, the makers of these fine collectibles released a “Universal Pictures” line, wherein each turtle was dressed as one of the studio’s famous monsters. Over the month, I had successfully “motivated” my father to purchase three out of the four figures. At the time, I thought the theme simply to be a novel idea: why not put crime fighting mutant ninja turtles in Halloween costumes? The uniqueness of these toys quickly made them my favorite; to this day they sit on a shelf together: Dracula, Frankenstein’s Monster, and the Wolfman.

![Ninja Turtles as Universal Pictures’ classic monsters.](image)

Figure 3.1 Ninja Turtles as Universal Pictures’ classic monsters. Cropped from original photo.

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24 To be exact, these toys were released January of 1993.
25 Although I will not be using it as a primary framework for this chapter, object relations theory has been used to think through psychic childhood attachments to objects (be they inanimate “things” or living people) and how these relationships inform one’s subjectivity as an adult.
My early attachment to these toys is telling; I had come to treasure “mutant” replicas of famous cultural cyphers, monsters known for their metaphorically “perverse” sexualities and, more interestingly, for their extraordinary transformations. These monsters continually defy the boundaries of their own corporeality, they exist in perpetual transmutation; Dracula becomes a bat, the Wolfman shifts from beast to human and back again, and Frankenstein is dead flesh made living. For this reason, amongst others, I became fascinated with these creatures. They physicalized, for me, my own early cravings to reach beyond my own body and become something other than myself.26

Just as monsters provided me with a cursory way to understand my gender identity, so too can they be used to articulate Superman’s own trans-ness. Indeed, although it is not often foregrounded within the mythos of the character, Superman is himself an extraordinary monster, if only for the fact that he has evaded detection for so long. In a task ironically better suited to the hero’s longstanding foe Lex Luthor, it is time to “out” Superman as a monster, more specifically, as a transsexual monster. It is the argument of this chapter that a trans-ing of Superman is incomplete without acknowledging the discourses that position both the hero’s and the transsexual’s body as “monstrous”. To do so means first foregrounding (before consciously backgrounding) the discursive history of trans monstrosity created, in part, by certain radical feminist scholars that read the transsexual body through the lens of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Doing so forces the formation of a “monstrous” trifecta, wherein Superman, particular feminist discourses of transsexuality, and Frankenstein’s creature become implicated in a relationship

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26 It would take more than a decade for me to finally understand these early impulses. In hindsight, I was experiencing a preliminary yearning to adopt a masculine gender identity. My inability to express this as a child – apart from my lack of self-knowledge – also stemmed from my assumed “naturalness” of this inclination. I had concluded, quite inaccurately, that every young girl pretended to shave in the bathroom mirror, thought of herself as Wesley while watching *The Princess Bride*, and secretly wanted a body like Ken’s. Since these thoughts were normalized in my mind, I saw no particular reason to vocalize them.
with one another. Therefore, one “monster” cannot be engaged without the other two, though, for the sake of clarity and logic, certain portions of this chapter will temporarily delink these categories from one another.

The Frankenstein narrative thus comes to haunt the Superman story, remaining an ever-present specter lurking in the shadows of the comic panels. A particularly clear instance occurs in *Superman: Escape From Bizarro World*, wherein authors Geoff John and Richard Donner, and artist Eric Powell replicate a sequence from James Whale’s 1931 film *Frankenstein* (see Figure 3.2). Inked in black and white, except for the falling yellow flowers, the comic features Bizarro (as Frankenstein’s monster) confronting a small girl. Instead of throwing the young child into the water, as the movie depicts, Bizarro instead throws her off a ledge, after which Superman promptly rescues her. The panel reads as a clear intertextual reference to Whale’s film, as well as to Shelley’s novel, the latter being a cornerstone text of the superhero genre. As discussed in Chapter 1, *Frankenstein* is often credited as being one of the first stories to explore the “super human”. In addition, Shelley’s foreshadowing critique of eugenic discourses of progress and idealism serve to continually inform Superman’s history and the ways in which his comic narratives are positioned and interpreted.
It is the goal of this chapter to encourage readers to come to terms with Superman’s own monstrosity. Most commonly seen as the most compassionate and humane Justice Leaguer, Superman, as will be revealed through an analysis of his imperfect clone Bizarro, is a monster; and it is due in part to this monstrosity, that he can be – or already is – “trans-ed”. Lastly, to discuss Superman’s transsexual monstrosity is to enter into a dialogue regarding subjectivity, since the monster is often a proverbial vehicle to meditate on the ontology of “our” own subjection. Instead, I seek to emancipate the “Superman Monster”\(^\text{27}\) from his duty as metaphor so that he may be reborn as one who speaks of his own monstrous subjectivity.

\(^{27}\) An acknowledgement to Dan Abnett, Andy Lanning, Anthony Williams, and Tom Palmer’s *The Superman Monster*: an Elseworlds “mash up” of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and the Superman origin story.
Readers should note that this particular monstrous reading of Superman is not the only one that can be produced. The textual beauty of the monster (or rather, the monster masquerading as comic superhero) is that it contains a multiplicity of readings specific to each spectator. In other words, the monster is always a cultural composite, a nexus of identities and histories inscribed onto flesh that readers may draw on and highlight given their own positionality (Halberstam 36). I wish to make explicit that my own strategic employment and articulation of monstrosity is, in part, made accessible through my own whiteness, a racial identity that does not explicitly force me to reconcile myself with racialized and colonial discourses of monstrosity. In this respect, my particular reading of Superman within the pathologizing histories of transsexuality – texts that are themselves marked overwhelmingly by whiteness – may be conceived notably different, for instance, by trans persons of colour. Thus, room for further analysis should be made here, particularly for one that might also reflect on the racialized category of the monster itself, and how that may inflect the articulation of Superman as trans.

In addition, to speak about the history of “trans monstrosity”, or rather the linkage between transsexuality and the Frankenstein monster, is to understand that both the literature and the label have applied primarily to male-to-female transsexuals (MTFs). Female-to-male transsexuals (FTMs) are rarely factored into this discourse. One can infer – given the background literature this chapter will briefly outline – that the already-castrated body of the FTM is too benign to pose as a “proper”, monstrous threat. Given this history, it is with some caution I invoke “the monster” as a reclaimed position of authority. It is primarily due to the work of Sandy Stone and Susan Stryker, who each reframe monstrosity in a rebellious and reclamatory fashion, that I am able to take up this work.
The Discursive Construction of Trans Monsters

To begin this chapter’s historical review, I turn to Mary Daly’s 1978 text *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*, wherein she becomes the first author to link transsexuality to the Frankenstein narrative. In the book’s opening chapter, “Deadly Deception: Mystification Through Myth”, Daly reads Shelley’s classic tale as a forewarning about “the technological fathers’ […] male mother-miming” and its inherent “boundary violation that ultimately points toward the total elimination of women” (70). It is a narrative or myth, she claims, we are culturally familiar with: the medical and scientific doctor who, while acting as a patriarchal agent, attempts to manipulate the natural order of life. The male doctor toils over his own “offspring” and negates the “biological” imperative of the mother; in doing so, the gendered subject is rebirthed, not from the womb, but from the hands of the male doctor. It is evident the explicit connections Daly is making to sex reassignment surgery and its participation in perpetuating the myth of the doctor/scientist as “male-mother”. More so, she warns that buying into this myth only “normalizes” the “created” transsexual body of the MTF. For Daly the MTF is a violent, “phallotechnic boundary violation” that replaces the “naturalness” of the female body with the artificial wombs of “cyborgs”. “[P]art flesh, part robot”, the MTF is a clone of the authentic “original”, she is, in other words, merely an imitation of a “real woman” (71).

