Beyond Binaries: Rediscovering *The Fantastic Four* through a Multi-Dimensional Lens

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Contemporary trends in literary and cultural analysis are predicated on a reading practice that reduces their subjects to a binary dichotomy that can be summarized as a *hegemonic-versus-subversive* discourse where, in the former case, the text promotes and enables the dominance of politically and economically privileged social groups over others and in the latter, the text resists such dominance in its subversive deployment of artistic and literary forms and conventions. Such patterns are especially pronounced in the burgeoning field of comics studies, specifically regarding the superhero comic book. This article attempts to destabilize this dichotomy by demonstrating the inherent overlap of these two reading models. In my analysis of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's *The Fantastic Four* (1961-1970), I argue that such analyses tend to reduce the narratives, characters, and underlying themes in superhero comic books to mere instruments of dominant cultural norms on the one hand or expressions of radical difference on the other. In juxtaposing diverging analyses, I highlight how such conclusions necessitate a disregard for contradictory evidence, thereby oversimplifying the interactions between these unique cultural productions and their socio-political surroundings while also obscuring other analytical frameworks crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of this material. I assert that the superhero comic book facilitates subversive and hegemonic readings simultaneously, demonstrating this through my close readings of various characters and stories, and conclude by proposing alternative methodologies with which to analyze the superhero comic book.

Ultimately, my analysis challenges privileged reading models ingrained in academia and begs the question, “How do we read?”

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Dedicated to my parents.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: “HERE THEY ARE…!”

There is a tendency in comics studies, with specific regard to the superhero comic book, to evaluate the quality and content of its subject for either its perpetuation of hegemonic ideologies or, increasingly rarer, its capacity to subvert said ideologies. This tendency results from what Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank characterize as “the prevailing moralism of contemporary theoretical writing [and] its impoverishing reliance on a bipolar analytic framework that can all too adequately be summarized as ‘kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic’” (5). For Sedgwick and Frank, the dependence on an arbitrary system of symbolic binary relationships inherent to structuralist analysis has not only survived the emergence of post-structuralism and deconstruction but is perpetuated by its constant critique. In their efforts to rupture the binary relationships of “subject to object, self to other, and active to passive,” critical theorists inevitably reproduce the structure they seek to dismantle even as they complicate the transitive relations the system hinges upon (1). Consequently, critical theory popularizes and disseminates an equally restrictive pattern of binarisms, such as “presence/absence, lack/plenitude, nature/culture, repression/liberation, and *subversive/hegemonic*” (1-2; emphasis added). As such, critical theory propagates the very scientism it contests in its deconstruction of structuralist methods.

The superhero comic book often falls prey to the rhetoric of a *hegemonic-versus-subversive* discourse, even as other, more critically lauded, comics are privileged with a plurality of readings appropriating diverse methodological frameworks. Such analyses can provide profound insights into the political and economic undercurrents that permeate cultural productions like the superhero comic book. However, they risk obscuring other analytical

frameworks crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of comics history, the medium's peculiar conventions, and the status of the superhero in its broader cultural context. My research seeks to negotiate this binary. By examining the formative years of Marvel Comics's *The Fantastic Four* (1961-1970),[1] I demonstrate the inherent limitations of a critical discourse that prioritizes engagement with its subject through the lens of a hegemonic/subversive dichotomy. I argue that such analyses tend to reduce the narratives, characters, and underlying themes in superhero comic books to mere instruments of dominant cultural norms on the one hand or expressions of radical difference on the other. This binary reading overlooks the comic's capacity to simultaneously reflect and contest dominant ideologies and negates its potential to engage with a broader spectrum of discourses.

Fantastic Four comic books of this period lend themselves well to analyses of the superhero comic's ideological underpinnings. However, to argue that Fantastic Four comics serve solely to reinforce or undermine dominant ideologies is to ignore their explorations of human experience that do not neatly align with such frameworks. For instance, while the series undoubtedly embodies certain Cold War-era ideals—such as the valorization of the nuclear family, scientific progress, and American exceptionalism—it also ventures into more complex territory, such as questioning the ethics of scientific discovery and exploring themes of otherness, alienation, and identity. Therefore, a more nuanced analytical approach is required to uncover these comics' dynamic themes and narratives.

In what follows, I outline two competing analyses of *The Fantastic Four* that demonstrate

[1] The individual comic books referenced have been compiled in various print editions. The stories discussed have been accessed through Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. *Fantastic Four Omnibus Vol. 1*. 3rd ed., Marvel Comics, 2021. Quotations are lightly edited to account for stylized capitalization. Efforts have been made to maintain spelling and punctuation.

the binary reading habits characteristic of contemporary literature and culture studies that Sedgwick and Frank identify. I begin, in Chapter II, with Matt Yockey, who, in his essay "This Island Manhattan: New York City and the Space Race in *The Fantastic Four*" (2005), critiques Marvel's superhero team on the grounds of their promulgation of a hegemonic politic. As a counterpoint, I will then turn, in Chapter III, to Ramzi Fawaz's *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (2016) to illustrate the potential for subversive readings of superhero comic book content. In engaging with these materials, I will demonstrate how each author's conclusion hinges on a selective reading of their subject that reduces their object of study to a hegemonic/subversive binary, which necessitates a disregard for contradictory evidence and oversimplifies the interactions between cultural productions and their socio-political surroundings.

My character study of the Invisible Girl in Chapter IV highlights the ways in which these comics facilitate hegemonic and subversive readings simultaneously, suggesting that this overlap enables a more nuanced understanding of the material. I continue in Chapter V by performing a close reading of a pivotal issue in the early FF canon, offering several alternative analytical methods that help move our readings beyond this stifling binary. I will conclude my study by offering my thoughts on the relevancy of the superhero to modern literary and cultural studies, ultimately recognizing the superhero comic book as a dynamic text that mirrors, critiques, and transcends its time.