The contempt Daly shows for transsexuals (which surprisingly only takes up three pages of her overall text) is unfortunately picked up and furthered by her student Janice Raymond, who one year later, in 1979, publishes *The Transsexual Empire*. Before providing readers with a synopsis of the author’s most applicable points, it should be noted that it is not the purpose of this section to critique, at length, the contradictory and essentialist claims made by Raymond.
throughout her text. It goes exceedingly beyond the purview of this chapter to detail the problematic and inflammatory nature of Raymond’s derogatory rhetoric. Instead, I only highlight several key points made by the author, paying specific attention to how they intentionally perpetuate the idea of “trans monstrosity” and how they eventually incited two provocative rebuttals.

Assumedly inspired by Daly’s analysis of the “man as creator/mother” myth, Raymond attempts here to superimpose this same power dynamic onto the “treatment” of transsexual individuals. She creates a rudimentary paradigm of this interaction whereby the male doctor is given supreme agency (assumedly his patriarchal inheritance) over the flesh and psyche of the transsexual patient. It is he who manipulates and sculpts the body in the image of idealism he so chooses; the transsexual is then merely a byproduct of the doctor’s work and imagination. To “hammer home” this observation, Raymond ceaselessly refers to transsexual individuals as males-to-constructed-females (and vice versa). The word choice, “constructed”, primarily meant to undercut the authenticity of the trans individual, moreover erases any agency or free will possessed by the transsexual subject. We are, like Frankenstein’s Creature, “dead” (read: powerless, passive) objects before our (male) doctors give us “life”.

The necessity for this type of “experimentation” is clear to Raymond: the patriarchy, after suffering a recent political blow from radical lesbian, feminist, separatist activism needs to squelch any ensuing incursions; the patriarchy needs a way to access female-only spaces in order undermine further political organizing; the patriarchy, much like the desperate husbands of Stepford, need to create inauthentic “women” (140). This description of Raymond’s rationale

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28 Again, as in Daly’s work, Raymond’s “study” is primarily focused on MTFs, specifically those who identity as “lesbian”. When she does mention FTMs it is either to accuse them of abandoning the “sisterhood” (in an attempt to access patriarchal privilege) or to insist the identity is a fabrication by the medical and scientific community in order to guise transsexuality as a “human problem”.
may admittedly seem hyperbolic but is unfortunately not inaccurate. She “hypothesizes” that what is “being tested in transsexual ‘laboratories’ is whether or not it is possible for men to diminish the number of women and/or to create a new breed’ of females” (140). Raymond even goes so far as to call out one woman in particular, Sandy Stone, who she believes suitably “proves” her hypothesis. She suggests Stone’s job at Olivia Records (an all women recording studio) is simply another example of a “man” attempting to (re)claim “his” importance at a time when “his” necessity is being questioned. For Raymond, the “she-male” Sandy Stone is an imposter, simultaneously existing as both a powerful and powerless pond in a heated game between the patriarchy and radical lesbian, feminist politics.

The paradox of the transsexual’s power is one that is never reconciled in Raymond’s work. The transsexual is at first an “experiment”, a “created” being who has little say over their body. Yet, the transsexual woman despite her “castration” (which Raymond crudely refers to an inordinate number of times) maintains the ability to violently penetrate the bodies of women. She asserts, “[a]ll transsexuals rape women’s bodies by reducing the real female form to an artifact, appropriating this body for themselves” (104). The monstrosity of the transsexual, which seemingly stems from their “inherent” capability to enact violence, is exacerbated by their fetishistic objection of the female body, a body they have no (biological) “right” to claim as their own. Raymond suggests transsexualism – as “originated”, “controlled”, “maintained”, and “legitimated” by patriarchal medical and scientific communities – attempts to commodify the female body by reducing women to “purchasable” parts. “Literally,” she claims, “men here possess women” (30). Again, in an unresolved paradox the transsexual is both the “owner” of the female body while at the same time being a mere fabrication of assembled parts. The transsexual’s monstrosity then, like many well-known monsters, is rooted in its own
ambivalence. Trans persons are both maker and made, self-birthed yet created; trans persons are both subject and object.

Indeed, Raymond’s account of transsexuality reads as its own gothic horror story, and assumedly to her, this is the point. Transsexuality is gothic horror brought to life. As Robert D. Hume notes, gothic horror operates by psychologically affronting one’s audience with shocking or disturbing events. Horror – which is decidedly different from terror within literary theory – is elicited through the repetition of repulsive situations (285). While authors like Mary Shelley have artistically achieved such effects, Raymond’s work is a crude undertaking of generic techniques to horrify readers with enough fabricated scenarios they begin to fear the transsexual “monster”. But gothic horror as a genre is much more complex than Raymond’s binary world of “good” and “bad”. Gothic horror, like the aesthetic of many Silver Screen picture shows, is muddled with grey. It demands readers reconcile with difficult situations that carve characters out as neither “hero” nor “villain”. As Hume testifies about Victor Frankenstein, gothic horror enters “the realm of the morally ambiguous” and characters are never “merely monsters, and only a bigoted reading makes them out as such” (286). The ambiguity that Raymond refuses to acknowledge or resolve within her text is the very catalyst that fuels two central retorts to her work, each produced by a transsexual woman who claims her monstrosity and the power of the monster.

In 1987, Sandy Stone, whom Raymond personally outted and attacked in her work, writes the cleverly titled “The Empire Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto”. Here Stone challenges Raymond’s assumption that “transsexuals are constructs of an evil phallocentric empire […] designed to invade women’s spaces and appropriate women’s power” (Stone 223) by providing readers with a clear, counter narrative. She specifically frames her discussion
around gender clinics, and the institutionalized (read coercive) power they have accrued. For Stone, these gender clinics are as threatening as Raymond perceives them to be, albeit for different reasons. First established to study “human aberrations”, gender clinics are the physical representations of transsexual pathologization; it is here where trans patients are viewed as “correctable problem[s]” (Stone 227). In this respect, the gender clinics, and the medical and scientific communities that fuel their research, are also an oppressive institution for trans individuals. As trans persons we are, as Stone points out, often “held hostage” to the biases and ignorance of these “gatekeepers”, they become the “final authorit[ies] of what counts as a culturally intelligible body” (231). Our transitions are therefore mediated and shaped by the gendered assumptions doctors and clinicians impose upon us; and these molds, which Raymond perceives as threatening, are equally damaging to trans individuals who are continually “encouraged” to adopt specific gendered behaviours and identities that often times counter their authentic selves. In this respect, gender clinics are in the business of making gendered subjects, ones that are neatly packaged to replicate hegemonic standards, many times to the detriment of their patients (228). For Raymond to claim that trans individuals are an inherent threat to feminist politics because they refuse to challenge gender norms is to dismiss the realities of the gender clinics; gender clinics are not a place of solace or refuge for the trans individual, they are often times a coercive structure that nonconsensually places restrictions and limitations on a patient’s own gender expressions.

Since transsexuals must submit so entirely to the policies and procedures put in place by gender clinics, outsiders reporting on this process, such as Raymond, often fail to narrativize the transsexual as an independent, autonomous agent. Instead, trans individuals are described by such radical feminist theorists as “robots of an insidious and menacing patriarchy, [an] alien
army designed and constructed to infiltrate, pervert and destroy ‘true’ women” (Raymond 230). The end result of this discourse is an accumulated amount of literature wherein others speak for the transsexual and capitalize on the perceived horrors of sex reassignment surgery to propagate their own political agendas. Through these discourses, the trans individual is exorcized of his/her subjecthood and rendered a cultural object through which wars of gendered power relations are played out. In this respect, the transsexual becomes, much like the textual monster, a “meaning machine”: a body whose only function is to be inscribed, to be written on, and eventually to be read (Stone 230; Cohen 4). For Stone, the reduction and objectification of the trans body can no longer be permitted. She instead seeks to fulfill what Donna Harraway names as “the promise of monsters”: reclaiming the refigured body so that the constantly evolving articulation of its own subjecthood exceeds “the frame of any possible representation” (quoted in Stone 232).

In 1994, Susan Stryker picks up this charge in her provocative piece, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage”. The title to the piece is taken from Shelley’s novel, specifically the moment when Frankenstein’s monster confronts his maker. In a restaging of the same scene, Stryker takes to task Mary Daly, Janice Raymond, and the medical community at large by reclaiming the power and identity of the monster. It is worth citing at length the passionate outcry Stryker produces.

The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction. It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other that that in which it was born. […] Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster’s as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that, I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist (245).
Here, Stryker embraces the horror associated with the monster, describing it as a source of power via the rage and passion it inspires. Her isolation from humanity – barriers fabricated in part by feminist and medical/scientific discursive histories – becomes the platform in which she can reframe the monster. The horror of the monster (in both *Frankenstein* and in regards to transsexuality), she argues, stems from the prospect that the monster may have a will and life of its own. Horror is brought forth by the “uncontrollable” nature of a “created” “object”. The monster should be subservient, carrying the weight of its “abnormality” silently. Indeed, this is the very image we have grown accustomed to in regards to Frankenstein’s monster. Boris Karloff’s performance as the mute and callous creature (from James Whale’s *Frankenstein*) has become iconic in our cultural memory. We often forget then that the creature of Shelley’s novel actively engages with his maker and more specifically demands that his maker see him as an autonomous being. It is of course the latter image Stryker invokes when crafting her essay. She calls forth the speaking monster, who like the transsexual, is a paradox of existence. Both object and subject, the monster and the transsexual cannot and will not be contained by the factors that produce their identity.

What is culturally at stake in both Stone’s and Styker’s work, as well as my own, is the curtailing of proliferating discourses that hold the trans person/the monster accountable to larger institutional structures and powers that seek to police bodies. Derived from medical, scientific, psychiatric, and legal paradigms of authenticity, trans bodies are discursively created as deceitful and thus needing of monitoring in order to determine legitimacy. Drawing explicitly from Stone’s work, Toby Beauchamp offers that medical surveillance projects of trans bodies have attempted to create a culture wherein the trans person is only legible, and therefore “successfully” transitioned, if they are not actively read as being transsexual. The ability to exist
“covertly” within society is discursively produced by larger institutional discourses as being an already determined goal of the trans individual and one with which they are willing to comply (Beauchamp 357). It becomes the responsibility of the trans individual to “disappear into a normatively gendered world, as if they [have] never been transgender to begin with” (Beauchamp 357). The ability to conform properly to a normatively gendered society also implies, as Beauchamp clarifies, the adherence to a gender presentation rooted in white, middle class, able-bodied, heterosexual sensibilities and understandings of gender (357). However, the explicit and implicit acts of coercive violence enacted by medical, scientific, psychiatric and legal institutions to silence disruptive trans bodies and erase their existence is continually deferred back to the trans individual who is discursively produced through these practices as being the “true” deceiver. Through the policing of trans bodies, trans individuals get marked as potentially fraudulent, in other words, as individuals who house a secret that “can and will be discovered” (Beauchamp 358). The word potentially is used specifically in the understanding that the ability of the trans body to threaten the status quo is curbed by the individual’s ability to adhere to other racist, classist, ableist, and nationalist norms (359). What is key then is observing and critiquing how trans bodies, bodies rendered particularly monstrous, are consistently under watch by larger institutional forces. The monster is never quite free from the gaze of his maker.

The fear of the speaking monster, of one who will speak against the scrutiny and surveillance placed upon their body, is what fuels this chapter. I will explore here how the motifs of monstrosity and subjectivity play out within the Superman narrative and how they help us to understand the figure as a “transsexual monster”. For the purpose of narrowing down the
purview of this work, I will focus solely on Bizarro’s appearance in the Superman narrative and his role in understanding Superman’s own monstrosity.

Superman and Bizarro

Bizarro makes his comic book debut in *Action Comics #254*, “The Battle with Bizarro”; prior to which he had become a well-known character in the serialized Superman newspaper strips. In this Golden Age telling, mad scientist Lex Luthor attempts to create a clone of Superman (who will assumedly do his bidding and wreak havoc on Metropolis) by exposing the hero to a “duplicator ray”. However, what is birthed from Luthor’s plan is an imperfect, “bizarre” imitation of Superman. Though he possesses the same powers as Superman, he lacks the hero’s intelligence, capability, and “good looks”. As well-meaning as Bizarro may be, he frequently causes more harm than good, often times because the very sight of him repulses those he intendeds to save. Bizarro’s inability to replicate Superman, both physically and behaviourally, allows others (both within and outside the comic text) to claim the creature to be imperfect or rather inauthentic. Here, we see a replica of the reactive impulses of Mary Daly and Janice Raymond who claim transsexuals to be supposed clones of “real” women. To reach this conclusion (in both instances) is to assume a more natural or more authentic original. Anything

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29 Throughout the years, Bizarro has, like most DC characters, undergone some canonical changes. Prior to 1986’s *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, Bizarro self-relocated to a cubical planet known has Htrae (the reverse of Earth, both semantically and logically). Here the gimmick of “Bizarro logic” was developed where anything “good” done on Htrae would be considered “criminal”. Post DC’s *Crisis*, Bizarro’s world was eliminated and two alternative origin stories for the anti-hero have been written. The first stays somewhat true to the original, Golden Era Bizarro. Here, Luthor (who had since been redeveloped as the ruthless chairman of the technological giant LexCorp) attempts to create a clone of Superman, this time with multi-billion dollar technology. This plan however “fails” and instead of a clone, the creature Bizarro is born. The second Bizarro is a creation of the Batman villain the Joker, who teams-up with Superman rival and cosmic trickster Mister Mxyzptlk to terrorize Metropolis with their “stooge”. For the purposes of this chapter, I will solely be concentrating on Lex Luthor’s Bizarro, who has throughout the years, stayed somewhat consistent in appearance and behaviour (Greenberger and Pasko 27-31).
that perhaps challenges particular signs of authenticity – again, both physically and behaviourally – is thus labeled an “imitation”. Indeed, as the panels below show this is how Bizarro comes to know himself. After gazing into a mirror and being repulsed by his own appearance, Bizarro violently smashes the panel pronouncing his own illegibility, “Me not human… Me not creature… me not even animal!” (Binder 130).

Figure 3.3 From *Action Comics* #242, released July 1959, Bizarro discovers his own monstrosity. Art by Al Plastino.