CHAPTER II

SKYSCRAPERS AND COSMIC RAYS: A HEGEMONIC READING

Co-created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby and debuting in *The Fantastic Four* #1 (cover-dated November 1961), the Fantastic Four were conceived during a period of immense social, political, and technological change. The team consists of scientist-engineer and team leader Reed Richards (Mister Fantastic), his fiancé Sue Storm (the Invisible Woman), her younger brother Johnny Storm (the Human Torch), and ace fighter pilot and long-time friend of Richards's Ben Grimm (the Thing), who are transformed into superheroes with incredible abilities after exposure to radioactive cosmic rays during a scientific excursion in space gone awry. This premise set the stage for a genre-bending series of adventures unique in the canon of contemporaneous superhero comic books, the outsized success of which helped to establish Marvel Comics as among the leading American comic publishers of the 1960s. The '60s were a period of significant social and cultural shifts in the United States, marked by the Civil Rights movement, the space race, and the early stages of the Vietnam War. These influences permeated Fantastic Four comics, which often reflected the optimism of the era's scientific advancements, as well as the anxieties of the Cold War. The Fantastic Four's adventures were not only about battling a colorful array of supervillains but also about exploring unknown realms, from the center of the Earth to distant galaxies and undiscovered dimensions. This sense of exploration and discovery resonated with the comic's 1960s readership, who were witnessing humanity's first forays into space and the promises (and potential dangers) of technological progress.

From its first issue, *The Fantastic Four* evinces the cultural resonances of attendant Cold War politics and emerging space race rhetoric. Future Marvel Comics publications would demonstrate a further preoccupation with Cold War anxieties, as well as a fascination with

scientific and technological advancements and their potential to alter human experience, with many of the Marvel Comics superheroes introduced in the wake of *The Fantastic Four*'s success realizing their powers through scientific means. However, as Matt Yockey notes, "only the Fantastic Four acquired their super-powers by journeying into space" (59). The team's origin, conveyed in a flashback sequence in *The Fantastic Four* #1, bespeaks these cultural imperatives.

When Ben Grimm confronts Reed Richards about his planned mission to space, warning of the potential "effect of cosmic rays" in his typically brash posture, Sue Storm intervenes, impressing the urgency of their mission upon the team's resident pilot: "Ben, we've *got* to take that chance—unless we want the commies to beat us to it!" (see Fig. 1).[2] So crucial is it that the US beat the Soviet Union into space that the team is willing to infiltrate a (not so) heavily guarded launch complex, sneaking past a lone guardsman and commandeering a government spacecraft to accomplish their mission. As Reed remarks, there is "No time to wait for official clearance!" Even as the team blatantly disregards established launch protocol, safety procedures, and the law, the urgency of their mission (however reckless) is comprehensible in the context of attendant space-age politics that necessitate victory over the nation's Cold War adversary by any means necessary.

Fig. 1: "Unless we want the Commies to beat us to it!"; Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. "Here They Are. . .the Fantastic Four!" *Fantastic Four*, no. 1, Marvel, 1961. *Marvel*, https://read.marvel.com/#/book/91?stay=true.

For Yockey, the reproduction of space-age ambitions inherent to the narrative structure of 1960s Fantastic Four comics bespeaks an "appropriation of Frontier Mythology at the turn of the

[2] To provide the highest quality visual examples, images have been pulled from the *Marvel Ultimate* database available on *marvel.com*. It should be noted that digital comics of this type often contain retouched artwork with digitally reworked coloring and line work compared to the original newsprint format.

century" (59). Drawing from Raymond Williams's assertion that productive historical analysis requires consideration of dominant (present), residual (past), and emergent (future) cultural moments, Yockey argues that the Fantastic Four contributes to the creation of a "myth of the corporation" (59-60). He writes,

> The frontier myth that defined American identity to that point was incorporated into the rhetoric of industrialism and monopoly capitalism of the period. This resulting corporate mythology intersects with the emergent concerns of the Cold War and the space race in the 1950s, and this emergent threat was pacified by its incorporation into the dominant and by associating it with the residual of Frontier Mythology. (60)

The integration of Frontier Mythology into a matrix of Cold War geopolitics and space-age ambitions "transforms the frontier from a material, geographical realm to an abstract, immaterial one in which physical exploration becomes technological innovation, market dominance the spoils of the victor" (Yockey 61-2). In Yockey's reading, New York City (more specifically, Manhattan Island, home of Marvel's inaugural superhero team) becomes "a site of national renewal and progress" in the context of this new corporate mythology (59). In the city, national interests are condensed and reinterpreted as part of a national project to define its present through interpolating its past, thereby reimagining its future. The city, then, becomes the symbolic manifestation of the nation's idealized self-image, and the towering skyscrapers that crowd the city's skyline serve as monuments to corporate culture, reifying the modern corporate mythology as they direct the gaze upward toward the New Frontier.

Yockey's analysis of the Manhattan skyline is critical. Not only do the Fantastic Four reside in the Baxter Building, a technologically advanced skyscraper in the heart of Manhattan, thereby configuring the superhero team as participants in a system of corporate hegemony, but

they also physically populate the sky as they survey the city from above in a collection of vehicles engineered by Reed, most famously the Fantasti-Car. The Fantastic Four regulate the city's airway as they patrol for enemies below and, increasingly, from above. For Yockey, "the skies are clearly the domain of the FF, their near-constant presence in it suggesting its significance as the city's most important border" (72). Indeed, from the first page of the series' premiere issue, the skyline is emphasized as a site of intense speculation (see Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: "Look! In the sky—"; Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. "Here They Are. . .the Fantastic Four!" *Fantastic Four*, no. 1, Marvel, 1961. *Marvel*, https://read.marvel.com/#/book/91?stay=true.

The center panel on page one depicts a gathering of startled pedestrians pointing upward in its foreground. At the same time, a massive cloud of smoke billows from a nearby building positioned at the image's far right border. The words "The Fantastic Four" emanate from the issuing cloud in wavy red letters, occupying nearly half the page. The comic's first dialogue is spoken in the bottom left panel; "Look! In the sky—" cries a bewildered police officer. "What in blazes does it mean?" The adjacent panel in the bottom right corner shows a man concealed in shadow, framed in a windowsill, and holding a smoking flare gun. The adjoining caption identifies him as "the leader of the Fantastic Four!"