It is my argument however that Bizarro is not as “separate” from Superman as we are inclined (or rather directed) to believe. I propose rather that Bizarro and Superman, similar to Frankenstein and his monster, are in fact each other’s “doubles”; their bodies are both one and
the same, mere extensions of the other. Quite briefly, the double, as Sigmund Freud theorizes, is
the self divided and made physical (9). Specifically it is a part of the self that one seeks to
repress but cannot. In this effect, the double is thought to be a figure of uncanny proportions.
Though an uncanny feeling may be evoked by something other than one’s double, the double is
always linked to the uncanny – that which has been repressed but has now been made known, or
as Freud words it, “something that has been left concealed but has been brought to the light”
(13). The appropriateness of this theory towards analyzing horror (and by extension Bizarro’s
story) is evidenced by this chapter’s opening epitaph from James Whale’s *Frankenstein*: “So far
he’s been kept in complete darkness. Wait till I bring him into the light.” The statement here,
which is almost an exact duplicate of Freud’s, refers to the monster, as expressed by his maker.
Dr. Frankenstein has previously buried his monster in secrecy, in darkness, and is now at the
cusp of restoring and ultimately revealing his creation. The monster then, as theorized by Franco
Moretti, can be commonly understood – within the paradigms of the horror genre – as his
maker’s double, a physical manifestation of a disturbing element within the creator that
repression fails to contain and ultimately resurfaces (is brought into the light) (102-103). The
monster then is always infused with the self. This explains why, as Robin Wood notes, so many
people mistakenly assume Frankenstein to be the name of the monster, when it is in fact the
name of the creator (72). Much like the name, monster and maker often become synonymous
with one another.

To this respect, Bizarro can be viewed as the physicalization of that which is psychically
repressed in Superman. Yet, what exactly is the Man of Steel supposedly hiding from himself?
What knowledge is buried in the darkness of his subconscious? It is my argument that Bizarro
signals and enacts Superman’s own profound sense of corporeal and psychological difference.
Where readers may tend to “forget” or under acknowledge that Superman is an alien amongst humans, Bizarro makes the otherness of Superman’s identity visible. Undoubtedly, this is not a new revelation. Comic creators continually struggle to reconcile Superman’s origins with his adopted planet. However, throughout the mythos and indeed in the character’s own felt sense of self, it is assumed that he is at heart a “citizen of Earth”. He perhaps goes so far as being a model human, capable of demonstrating the power of humanity through profound acts of valor and compassion. Yet, we can also read this as a continued performance of overcompensation, that Superman’s good deeds are simply there to absolve himself of his own difference, to make his otherness less visible by appeasing particular moral norms. Bizarro then is the deep-seated “truth” that these actions can only temporarily mask the profound sense of non-belonging Superman feels.

Tying back to the politics of visibility brought forth by Beauchamp, the laying bare of “abnormality” as manifested in Bizarro makes room for Superman to find safety under the marker of “normal”. Through the juxtaposition of these two bodies, Bizarro’s monstrosity becomes foregrounded while Superman’s otherness can slink silently into the background. The use of fixed, dichotomous categories – here being “abnormal” versus “normal” – is a consistent structure in the debates of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans visibility, both inside and outside the community. As Joshua Gamson’s insightful investigation of television talk shows demonstrates, othering and the creation of the us/them divide is continually recycled in discourses of visibility, which carve out some bodies as appropriate within normative society and others as “pathological, pathetic, or silly” (33). In regards to Superman, Bizarro becomes a necessary foil

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30 Much more can be said about the implications this statement has especially regarding race and citizenship. One can speculate that although Superman’s race is actually Kryptonian, his positioning within the comics as white allows the figure to be aligned with the American nation state. Not only then is Superman positioned as a citizen of Earth, he becomes, as the iconography of the character depicts, the quintessential American subject.
so that the hero may be perceived as suitably “normal” (read here as American, white, moral, properly gendered/sexed, etc.). However, as Gamson also makes clear, visibility is a constant series of political negotiations that cannot be adequately discussed and measured by simple binary sets (33). What we will see in the Superman narrative is that both hero and monster are different sides of the same coin. Instead of being end points of a continuum of normality, Superman and Bizarro are unified psychic and material entities that together visualize the difficulties of being consistently misread and misinterpreted.

For transsexual men one of the main challenges regarding visibility is continually negotiating others’ perceptions and readings that assume us to be cis-sexual men. The more we are seen as members of a cis-sexist society – one that presumes to understand our physiology, sexuality and psyche – the more invisibilized our difference becomes. For some, this is an advantageous boon, to simply sink into the woodwork. Yet, for others like myself, to be rendered invisible or rather to be seen as “fitting in” is to experience a deep sense of isolation that can only be temporarily remedied by strategically deployed “coming outs”. To this regard, we come to feel ourselves as border crossers, ones that enter spaces initially barred from us only to be assumed “natural” members of these same locations. Though Daly and Raymond may see this “freedom” of movement or “infiltration” as the ultimate prize, to many transsexual individuals, invisibility comes at the price of non-recognition; we simply fade into the backdrop of a world attempting to suppress our very existence.

The dialogues of visibility that exist within trans communities and activist circles are often a tricky field to navigate through. Positions and opinions are often divided across generations, genders, races, and classes, leaving few moments of solidified agreement. In her blog entry entitled, “fetishizing visibility [sic]: when trans activism values ‘being seen’ over
being liberated” lefty girl (a self-identified American trans woman) responds to trans activist Riki Wilchins’ *Advocate* article wherein she claims to be a political dinosaur. Wilchins, who maintains the position that trans folks should not conform to normative gender expressions, laments the fact that young trans folks will not grow up to know the struggles of living as an “out” (read visible) trans person. It is the end of trans identities as Wilchins knows it; “public transsexuality is fading out” (quoted in leftygirl). leftygirl responds to Wilchins’ nostalgia by a) calling out her classist assumption that all trans youth have access to puberty blocking hormones that allow them to circumvent the unwanted changes of puberty (thus preventing them from having a body, which after transitioning, may be read more frequently as trans); and b) advocating instead for an empowerment of trans folks to be comfortable with their chosen level of visibility, which for some she acknowledges is never actually a choice they get to make.

The knowledge that we are here, living as openly visible trans persons and/or are frequently disclosing our trans status, that we have voices and demand understanding, is perhaps what triggers such emotionally volatile responses in Daly and Raymond. It requires coming to terms with the “monsters” they have discursively created. As Moretti explains, the impetus for one’s fear response is the moment of confrontation with the repressed as signaled by the monster’s presence (103). In turn, what produces the actual moment of intense horror is realizing that the disturbing element of the monster is in fact an element within oneself (Moretti 102). For Daly and Raymond who invest so heavily in a politic of “authenticity” and “purity”, it is clear how the presence of the transsexual unhangs their assumption in a stable, unwavering world of corporeal sex/gender divides (Stryker “My Words” 254). The transsexual “monster” signifies the ability to overturn and to cross “natural” boundaries that claim certain bodies are “male” and certain bodies are “female”. In other words, the transsexual creates a distrust in the
binary system of organization which arranges the bodies of Daly and Raymond as “authentically” female. This preserves a system of “natural” hierarchy wherein Daly and Raymond can claim their place as “women” without challenging the very construction of the category. In an ironically essentialist fashion, these authors attempt to solidify their position as gatekeepers of female society by dismissing the very processes that allow their identity to exist in the first place. To confront the transsexual then is to understand that one’s own identity is never actually as stable as one so hopes. It is little wonder then why these authors take up such heated, transphobic rhetoric in order to squash potential fears regarding their own gendered bodies. Through the dismissal and discursive annihilation of the transsexual/ the monster/ the Other, Daly and Raymond can disown this horrific, wavering part of their own sexed/gendered selves.

Via his own body, Superman himself plays out this anxiety regarding the “natural order of things”. For Superman, the body is the foremost signal of his difference. The capabilities of his body render him at odds with his human peers. However, the oddity of his body is often overlooked and even accepted because he chooses to use his body for good (to preserve progress and modernity) rather than for evil and destruction. The most vocalized hesitation around Superman’s body is often personified by villain Lex Luthor, who in numerous incantations of the character refuses to “blindly accept” Superman as “one of us”. Brian Azzarello and Lee Bermejo eloquently lay out Luthor’s often difficult to understand perspective in the comic series Lex Luthor: Man of Steel. Told from Luthor’s point of view, the story reveals how the character struggles to understand himself as human in the shadow of a god-like monster. Luthor explains his rage when he states, “All men are created equal. All men are created equal. All men. You are not a man” (Azzarello). To him, Superman is an outsider impeding the progress of humanity

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31 See Chapter 2 for a more comprehensive study of this topic.
with his acts of bravado and control. So reliant has humanity become on the hero (to usher them out of crisis), they have forgotten what it means to be human: to struggle for survival. For Luthor, Superman eradicates the very core of human identity. The artwork of this series further serves to demonize the hero as he is drawn with a cold, metallic, steel-hard body and glowing red eyes (see Figure 3.4). He is illustrated, in this instance, as the horror Luthor knows him to be. However, as Moretti and Wood suggests, it is often difficult to decipher maker (ie. Lex as the producer of Superman’s otherness) from monster, signaled here through Luthor’s own image appearing on Superman’s chest. The embedded duality of the two – that each produce reflections of the other – suggests the both subjectivities are interlinked to each other. Luthor can only know himself as “human” and therefore morally superior, in juxtaposition to Superman, who he knows to be “monstrous”.

Figure 3.4 Front cover at for Lex Luthor: Man of Steel #5 by Lee Bermejo
Other than this series, there are few narratives that attempt to position Superman as a monster. This label is often reserved strictly for his double Bizarro, whose difference is also physically inscribed upon the body. Dead flesh made living, the character is often illustrated as having chalk white skin that appears to be stone-like in nature and crudely chiseled into shape (see Figure 3.5). Whereas Superman is a sleek, sophisticated Man of Steel, Bizarro is a fumbling creature of poorly etched proportions. We can read the inverted nature of Bizarro’s appearance as a solidifying characteristic of the monster as double. The monster’s flesh is most commonly a physicalization of the creator’s repressed inner character (Lee Six and Thompson 240). The horror of the psyche is projected outwards and becomes the horror of the flesh. Bizarro’s body is Superman’s as it “should” be. Monstrous in form and ability, Superman is the unnatural body brought to life, though character, creator, and reader alike rarely engage with this idea. It is easier to project the fears one may associate with the body that defies logic or containment (Is it a bird? A plane?) onto a creature that stands at a notable physical and behavioural difference from “ourselves”. The hypervisibility of Bizarro’s monstrous body enables him to become a “proper” receptacle for exorcising cultural anxieties over ambivalent flesh.
The underlying assumption in Daly and Raymond’s work, as well as other detractors of trans individuals, is that flesh is a static component of the body, particularly when it pertains to the physical signifiers of sex/gender. Though it may stretch and shrink over time, its overall form and contour is understood by them to be rigidly set in place, thus allowing us to categorize bodies into properly sexed groupings. The supposed naturalness of flesh serves to justify the assumed naturalness of the categories “sex” and “gender”, as each are thought to be materialized by the body first, and put into language second. However, the malleability of flesh as signaled by the transsexual creates a profound break in this logic. In rupturing the skin through the surgeon’s blade, the transsexual also ruptures the basis of logic that holds bodies as “naturally” male or female. In this instance, one can claim then, as Daly and Raymond do, that trans bodies are unnatural and therefore deserving of the label “inauthentic”.  

Although Daly’s and Raymond’s works are somewhat dated, the commonness of the language of monstrosity in attacks on trans individuals still exists in contemporary rhetoric. In a 2012 blog post by
transsexual body is merely reorganized flesh that attempts to mirror the original referent. The “monstrosity” of transsexuality is therefore deeply rooted in the physical makeup and aesthetic of the body. Scars, for instance, are a primary example of how the transsexual body may “out” itself as unnatural or tampered with, thereby revealing it to be unreal. Natural bodies (read properly gendered bodies/cis-sexual bodies) are instead understood to be clean, sleek vessels free of abject, man-made lines. The presence of scars, which reveal a trauma to the body, also indicate a trauma to the binary system of logic that seeks to properly sex bodies. It is only through this positioning against a fixed understanding of flesh and identities, that transsexuals can be read as embodying an active resistance against clean categorization and containment. Like the figurative monster, the transsexual’s body resists binary-based classifications, and instead demands a system wherein movement across and through categories is permissible (Cohen 7).

The unintelligible nature of the monstrous body is often exacerbated by the creature’s physical actions; not only is fear a reaction to seeing the monster, it is also a response to witnessing what it does or rather who it does “it” with. Sexuality, since it often relies on a relationship between parties, potentially positions individuals as susceptible prey to these monstrous bodies. Within Bizarro’s narrative, the creature is often, perhaps ironically, treated as

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33 Patricia Elliot’s chapter “Desire and the (Un)Becoming Other: The Question of Intelligibility” in Debates in Transgender, Queer and Feminist Theory illustrates the ongoing dialogues between scholars regarding the legibility of trans bodies. She documents the discursive boundary wars between theorists who either argue for a restructuring of the gender binary (and by proxy definitions of the human) in order to include trans bodies and those who claim the site of the gender outlaw as revolutionary and liberating.
a benign, asexual being who seeks companionship more so than carnal intimacy (staying consistent with the virginal overtones of the Superman franchise). In the original Golden era comics, Bizarro crafts a duplicate Lois Lane after falling in love and subsequently being rejected by the real one. This plot point is often rehashed as a gag or a moment of redemption for the creature, proving him to be more comical friend than worthy foe. However, John Byrne’s 1986 mini-series *The Man of Steel* provides us with an interesting revisionary encounter that allows us to think through Bizarro’s, and in turn Superman’s, sexuality.

In John Byrne’s story interestingly entitled, “The Beast Within!” Bizarro is under the belief that he is Superman and as such, attempts to rescue ill-fated citizens of Metropolis. While surveying the city, he spots and promptly saves a blind Lucy Lane (Lois’ sister) who is moments away from stepping off a roof ledge in an attempt to take her own life. Assuming Superman has saved her, Lucy swoons over the hero until it is later revealed that in fact a bizarre, look-alike creature rescued her. Though distressed over potentially lusting after a monster, Lucy admits that coming into contact with the monster’s dust-like skin has returned some of her vision. Bizarro, upon overhearing Lucy’s admission, engages Superman in a battle to the death (see Figure 3.6). The hiding of the impact with overlaid text can be read as a conscious effort not to depict the violence of Bizarro’s final moments. However, the build up to the panel, with both figures dramatically positioned at a distance from each other, on the same linear plane, also allows one to read the panel as the final melding of Superman and Bizarro. The moment becomes the successful and forcible repressing of Superman’s own psychic horrors of otherness. Yet, the panel’s ambiguity also serves to hide the act of psychic repression, in that through his physical destruction of Bizarro, Superman himself becomes the violent monster.