Reed's use of a flare gun to signal the other three members of his troupe (a recurring motif in early FF comics) signifies an intervention by the private into the public, as he emblazons his newly formed organization's brand name across the sky, reducing the mysteries of space to a corporate asset. For Yockey, such intervention is "emblematic of the hegemonic order the FF defends" (73). However, for other readers, as we will soon see, Reed's performative gesture

signals—both literally and metaphorically—a burgeoning evolution in social relationships that will ultimately destabilize normative identity categories consistent with Cold War ideology.

Famously, the Fantastic Four initially refrained from adopting the stereotypical signifiers familiar among other comic book superheroes of the era, such as distinct superhero costumes and secret identities, choosing instead to walk the streets in plain clothes, their identities public knowledge. This changed with *The Fantastic Four* #3 (March 1962), an issue of many firsts that might be read as the founding of the team's corporate identity (see Fig. 3). In this issue, the Fantastic Four don their iconic blue uniforms for the first time, and readers are introduced to the Fantasti-Car and the team's skyscraper headquarters. Kirby provides a cutaway diagram exhibiting all the technological wonderments of the Fantastic Four's home base. Among the many hangars housing the team's assortment of futuristic vehicles, the several laboratories, and the launchpad for the team's privately owned long-range passenger missile, the building (not yet named the Baxter Building) provides living quarters for each team member, thereby visually articulating the integration of space-age rhetoric and Cold War ideology with the domestic and familial.

Fig. 3: "The World's Greatest Comic Magazine!!"; Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. "The Menace of the Miracle Man." *Fantastic Four*, no. 3, Marvel, 1962. *Marvel*, https://read.marvel.com/#/book/3328?stay=true.

In many respects, the Fantastic Four functions as an independent corporate entity, regularly conducting privately funded research and development projects within the confines of its corporate headquarters. As Yockey notes, "The FF are independently funded by Reed's wealth, occupy their own skyscraper headquarters in the heart of Manhattan, and, perhaps most significantly, have their own 'corporate' logo, the 4 in a circle" (77). The costumes, designed by

Sue, consist of sleek, identically patterned blue jumpsuits, the uniformity of which is suggestive of corporate sponsorship more so than the typically excentric superhero outfits of other comic book superheroes. Indeed, when Ben expresses his dismay at the thought of donning the new outfits ("Bah! Costumes—tights—that's kid's stuff! Who needs 'em?"), Sue conflates the team's super heroics with capitalist enterprise in her reply: "We do, if we're in this business of crimefighting for real!" For Yockey, "The presence of the logo on their uniforms and their equipment further serves to equate the group as a manifestation of corporate enterprise, as another set of tools stamped by the corporation and employed in company service that is ideologically tied with national concerns" (77). The conflation of private/public embodied by the FF manifests most dramatically in their many excursions in space, as Reed and his companions use their independent wealth to traverse the stars and act as ambassadors of the nation in their contact with the various inhabitants of far-off galaxies and distant dimensions.

Early Fantastic Four comic books are preoccupied with the team's discovery of the unfathomable, whether by exploring the deepest depths of the Earth, making contact with visitors from another world, or traveling back in time. By issue #13, the Fantastic Four score a decisive victory in the space race when they travel to the moon and defeat Soviet scientist Ivan Kragoff, vanquishing their geopolitical adversary and claiming the celestial object for the US. The issue opens with a fire in Reed's lab, the result of his experiments with "a new type of energy for rocket propulsion." When explaining his discovery to his teammates, Sue exclaims, "This means America may win the space race!" The implications of Reed's breakthrough are made explicit by Sue's declaration, linking Reed's scientific endeavors to the national astronautics project. Wasting no time, Reed plans to test the new material in a voyage to the moon and, in what Yockey describes as "a show of American democracy, zeal, and self-sacrifice," his three partners

demand that they, too, go on this mission (72). Unbeknownst to the FF, at the moment of their departure, Kragoff and his three primate companions embark on their own mission to the moon.

It is unclear who reaches their destination first, but when their spacecraft lands, the FF encounters the Watcher, a seemingly omniscient celestial peacekeeper who has sworn an oath never to interfere with the happenings of humanity (an oath frequently broken in subsequent adventures). The Watcher pits the FF against Kragoff, who has now gained his own unique abilities after passing through cosmic rays in his travels through space. Upon their victory over the newly named "Red Ghost," the Watcher declares to Reed and the others, "Space is your heritage—see that you prove worthy of such a glorious gift." For Yockey, the Watcher's pronouncement indicates "that the moon has fallen into the 'right' hands and that the Soviets are illegitimate claimants to this 'heritage'" (73). Therefore, the Fantastic Four, despite the independent nature of their private excursion, represent America's exceptionalism and moral superiority compared to their Soviet adversaries. Reed's service to his nation is again made explicit in the comic's final panel when he declares, "And now, we'll return to Earth and present our fully-tested rocket fuel to the national space agency!" Once again, national interests are conflated with corporate hegemony.

Yockey's analysis hinges on a reading of *The Fantastic Four* that foregrounds themes of industrialized capital and national identity, presenting the superhero team as the embodiment of the emerging post-war neoliberal regime. Indeed, Reed is himself a symbol of economic privilege. For example, in a "bonus" story featured in *The Fantastic Four* #11 (Feb. 1963), when recounting his and Ben's college years in what was the first extensive retconning of the team's origin, Reed states, "I was a millionaire's son, and [Ben] was from the wrong side of the tracks…" In acknowledging his upper-class status, Reed likewise acknowledges the class

division between himself and his best friend, who was admitted to college on a football scholarship "instead of bein' a big brain" like Reed. According to Yockey, "The fundamental narrative conflict between Ben and Reed is emblematic of the comic's attitude about class" (69). Yockey argues that class distinctions are exploited in the FF exclusively for comic relief, referring to the Yancy Street Gang, a gang of rough-and-tumble New Yorkers who spend their time pranking Ben and his teammates from off-panel, as exemplary of this fact. He notes Lee's past acknowledgment that the name Yancy Street was inspired by Delancy Street in "New York's Jewish Lower East Side," a fact that Yockey argues "adds another dimension to the comic's class consciousness."