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In Byrne’s mini-series, Bizarro is given a new origin story. Here, the creature is an imperfect clone fashioned from Superman’s DNA, not a duplicating ray. Instead of possessing opposite powers, Bizarro (who is never actually called as such in the series) is identical in ability to Superman.
Shattered into tiny particles of dust by the hero’s might, Bizarro knowingly sacrifices himself so that Lucy’s vision may be restored (in effect, becoming the tale’s “real” romantic hero). The motif of visibility, or rather recognition as visibility, gets played out repeatedly throughout the Superman narrative: Clark must wear glasses to disguise himself, Superman has X-Ray vision, and Lois’ journalistic pursuits involve unmasking the truth. In this particular comic, the importance of vision is reiterated, specifically in regards to monstrosity. Here, Lucy’s blindness allows for a temporary acceptance of the monster and his body.\(^{35}\) She “sees” his authentic self, his inner self, in some sense, only to be deceived later by the exterior body he feels trapped in. In this exchange, Bizarro physicalizes Superman’s hidden corporeal challenge. Superman’s body looks human (natural, normal) when it is instead alien and unknowable. Yet, when you strip away the cape (perhaps in a heated moment of intimacy) the difference of his body is hard to conceal.

\(^{35}\) This trope can again be traced to Shelley’s novel, specifically the moment when the creature is temporarily taken in and schooled by a blind patriarch. It is only after the wise man’s children catch the two interacting (and explain to their father what the creature looks like) that the man shuns the monster.
In a hyperbolic satire of such a moment, James Niven’s, “Man of Steel, Woman of Kleenex” exposes the horrific consequences of having a super body in bed. He notes,

Consider the driving urge between a man and a woman, the monomaniacal urge to achieve greater and greater penetration. Remember also that we are dealing with kryptonian muscles. Superman would literally crush Lois Lane’s body in his arms, while simultaneously ripping her open from crotch to sternum, gutting her like a trout (III).

This visceral detailing of Superman’s sexual intimacy positions the hero in a grotesque light. His figurative ravaging of Lois can be read as proof that difference (as signaled by his origins) destroys normality. The body then becomes part of Superman’s larger deception. Posing as
Clark we understand him to be human and to experience the body as a human. Yet, Superman and the ability of his body in fact extends far beyond our reach and knowledge.

Similarly, transsexual male bodies are often (mis)read as cis-sexual. A trans male who can be said to pass in society is thus assumed to have a particular body that is congruent with normative standards. When this assumption has been made, it is understandable why certain trans men find the act of physical intimacy a daunting one. To engage in acts of intimacy requires one to reveal the “truth” of their identity via the body. To physically expose the body is to also expose the self, or rather one’s past self (as female). The strategically placed scars on the body often act as cursory “give aways” before one’s genitals often “confirm” the body’s previous morphology. To put one’s body on display in such a manner, during such an intimate moment, places the transsexual in an extremely vulnerable position. In that moment, the transsexual literally lays bare their identity for the other. Into the hands of the other is given the ability to either authenticate the transsexual’s identity (in this instance) as male or to reject the body, thereby rendering the transsexual a “fake”. Much like the story of Byrne’s Bizarro, the other often wields the power to either “make” or “break” the individual. In refusing to recognize Bizarro’s humanity, via his moral goodness, Lucy rejects Bizarro’s “authentic” identity and thus, forces the “monster” to physically forsake (read unmake) himself in order to right her wrong.

Together in an interview, Amber Hollibaugh and Cherríe Moraga discuss the importance and role of the sexual other. Although the context is specific to the butch-femme dynamic of lesbian relationships, there is some applicability to the relationship between a transsexual man and his partner. As Hollibaugh outlines the role of the femme is to take care of her lover, to soothe her lover’s wounds (399). Inflicted on her by a patriarchal, heteronormative society that dismisses and pathologizes her masculinity, the butch can find healing in the love and in the
arms of the femme. Here, the butch is free to reveal and explore herself. The femme, as Hollibaugh points out, is often there to facilitate in exposing this vulnerability. She finds pleasure and desire in witnessing the butch in a gender role denied to her by society (401). A similar dynamic can be seen between transsexual men and their lovers. The lover, via the act of sexual intimacy, signals an approval of and engagement with the trans man’s gender and body that is often lacking outside the bedroom. Here the other/lover reaffirms the trans male’s identity so that he may feel himself as he knows himself to be: authentically male. The other then has the extraordinary power to recognize the trans man in his entirety. The other liberates the transsexual from the assumptions and invisibilities faced in society for a temporary moment of euphoric understanding.

In Byrne’s comic, Lucy, although at first disgusted by the creature, comes to recognize him as a hero. She confirms who Bizarro knows himself to be: Superman. This particular moment of having the self recognized, and thereby authenticated, through the Other’s eyes is not unfamiliar to the Superman mythos. In an earlier, Golden era comic, Superman himself meets a young girl who, because of her lack of sight, refuses to believe in his existence. The hero then takes it upon himself to restore the girl’s vision so that he may prove his own existence (see Figure 3.7). As one may anticipate, Superman is successful at both tasks. The echoing of this moment in the Lucy/Bizarro narrative not only serves to strengthen the linkage between the hero and his double, it also reiterates how the establishing of one’s identity is often times at the mercy of the other’s ability to accept or reject difference.
Figure 3.7 Panels from Superman #96, “The Girl Who Didn’t Believe in Superman”, released May 1955. Written by Bill Finger, drawn by Wayne Boring and inked by Stan Kaye.

The paradigm illustrated by Bizarro and Superman – that of the monster who seeks to understand the self through the other – is of course a reversal of the more commonly invoked process of actualizing the self in juxtaposition to the monster. Usually, the figure of the monster is understood to be the cypher for otherness and difference. It is always an object to be observed and juxtaposed against in order to define the boundaries of the self. Rarely is the monster’s perspective considered to be a feasible position for thinking through one’s own subjectivity. But for trans individuals, we ourselves are the monsters; the self is the Other. We are forced to reconcile with the fact that others deploy our identities and our bodies to help author their own personhood, much like Daly and Raymond have done in their own respective scholarship and like the political Right continues to do, as documented by bloggers like Autumn Sandeen. This in turn denies us the ability to speak of our own lives; we are merely human props displayed for contrast.

The idea of the silent transsexual or the quiet monster (such as Whale’s Frankenstein) is a popular one. It creates the illusion that trans persons/monsters are incapable of articulating
their own subjectivity and experience. Instead, others create one for us. Trans persons and monsters are made into meaning machines. We become a body of culture; pure text meant only to be read. But unfortunately, monsters have the tendency to break out of the cages set forth for them as noted by contemporary community debates regarding visibility (such as those reported by leftygirl). Monsters escape the clutches of their creators and become (in many senses of the word) uncontrollable. At some point in the narrative, the monster – like Bizarro or Frankenstein’s creature, like Stone or Stryker – gets up and begins to lead its own existence (Morreti 106).