The fact that both Lee and Kirby were Jewish seems to reinforce Yockey's assertion here. Kirby himself has acknowledged that Ben Grimm is ostensibly the artist's fictional avatar, stating, "If you'll notice the way the Thing talks and acts, you'll find that the Thing is really Jack Kirby . . . He had my manners, he has my manner of speech, and he thinks the way I do. He's excitable, and you'll find that he's very, very active among people, and he can muscle his way through a crowd. I find I'm that sort of person" (qtd. in Smith 195). Andrew Alan Smith notes that Lee and Kirby, through the first 101 issues and six annuals of *The Fantastic Four*, "didn't give us much insight" into Ben's religious or ethnic background; they did, however, "provide some clues that later writers embellished" (195). For example, Ben's Lower East Side upbringing and his Hebraic first name code him as ethnically Jewish, but it would be more than 40 years after his debut in *The Fantastic Four* #1 before Ben's Jewishness was made definitive. In disallowing Ben to articulate his Jewishness explicitly, early Fantastic Four comics suppress religious and ethnic differences, forcing Ben to conform to normative WASP culture.

The erasure of Ben's Jewish heritage hints at a more problematic issue concerning the

representation of racial and ethnic identity. Yockey writes, "*The Fantastic Four* remains blissfully unaware of any class, ethnic, or racial divisions that existed in the real New York" (69). As Yockey points out, the Manhattan depicted in *The Fantastic Four* is exclusively white. He writes, "[I]n its early years the comic admits little to no space for ethnic or racial minorities except through the reductive symbolism of generic alien threats" (66). Non-normative racial and ethnic identity is erased from the narrative, with only interplanetary alien visitors representing non-white identity. The fact that these alien visitors are often hostile serves to promote the idea that racial and ethnic difference threatens the stability of white culture and civilization. For Yockey, "The city in *The Fantastic Four* becomes an imagined past and future site of white utopia" (68). It is the Fantastic Four's duty to preserve white civilization by protecting it from racial and ethnic outsiders. If "[h]egemonic order prescribes American identity within white, middle-class boundaries" (66), as Yockey suggests, then the Fantastic Four should ultimately be read as upholding the hegemony of white corporate culture through its suppression of outside "alien" threats.

Yockey provides compelling evidence in support of his analysis. However, even as he articulates a vision of the Fantastic Four as purveyors of a hegemonic corporate mythology dependent upon the exclusion of non-white identity, he omits examples that potentially contradict his reading and that promote a more subversive politics. In the following chapter, I engage a reading of *The Fantastic Four* that proposes alternative understandings of the comic's essential themes of alienation, othering, and identity formation to illustrate better how the comics lend themselves to opposing interpretations given the reader's preferred methodologies.

CHAPTER III

QUEER INFLECTIONS: A SUBVERSIVE READING

Where Yockey argues for a reading of the Fantastic Four that emphasizes the comic's corporate predilections, Ramzi Fawaz offers an alternative interpretation that foregrounds the superhero team's alien otherness, asserting the comic book's subversive potential to disrupt conservative Cold War ideology and promote a liberal cosmopolitanism. Even as they engage with the same materials, Yockey and Fawaz come to wildly divergent conclusions. Fawaz insists that Reed demonstrates a persistent "liberal egalitarian impulse that leaves him in a precarious relationship with the government's national security interests" (73). In reading *The Fantastic Four* #13, Fawaz foregrounds Reed's humanitarian persuasions, citing instances in which the leader of the Fantastic Four expresses his desire for peace and conciliation. For example, when the Watcher transports the FF to a "vast, secluded combat area" where they will battle with Kragoff for dominion of the moon, Reed exclaims, "This is wrong! Why should we battle Kragoff? Why can't we leave our differences behind us? This is the first step to the stars—and we should all make that trip together—as fellow Earthmen!" Reed's plea for peace is echoed by the Watcher when he conveys to the superhero team his seeming omniscience, chronicling his observations over the eons: "We have witnessed the death of worlds which were older than your entire galaxy—! / And, worst of all, we have seen once-noble races turn savage and warlike with the passing of time! A fate which your own foolish breed seems headed for!" (see Fig. 4). It is impossible not to read the Watcher's

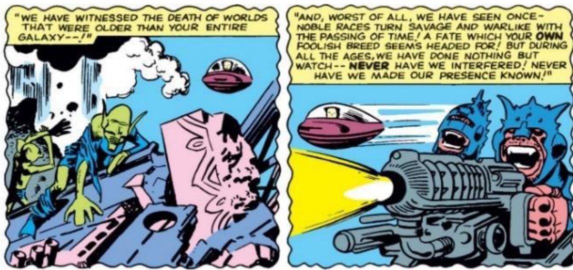

Fig. 4: "The Death of Worlds"; Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. "The Red Ghost and His Indescribable Super-Apes!" *Fantastic Four*, no. 13, Marvel, 1963. *Marvel*, https://read.marvel.com/#/book/4624?stay=true.

declaration as an indictment of Cold War hostilities (an observation Yockey seems willing to overlook), given the narrative's concern with the US/Soviet conflict both in terms of its appropriation of space race imagery and in a more physical display of aggression through the Fantastic Four's war by proxy with Kragoff and his simian companions. Furthermore, as Fawaz notes, "In the prevailing conservative rhetoric of his time, had Reed uttered such a statement anywhere besides the dark side of the moon, he would have undoubtedly been accused of being 'soft on communism'" (73). Far from the purveyors of hegemonic corporate interests that Yockey describes, Fawaz would have us read the Fantastic Four as peace-keeping humanitarians whose interests lie less in advancing national interests than promoting an egalitarian global politic.

Beyond the Fantastic Four's advocacy for equality and general skepticism of Cold War isolationist ideology, Fawaz articulates a vision of Marvel's "first family" as a radical reinvention of liberal politics and American identity enabled by each team member's embodied resistance to normative physiognomies. He writes, "Where once superheroes were symbols of national strength and paragons of US citizenship, now they were framed as cultural outsiders and biological freaks capable of upsetting the social order in much the same way that racial, gendered, and sexual minorities were seen to destabilize the image of the ideal US citizen" (4). In acknowledging the superhero's roots as a righteous defender of the status quo, Fawaz locates a radical transformation of the archetype in mid-century superhero comic books that better reflects the nation's diverse demographics and is more closely aligned with shifting political attitudes characteristic of the period. Crucially, for Fawaz, "The traditional view of the superhero as a nationalist icon has blinded scholars of cold war cultural history to the dynamic role the figure has played in offering alternative and often radical reinterpretations of the central political terms

of liberal democracy in the post-World War II period" (4). In contrast with Yockey, Fawaz argues that "Unlike the frontier hero escaping the constraints of civilization, the modern superhero is an embodiment of the *synthesis* between the seemingly 'natural' biological self and the technologies of industrial society" (6). Where Yockey reads the FF as symbols fully integrated into a culture of Cold War politics and space race rhetoric, Fawaz proposes that the modern superhero is a figure defined by its failure to conform to such systems.

Fawaz details how each member resists assimilation to normative cultural expectations, which he identifies as "anti-communism, psychoanalysis, consumer society, [and] domesticity" (89). Significantly, for Fawaz, "This transformation in the symbolic structures of normalization was effected by an equivalent reworking of the gender and sexual identity of each character." Take, for example, Reed Richards's elastic physique. With the ability to stretch and contort his body and limbs to extreme lengths, molding his frame into various shapes and sizes at will, Richards's body assumes the physical and chemical composition of postwar consumer goods while visually articulating the qualities commonly attributed to the ineffectual liberal intellectual (Fawaz 73). Reed's awe-inspiring physical abilities, and those of his three teammates, are the result of the instability in his molecular makeup—what is referred to frequently in the comics as "unstable molecules." Such molecular recombination grants the FF their powers and configures the superheroes as outsiders in relation to their normative Manhattan-resident neighbors.

However, the Fantastic Four are not rendered as social outsiders merely based on their physical characteristics. For Fawaz, how each character responds to and enacts their uncanny abilities is equally important, perhaps even more so, as their observable physical differences. In the case of Reed Richards, the pliability of his body and limbs allows him to envelope himself around his opponents, such as in *Fantastic Four* #18 (Sep. 1963), when Reed attempts to

incapacitate the villainous Super-Skrull by folding his body around his enemy in a twisted embrace (see Fig. 5). The bizarre bondage scene is one of many such examples of what Fawaz refers to as "instances of physical homosocial bonding" wherein "Reed's masculinity is placed in crisis, his body distended to the point where his gender is no longer clearly identifiable" (75). These "queer encounters with the bodies of other men" are indicative of Reed's inconsistent heterosexual desires, which, according to Fawaz, are most pronounced in his interactions with his fiancé Sue Storm.

Fig. 5: "A Human Straight-Jacket"; Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. "A Skrull Walks Among Us!" *Fantastic Four*, no. 18, Marvel, 1963. *Marvel*, https://read.marvel.com/#/book/4629?stay=true.

Sue states explicitly in the series' debut issue that she and Reed are engaged: "I'm your fiancée! Where you go, I go!" Interestingly, the established engagement between the team's two parental surrogates is seemingly abandoned in subsequent issues, especially after the (re)introduction of Marvel's Golden Age anti-hero Namor, the Sub-Mariner, in *The Fantastic Four* #4 (May 1962). The developing love triangle, evocative of the popular romance comics of the time more so than contemporaneous superhero comic books, complicates the relationship between Reed and Sue, and the two are reconfigured in ensuing issues with Reed situated as the unrequited lover and Sue the conflicted lover torn between two men. Fawaz reads Richards as ambivalent in his romantic pursuit of Sue, too distracted by his scientific endeavors to notice her affections. He writes, "Reed's attachment to the rigid, sterile tools of cold war science and technology damage his emotional connection to Sue, who is repulsed by her fiancé's obsessive focus on experiments and technogadgets" (75).

Indeed, this is, at times, the case. However, Reed is just as likely to openly express his

feelings for Sue as in the previously discussed bonus story featured in *The Fantastic Four* #11. As Reed reflects on his service during WWII, he remarks, “But all the time I was at the front, I dreamed of the day I’d return home—to the girl who was always in my thoughts!” Sue replies, “Let’s skip over that part of it! It—it’s rather painful for me!” The conversation is dropped, but not before Reed acknowledges Sue’s romantic interest in the Sub-Mariner. Here, we see that it is not Reed’s inability to communicate his feelings for Sue that ruptures their romantic entanglement but Sue’s ambivalence about the couple’s engagement. “I know how you feel—And I don’t ever want to hurt you!” she tells Reed. Therefore, we cannot interpret the complications in the superhero couple’s relationship as resulting solely from Reed’s lack of attentiveness. Instead, Sue’s hesitancy is a dramatic ploy arranged in a grander narrative design. As in so many other cases, this is not a matter of *either/or* but of *yes/and*. Yes, it is a common trope in Fantastic Four comics that Reed’s work alienates him from his family and other loved ones, *and* his relationship with Sue is complicated in early issues of the series by Sue’s affections for the Sub-Mariner.

Reed’s elastic body contrasts with Ben Grimm’s transformation into a solid rocklike specimen, granting him super strength to go along with his combustible temperament. However, unlike the other three team members, Ben cannot return to his human form at will. His seemingly fixed state as the monstrous Thing is the cause of great anguish, a narrative device that will be explored in greater detail shortly. For Fawaz, “the Thing’s struggles to come to terms with his monstrous form became a central trope of *The Fantastic Four*, positioning him as the neurotic subject of failed masculinity” (76). He elaborates: “In Benjamin Grimm . . . *The Fantastic Four* celebrated the neurotic personality as a desirable state of being that described a productively maladjusted stance toward contemporary gender and sexual norms” (77). Ben’s anguish can be

directly traced to his life before the fateful mission to space that granted the FF their powers. Returning to the *Fantastic Four* #11, we see that Ben, prior to his transformation, exceeded normative expectations of masculinity. He was an All-American college football star before joining the war effort as a fighter pilot. He also comes from a working-class background, and his rough demeanor and say-it-like-it-is disposition routinely put him at odds with his more culturally refined friend, Reed Richards. The change in Ben's appearance has psychological ramifications beyond his perceived loss of humanity. While his altered form bars him from reentering society as a model of masculinity, such as he once was, his transformation may also have consequences in terms of his sexual reproductive capacities, lending further to his psychological frustrations.