Each monstrous existence must begin with a rebirth, whether it is the dead creature brought to life or the female who becomes male, the monster is always made anew. I seek then to conclude my work with a proposal. I ask for, or rather I demand, a rebirth of Superman. Just as Lois Lane provided him with his heroic name, I assign him a new one. It is time that we view Superman as a transsexual monster. For years he has been misrecognized as a normative figure that speaks only the stories of a cis-sexist, heteronormative society. It is time now to write a new chapter of the Superman narrative. Through my work, I give voice to his monstrosity, a trait that allows us to understand how this figure comes to represent the larger transsexual experience of otherness. In this respect, I become a creator of monstrosity. However, I choose not to contain or control, instead I release him.
Conclusion

Whatever Will Happen To the Man of Tomorrow? (Re)Reading Superman as a Trans Fan

In an interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, director Brian Singer (*Superman Returns* [2006]) was asked about the challenges of crafting a Superman story for the screen. He answered, “Although he has a difficult past of being an orphan and a stranger in a strange world, he’s not as tormented as a lot of characters like Batman or Wolverine, where there’s a lot of angst to explore” (34). Singer’s interpretation, disappointing primarily for its lack of insight, is perhaps not an uncommon one. Seen as the all-American boy scout of the comic book industry, Superman is often times lambasted for his overtly “good guy” demeanor versus other “grittier” or “darker” figures such as Batman (Waid 6). It has become somewhat of a trope now in comic stories, television series, and animated shows for “Big Baddies”, as they are known, to physically accost Superman to an extreme in order to prove a point: he may be the world’s strongest, but he is certainly not the toughest. In 2006 (the same year as Singer’s film), the animated series *Justice League Unlimited* reimagined the complexities of Superman’s day-to-day life in their now famous final episode, “Destroyer”. In what look likes a moment of defeat for the JLA against one of DC’s more heinous and powerful villains, Darkseid, Superman emerges from the rubble and explains,

> [Batman] won’t quit as long as he can still draw breath. None of my teammates will. Me? I've got a different problem. I feel like I live in a world made of cardboard, always taking constant care not to break something, to break someone. Never allowing myself to lose control even for a moment, or someone could die. But you can take it, can't you, big man? What we have here is a rare opportunity for me to cut loose and show you just how powerful I really am (“Destroyer”).

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The title is a nod to Alan Moore’s poetic and haunting piece, *Whatever Happened to the Man of Tomorrow?* Written in 1986, Moore’s nostalgic, emotional send off tells the last story of the 1960s and 70s Silver Age Superman (Salkowitz 71). It offers readers closure before DC’s reboot of the title following the events of *Crisis on Infinite Earths*, after which John Byrne’s *The Man of Steel* series begins.
Meant to be a jeering incitation into an epic battle sequence, Superman’s “World of Cardboard Speech” (as it has been dubbed) also reveals the grief and frustration of living in a world not suited to one’s body. The fragility of cardboard invokes the image of a precariously balanced society, one in which Superman’s movements through could potentially destroy. Its logics and architecture are thus depicted as exhausting for the hero to navigate. Evidently, Singer has overlooked this particular aspect when he describes the character’s limited amount of torment. To live isolated in a world that is fundamentally at odds with the logics and materiality of your own body seems to me to indicate a large amount of anxiety and angst to creatively play with. We can attribute, perhaps, this large oversight to Singer’s own experience as a white, cis-sexual, male who has assumedly been able to navigate through society with some ease (although, Singer’s open homosexuality may complicate his relationship to privilege). It is the replication of this particular understanding of Superman – as someone largely unencumbered by physical and mental challenges – authored repeatedly by creators who occupy a privileged social space that my work seeks to address.

The World of Cardboard speech was largely created to appeal to fans that were tired of watching their favorite JLA member gratuitously beaten. Singer’s Superman Returns was created as a “love song” to Richard Donner’s original film. Although many popular art forms have fans, as Rob Salkowitz explains, the comic industry is unique in that is built upon a combination of fandom (fan participation) and nostalgia (Salkowitz 126-7). As discussed in Chapter 1, both Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster – some of the founding fathers of superhero comics – were avid readers of science fiction magazines and pulp fiction stories, ultimately taking their knowledge of the genre and supplanting it into their super-heroic creation. Jumping almost five decades ahead, now-classic authors and artists such as John Byrne and Dick Giordano, as seen in
Chapter 2, were simply “ex boys” attempting to craft original tales that were also respectful to the hero’s roots. From these examples, we can sense a distinct pattern regarding not only the creative influences fans have on superhero stories but also as to what types of fans actually do get to transform comic culture – in other words, to fight on the industry’s ideological battle grounds for the definition of a character’s cultural meaning (Costello “Super Politics” 1.2; Jenkins and Shresthova 1.9). Historically, and now currently, the fans who are allowed to actively participate in comic culture are those that typically reaffirm the genre’s white, androcentric, heteronormative, and cis-sexist roots.

In “The Super Politics of Comic Book Fandom” Matthew Costello notes the overtly political work non-normative fans can engage with when reading and creating narratives of their favourite comic characters. He suggests that these fans hold a particularly transformative power to assert their interests “against an industry that continues to define its audience,” and we can also add itself, “as exclusively white and male” (Costello “Super Politics” 1.3). Though the industry has attempted to reach out to a larger audience base time and time again, most attempts have only served to highlight systemic industry problems and to further marginalize readers. As an example, Costello notes efforts by both Marvel and DC to address the needs of racialized fans by creating heroes of colour, all the while maintaining an unsettling trend to name characters according to their race (ie. Black Panther, Black Goliath, Black Lightning) (Costello “Super Politics” 4.1). Continuing this pattern to present day is the revitalization of Aquaman villain Black Manta (originally created in 1967) who in one of the newest DCU “game-changers” Brightest Day (2010) has resumed his criminal career and by proxy his importance within syndication.
One example, as noted by Costello, of fan-based attempts to intervene into comic culture, is 1990’s Milestone Comics, the “first African American-owned and operated comic book company” (Costello “Super Politics 4.2). Milestone Comics, although no longer in operation, created several original black heroes, such as Icon and Static Shock, that became well-known commercial characters now assimilated into the larger DCU (Costello “Super Politics” 4.3). Efforts by feminist fans are also documented by Costello, noting Gail Simone’s 1999 piece “Women in Refrigerators” being particularly important for raising awareness for the overly prevalent misogynist violence in superhero comics (“Super Politics” 4.3). Her title draws from a particular moment in Green Lantern #54 (1994), wherein Green Lantern Kyle Rayner finds his partner, Alex, murdered and gruesomely stuffed inside a fridge. The image, as Simone notes, is an ongoing trope in comics that requires a female hero, partner, or civilian to be viciously injured or killed as a plot device to inspire a male hero’s quest for justice.37

Occasional industry attempts to placate female readers, and those who love reading female characters, have also failed horribly. Recently, J. Michael Straczynski’s Brave and the Bold #33 (2010) has caused quite a stir with readers who show decidedly mixed reactions to the piece. Set before the shooting of Barbara Gordon, “Ladies’ Night” (as it is titled) depicts Zatanna and Wonder Woman’s attempt to give Barbara one last night of joy and freedom before