We might say that Ben suffers from dysmorphia, as he is perhaps the first in a long line of Marvel Comics superheroes for whom the presence of superpowers and their accompanying altered states of being are points of trauma rather than points of empowerment. However, we should stop short, as Fawaz does, of identifying Ben's feeling "of being trapped in the wrong body" with the experiences of trans and nonbinary individuals. As Fawaz writes, Ben's dysmorphia "conveyed the failure of *any body*, especially the normatively heterosexual male body, to capture an authentic sense of self" (80; emphasis added). In the hetero-masculinist paradigm of homogenous Cold War era American culture, any bodies judged as deviations from the norm were subjected to a process of social othering. For Fawaz, the Fantastic Four visualizes this process through Ben's characterization: "In this way the comic book suggested that a variety of discourses of bodily identities in the face of homophobia and transphobia . . . could also be used to *destabilize* normalizing structures like heterosexual masculinity" (80). The Fantastic Four, then, embrace a queer-inflected identity as a means of resistance to hetero-masculinist

homogeneity.

No other character in *The Fantastic Four* relishes their newfound abilities quite like Johnny Storm. Johnny stands in stark contrast to Ben Grimm as the gleefully exuberant junior member of the team. As Sue's teenage brother, Johnny could hardly be more enthusiastic about his extraordinary gifts. In *The Fantastic Four* #1, the other team members are initially shocked, even horrified, at their peculiar transformations after exposure to cosmic rays; Johnny, on the other hand, is elated at his newfound ability to fly through the air, his body engulfed from head to toe in flame. "I'm lighter than air!!" he cries out triumphantly. "I can fly!! Look—I can fly!!" (see Fig. 6). Johnny's ecstatic reaction to his extraordinary new talents immediately ends the preceding hostilities between Reed and Ben, who have come to blows following the revelation of their metamorphoses.

Fig. 6: "Look—I can fly!!"; Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. "Here They Are…the Fantastic Four!" *Fantastic Four*, no. 1, Marvel, 1961. *Marvel*, https://read.marvel.com/#/book/91?stay=true.

Consistent with his reading of Marvel's superhero team, Fawaz directs attention to the queer potentiality of the Human Torch's embrace of his particular condition. He writes, "Johnny's blazing body functioned as both a visual expression of excessive heterosexuality—the hypersexualized teenage rebel—as well as its seeming opposite, the 'flaming' homosexual of popular political rhetoric" (81). For Fawaz, Johnny reappropriates the language of homophobia as a pronouncement of his unabashed pride in the radical opposition his differentiated body poses to heteronormative positionalities. Such opposition is routinely reenacted every time he triggers his superpowers with his famous battle cry, "Flame on!" a catchphrase Fawaz describes as "a performative utterance that brings into being the condition it describes" (82). Where Fawaz is right to point out Johnny's flippancy toward the opposite sex in early issues of *The Fantastic*

Four, seemingly reaffirming his queer reading of FF comics, Johnny's character arch, as with the other members of the team, is explicitly heteronormative. Such obvious oversights risk undermining Fawaz's radical reinterpretation of Marvel's superhero foursome and further demonstrates how the text is read in service of a predetermined conclusion when arguing for or against the supposedly radical or, in Yockey's case, conservative politics of the Fantastic Four and other superhero comic books of this and other generations.

Other critics have noted such inconsistencies inherent in assessments of the superhero comic book's ideological content and, by extension, broader trends in contemporary literary and cultural criticism. For example, in his review of Fawaz's *The New Mutants*, Marc Singer notes that Fawaz consistently displays "a discomfiting willingness to downplay any elements that contradict his preferred interpretations" (114). Singer describes Fawaz's work on the Fantastic Four and other Marvel Comics titles featured in his book as

> a fine representative of a type of scholarship currently favored in certain sectors of the humanities: highly cultivated in its academic voice, though careless in its attention to textual and contextual detail; dedicated to sustaining its theoretical assumptions, but indifferent to other scholarship that might have complicated its arguments; daring in its impulse to overturn conventional wisdom, yet eminently safe in its unfailing confirmation of the ideological righteousness of its primary subjects. (116-7)

Singer takes issue with Fawaz's interpretation of the Human Torch, of whom Fawaz writes, "the physical manifestation of Johnny's flame symbolically enacts a queer narcissism that reroutes his assumed heterosexual desire for women toward a queer desire for an unruly, flaming body" (81). In this case, Fawaz's reading is dependent upon cultural subtext that, unfortunately, does not align historically with this specific example. As Singer notes, "Fawaz makes this claim on the

basis of . . . an anachronistic association of Johnny's fiery powers with the 'flaming' homosexual, a slang term that would not enter popular usage until the 1970s, a decade after his creation" (112). It stands to reason, then, that much of Fawaz's interpretive work requires not only his sidestepping of contradictory evidence but also the misapplication of historical context to justify a conclusion that looks here to be predetermined. For Singer, "These comics are not always easily reconciled with the values of twenty-first-century academics, which sometimes appears to be Fawaz's primary goal" (113). But is this a one-off example, or is this indicative of a larger pattern in Fawaz's work?

CHAPTER IV

FINDING THE MIDDLE: SUE'S INVISIBLE MYSTIQUE

To further locate potential incongruencies in Fawaz's reading, we can turn to his examination of Sue Storm, alias the Invisible Girl. As her name implies, Sue possesses the uncanny ability to turn herself invisible at will, often using this ability to covertly sabotage the best-laid plans of the Fantastic Four's enemies. Fawaz writes, "In Sue Storm *The Fantastic Four* attempted to wed femininity with a queerly inflected feminism through a symbolic restructuring of the relations between women's bodies and the material object world of postwar domesticity" (89). For Fawaz, Sue's inability to conform to the normative standards of Cold War America is not a matter of her failure to identify with such standards, as it is for her three teammates. Instead, Sue's supposed resistance to the prevailing standards of femininity in 1960s America should be read as her *disidentifying* with the criteria of normative femininity (Fawaz 85).

Drawing from Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Fawaz argues that Sue physically manifests "women's social invisibility" in professional and political domains. He writes, "It is *through* invisibility, rather than an attempt to escape the social stigma of being invisible and unrecognized, that Sue would alter the meanings that attached to postwar women's supposedly docile, domestic bodies" (86). Even as Sue visually articulates women's absence from American social life outside the domestic, her abilities afford her a measure of autonomy unique for her time. Sue's invisibility gives her command over the display of her body on the page, allowing her to resist the exploitative, sexualizing male gaze. Through invisibility, Sue controls her desirability and opens new channels to express pleasure that, for Fawaz, "echoed new conceptions of women's sexuality emerging in the mid-1960s" (87).

Singer acknowledges the creativity of Fawaz's interpretations, going so far as to call Fawaz's readings "fascinating." However, he takes issue with Fawaz's circumnavigation of the

many instances of outright chauvinism prevalent in the texts (113). He writes, "[Fawaz] similarly downplays the rampant sexism in the depiction of Sue Storm" and "largely overlooks the comic's presentation of Sue as a timid, self-effacing girl dependent on Reed Richards for direction." The chauvinism of early FF comics is embedded in Sue's very name, the Invisible Girl, an infantilizing moniker that seemingly suggests Sue's youthful naivety, inexperience, and immaturity. Lee and Kirby state that Sue "is in her twenties" in response to a fan letter published in issue #11 while also noting that they "can't tell Sue's EXACT age because, being a female, she'd never talk to us again!" For context, Lee and Kirby put Reed and Ben "in their late thirties." We cannot extrapolate a precise age for Sue based on the available information. However, we know that throughout the first decade of *The Fantastic Four*, Sue moves through the traditional milestones of an adult woman, marrying Reed in *The Fantastic Four Annual* #3 (Oct. 1965) and giving birth to their first child in *The Fantastic Four Annual* #6 (Aug. 1968), all the while maintaining the title of Invisible Girl despite her status as wife and mother. It is not until 1985, in The Fantastic Four #284, that writer-artist John Byrne canonically transitions Sue from "Invisible Girl" to "Invisible Woman," more than two decades after the series debut. Through her character arch, we see that Sue, far from resisting normative standards of femininity as Fawaz would have it, actually conforms to the prescribed gender roles of her time, and her persistent ineffectual depiction made her a point of controversy among readers from the earliest months of the comic's availability on newsstands.

The debate over Sue's depiction as either an unfavorable stereotype of women's domestication or an empowered icon of feminine strength and autonomy has been ongoing since the debut of the "Fantastic Four Fan Page." Beginning with *The Fantastic Four* #3 and included at the end of each issue thenceforth immediately following the book's featured narrative, the fan

page compiled select mail-in letters from Marvel's devotees alongside humorous commentary provided by Lee and Kirby, offering a space for readers to participate in the burgeoning Marvel fan community. In *The Fantastic Four* #6, a letter was published by a reader named Martin Ross, reading, "It's the greatest! But I think Susan Storm ought to be thrown out. She never does anything." The letter initiated an outpouring of fan speculation concerning Sue's value to the team in the ensuing months, and in a fascinating example of reader engagement, Lee and Kirby directly addressed their fans in the bonus story featured in *The Fantastic Four* #11. With some readers expressing their desire for Sue's removal from the series entirely and others supporting her status as an equal team partner, Lee and Kirby allowed their creations to speak for themselves. However, this metatextual device perhaps does not prove the point Lee and Kirby attempted to make.

At their skyscraper headquarters, the Fantastic Four are reading their recently delivered fan mail when Sue suddenly begins to cry. "A number of readers have said that I don't contribute enough to you—you'd be—better off without me!" she says, an arm across her face to mask her tears. Reed admonishes his readership, breaking the fourth wall as he points a stern index finger directly at his audience and offers a bizarre comparison to Abraham Lincoln's mother to justify Sue's place on the team (see Fig. 6). "Lincoln's mother was the most important person in the world to him! But—she didn't help him fight the Civil War!" he says, suggesting that Sue, in fact, does not contribute in any actionable way when the team is imperiled by its enemies. Sue's responsibilities to the team are made explicit by Reed's suggestion that her primary role is to serve as the team's matriarch, presumably busying herself

Fig. 7: "She didn't help him fight the Civil War!"; Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. "A Visit with the Fantastic Four." *Fantastic Four*, no. 11, Marvel, 1963. *Marvel*, https://read.marvel.com/#/book/435?stay=true.

with domestic concerns.

Indeed, Sue is routinely depicted as serving in a normative feminine domestic role throughout the early issues of 1960s Fantastic Four comic books. When not occupied by shopping or tea with friends, Sue is busied with other interests commonly gendered as feminine, such as designing the Fantastic Four's costumes (see Fig. 8) and experimenting with scentless perfumes. She is routinely objectified, including by her creators, such as when she is referred to as "the fourth member of the FF with the long blonde hair and the pretty legs" in an editorial response to a fan letter in *The Fantastic Four* #18. Sue herself acknowledges her role as matriarch when, in *The Fantastic Four* #16, she is asked by a news reporter to name her favorite member of the team and responds, "That's like asking a parent to name her favorite child!" Often, Sue plays a pivotal role in thwarting the plots of the team's many supervillains, but just as frequently, she is immediately subdued and succumbs to the role of damsel-in-distress. Even in her bravest moments, Sue appears incapable of escaping the trappings of the "feminine mystique," invisible or not.

Fig. 8: "You designed a costume for yourself!"; Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. "The Menace of the Miracle Man." *Fantastic Four*, no. 3, Marvel, 1962. *Marvel*, https://read.marvel.com/#/book/3328?stay=true.

Nevertheless, Sue does, in fact, often play a pivotal role in detaining the team's enemies, and she, at times, deploys her powers to make fools of would-be chauvinist aggressors. Reed's defense of Sue in *The Fantastic Four* #11 perfectly encapsulates Sue's resistance to binary readings of her hegemonic or subversive qualities. Initially, Sue weeps when confronted by fan criticism, and this display of stereotypical feminine emotionality is followed by Reed's curious Lincoln comparison. However, both Reed and Ben come to Sue's defense by recalling past instances in which Sue's actions were critical to the team's success. For example, Reed reminds

readers that Sue engaged in battle with the shape-shifting alien Skrulls alongside her three teammates in *The Fantastic Four* #2 (Jan. 1962). For his part, Ben recalls Sue's daring rescue of the team when her three partners were trapped in an airless chamber by their arch nemesis, Dr. Doom, in *The Fantastic Four* #5 (July 1962). These flashback panels are juxtaposed with Reed's initial assertion that Sue's motherly qualities are what bring her value to the team, creating a tension between the expectation for her to assume a domesticated, feminine role and her assumed role as a masculinized soldier against the enemies of the free world. Sue effortlessly fulfills competing commitments. Time and again, she is shown to be an invaluable team member through her savvy ability to navigate dangerous situations, regularly using her stealth abilities to help save the day. If she enjoys tea with her society friends and fashioning new outfits for the team in her downtime, it is never at the expense of her other obligations.