37 The problem of intersectionality is certainly one to take note of, specifically regarding the comic industry’s identity politics. Marginalized characters, when introduced into stories, are often presented in rather “normative’ fashions, in that they conform largely to other identities of privilege. For instance, racialized heroes are often male identified, while female heroines are often white. There seems to be a limited ability for the industry to see identities as multiplicitous and to conceive of characters that may stand outside the status quo for a variety of reasons, including their race, gender/sex, sexual orientation, class, ability, etc. There seems also to be an overly prevalent need to homogenize “different” characters into more mainstream cultures. At a 2012 San Diego Comic-Con panel entitled “Rewriting the Rules of Queers in Comics” author James Robinson stirred up debate when he suggested he scripts Green Lantern Alan Scott (now an openly gay character) as he would any other straight character.
impending events leave her paralyzed (Zatanna has had a premonition of the fateful night).\textsuperscript{38} The frivolous treatment of DC’s most celebrated heroines is disappointing at best. Instead of attempting to stop the impending danger as they have done countless times, Zatanna – a magician – and Wonder Woman – an Amazonian goddess – instead decide to go out on the town, dancing and singing karaoke to Beyoncé’s “Single Ladies”. Apart from the patronizing plot that casts female heroes in a remarkably shallow and inept light, the work also undermines queer and disabled identities when it a) insinuates a kiss between Zatanna and Wonder Woman – purposefully playing on the latter character’s legendary queer fan base – when all the while the two are hugging over the tragedy of Barbara’s ultimate fate (see Figure 4.1); and b) depicts a blatantly ableist interpretation of Barbara who in the present – post-shooting – laments, “I was dancing. I was beautiful. I was dancing.” (Straczynski). Although one can interpret “Ladies Night” as Straczynski’s attempt to comfort readers over Barbara’s injuries, it also leaves many feeling emotionally manipulated and outright offended by its poor treatment of three stellar characters. Indeed, it is as Costello suggests, when middle-aged white male creators occasionally attempt to script powerful female characters, they often times manage to create a condescending and embarrassing product (“Super Politics” 4.1).

\textsuperscript{38} Daughter of Gotham’s Commissioner Gordon, Barbara is shot by the Joker in Alan Moore’s \textit{The Killing Joke} (1988) in an attempt to (not so subtly) have the character retire from DCU continuity as Batgirl.
We can also add queer fans to Costello’s list of marginalized readers who have resisted erasure. Attempting to ratify the industry’s overwhelming heterosexist attitudes, queer writers and artists have since the 1940s been creating alternative comic characters. Justin Hall’s No Straight Lines is a particularly good anthology, collecting numerous queer works from Tom of Finland, Howard Cruse, Ruppert Kinnard, Alison Bechdel, Diane DiMassa, and Jennifer Camper. Within more mainstream comics, little in roads have been paved for queer characters as overtly homophobic attitudes by readers continue to sway industry producers. A particularly striking example occurred during DC’s canon overhaul “The New 52”, which restarted over seventy years of continuity. Within the Earth 2 world, Green Lantern Alan Scott came out as gay, inciting readers to question his ability to perform heroically given his sexual orientation. Other queer characters, aside from Scott, have also been canonized – most notably Batwoman – however, often those who are remain so obscure many readers take little notice.

Although much work remains to be done the landscape of comics is changing, albeit slowly. Will Brooker, Sarah Zaidan, and Suze Shore have recently began a project that largely borrows from Barbara Gordon’s canon. Titled, My So-Called Secret Identity, the work is not an explicit rewriting of Gordon’s narrative but is instead a reimagining of comic heroines in
general. This is, in part, carried out through the work’s art, which depicts heroine Cat fighting crime in sensible and practical clothing, unlike her bathing suit, high-heeled clad industry counterparts. (As an aside, Wonder Woman finally saw a much-needed costume change in issue #600 [2010] but has since reverted back to her old gear in DC’s “The New 52” [see Figures 4.2 and 4.3]).

Brooker, Zaidan, and Shore’s collaborative project is an apt example of the power of fans – here particularly of Batgirl – to move beyond the canonical comic text in order to create work that explicitly comments on and challenges “industrial inequities and the gendered nature of comic book content and culture” (Roddy et. al 1.3).

The Batgirl title published by DC has also undergone some unprecedented changes with the inclusion of mainstream comics’ first openly trans-identified character (see Figure 4.4).
Presented in *Batgirl #19*, Barbara’s roommate Alysia Yeoh comes out to her during a conversation in which the two are discussing intimate details about Barbara’s past.

Figure 4.4 Alysia makes her own confession to roommate Barbara. Art by Daniel Sampere and Vicente Cifuentes.

Batgirl author Gail Simone has been openly vocal about the need to increase the number of diverse identities in mainstream comics, seeing this as *the* number one issue for the industry.

Look, we have a problem most media don’t have, which is that almost all the tentpoles we build our industry upon were created over a half century ago… at a time where the characters were almost without exception white, cis-gendered, straight, on and on. It’s fine — it’s great that people love those characters. But if we only build around them, then we look like an episode of *The Andy Griffith Show* for all eternity (quoted in Hudson).

When asked about the impetus for disclosing Alysia’s trans-identity Simone remarked, “And it just hit me: Why was this so impossible? Why in the world can we not do a better job of representation of not just humanity, but also our own loyal audience?” (quoted in Hudson).

Simone’s statements explicitly underscores the industry’s ongoing erasure of trans identities both within its pages and within its understanding of its fan-base. Until now, trans issues have been completely sidelined, with absolute no dialogue regarding the creation of trans characters or
reinventing cannon characters as trans. However, Simone’s work is a small step towards an increased visibility in mainstream comics, and popular culture in general.\footnote{I make this observation with hesitation. The comic book industry, like other popular entertainment medias, has largely been grounded in an ethos of “one-upmanship”, continually striving to outdo competitors with the “next big hero”. This pattern undoubtedly affects how one should read the inclusion of difference within mainstream comics, namely as having the potential – if it has not already – of tokenizing “non-normative” characters. For example, in November 2013, Kamala Khan, a Pakistani-American, was introduced as Marvel’s new Ms. Marvel. As Andrew Wheeler from \textit{Comics Alliance} reports, “The new Ms. Marvel will be the first Muslim character to get her own ongoing solo series at Marvel, one of a growing number of female solo leads, and the only person of color headlining a solo book” (author’s own emphasis). However, the repeated trend to homogenize “different” characters prevails. Writers explain that \textit{Ms. Marvel} will be “‘about the universal experience of all American teenagers, feeling kind of isolated and finding what they are’ but ‘through the lens of being a Muslim-American’” with superpowers (quoted in Wheeler). This news happens on the back of Simon Baz’s debut, a year previous, as the DCU’s first Arab-American Green Lantern.}

It is time then to expect the same of comic scholarship, whose body of work has also largely overlooked trans readers. The beauty of comics is that they lend themselves so well to exploring identity politics, particularly regarding issues of visibility. The comic text depends on the use of imagery to convey its story; it relies on making the invisible visible. How we interpret those visuals then is of equal importance. In regards to Superman, a character whose narratives span seventy-five years worth of material, we maintain the scholastic impulse to reiterate the same national and/or (cis)gender-based interpretations of the figure. These are certainly important observations to make but they are only one piece of a much larger, and much richer story – a story that also includes trans identities.

This work here is that of a fan; a fan whose identity as a white, trans male explicitly informs how he reads and interprets the adventures of his favourite comic book hero. This work is a transformative reevaluation of the hero’s life and an interjection into the academic work he has inspired. This project is one-stepping stone into a larger body of scholarship that is hopefully still to come and develop, a growing field of study that takes into account the perspective of trans readers and their understandings of superheroes. Reading Superman as a
trans fan means acknowledging how gender and sexual identities affect our relationship with the comic text in ways that inherently challenge and reevaluate the assumed foundations of the medium. It rethinks discourses of the body and its ties to the nation, science, and technology, while providing new logics for understanding nostalgia and boyhood. To read Superman as a trans fan is ultimately to liberate the figure as a monstrous subject whose “Otherness” is no longer easy to assimilate into a larger cis-sexist culture but calls forth a desire for understanding on its own terms. The time for Superman’s outing is now and the message is perhaps already being heard.

Figure 4.5 Superman rethinks his options. Created by Harry Bliss.