As a public celebrity, Sue is also subjected to unwanted attention from unsavory characters. She and the other members of the Fantastic Four are often bombarded by fans and other curious spectators when walking the streets of Manhattan. As such, Sue is sometimes approached by eager men with sexually suggestive intentions, as in *The Fantastic Four* #10 (Jan. 1963) when one such "fan" stops Sue on the street. "So this is what you look like! Mmm—You shouldn't ever turn invisible, doll!" the man says, his arms outstretched to embrace Sue. Sue escapes the uncomfortable situation by turning invisible, remarking as she slips underneath the man's arms, "Get lost, repulsive!" The interaction is but one in a series of scenarios in which Sue's status as a sexual icon is foregrounded.

For example, the pin-up page following the featured narrative in this issue depicts Sue in a glamorous pose, an outstretched arm gesturing toward her adoring fans. Fawaz notes, "Sue's pose is a direct visual reference to Marilyn Monroe's sultry wave in her famous cover photo for

the inaugural 1953 issue of *Playboy*" (87). Furthermore, "Sue's bobbed hair and regal manner . . . link her to the elegant femininity of Jacqueline Kennedy." Sue embodies competing notions of women's desirability. On the one hand, she possesses Monroe's erotic sensibility, suggesting an embrace of changing sexual norms. On the other hand, Sue maintains a conservatively inflected, upper-class respectability akin to the First Lady. At the same time, she assumes the role of wife, mother, and, when necessary, masculinist adventurer and action hero.

Sue is capable of expressing her femininity in diverse ways that complicate readings attempting to reduce her to either an expression of hegemonic order or of radical subversion. She is not immune to sexist hetero-patriarchal systems, but she cannot be said to enforce such systems either. The truth of her complicated characterization, as with the other three members of the Fantastic Four, lies somewhere closer to the middle.

CHAPTER V

ALTERNATIVE FRAMEWORKS; OR, BEN AND THE WHALE

I want to turn now to a pivotal issue in the first year of Lee and Kirby's *The Fantastic Four* to present various alternative interpretations of the superhero comic book that are sometimes overshadowed by the prevailing theoretical rhetoric. Before doing so, I should note that while my study of *The Fantastic Four* leans toward cultural analysis, a growing body of work in recent decades often categorized under the umbrella term "comics theory" offers many valuable tools for examining this peculiar medium and its conventions. Groundbreaking works in comics theory, such as *Understanding Comics* (McCloud) and *The System of Comics* (Groensteen), have proven foundational to our modern understanding of the formal elements of this previously neglected medium, helping to promote comics in academic and other critical circles that have proven resistant to acknowledgments of the medium's artistic and literary merits in the past. Nevertheless, even as comics theorists are not averse to making the occasional aside to the works of superhero comic book creators like Lee and Kirby, these pop culture artifacts are routinely ignored by more academicized theorists. It is true that even superhero comic books have recently garnered much critical attention. However, such analyses, like my own, tend toward discussions of the comics' cultural influences rather than their formal devices.

Charles Hatfield provides one notable exception to this rule in his extensive study of Jack Kirby's wildly influential work. In *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby* (2012), Hatfield meticulously chronicles Kirby's career and provides the most thorough theoretical analysis of Kirby's unique visual style to date. Hatfield argues that "Kirby's narrative drawing oversteps any neat classification of signs, exceeds illustration, outruns the conventions of realism, and, in sum, constantly redraws relationships among the various functions of drawing and between naturalism

and cartoon stylization" (37). He describes Kirby's revelatory comics stylings as "an apocalyptic imagination excited by the prospect of disaster" (67), drawing attention to Kirby's idiosyncratic use of "geometric forms, slashing lines, squiggles, dots, bursts, and so on" (47). However, where my analysis centers on Kirby's work in the early 1960s with *The Fantastic Four*, a pivotal juncture in the history of mainstream superhero comic books, Hatfield is focused primarily on Kirby's 1970s output when the artist defected to rival publisher DC Comics where he produced some of his most artistically renowned work with complete creative control as writer-artist. While Kirby's work on *The Fantastic Four* has proven equally, perhaps even more, influential than his work with DC Comics, early issues can accurately be described as "early-Kirby," meaning, whether due to economic and time constraints or artistic ambition, the artist had not yet fully developed the unique style that would make him an industry legend in the decades to come. In thinking about the various alternative methodologies with which to analyze superhero comic books, we might first consider how comics theorists might better embrace the plethora of material produced in the last century in the superhero comic book genre. Nevertheless, in doing so, we should guard against the type of theoretical biases discussed throughout this paper, for as Hatfield notes, "typically, we read the artist through the lens of the theory without necessarily reflecting on the efficacy or limits of the theory as such" (37).

The Fantastic Four #4 (May 1962) is a crucial episode in Lee and Kirby's ongoing epic that proves foundational to the superhero team's development, both in terms of the structure of their narrative and the evolution of the characters themselves. In this issue, we find Lee and Kirby establishing the building blocks of their shared fictional universe across Marvel titles as they revive a Golden Age favorite, the Sub-Mariner, and pit him against the titular superhero foursome. Unlike other influential FF villains like Dr. Doom, the Sub-Mariner's conflict with the

Fantastic Four is not one of a fascistic ambition for global conquest per se. The Sub-Mariner's grievances are more nuanced and complex, as is his relationship with the superheroes themselves, thus demonstrating Lee and Kirby's insistence on multifaceted character dynamics that set their superhero comic books apart from their competition. Furthermore, in *FF* #4, we find Lee and Kirby experimenting narratively by employing meta- and intertextual devices. These knowing moments of self-reflexivity should not be interpreted as superfluous embellishments. Instead, they are foundational to Lee and Kirby's worldbuilding and help to facilitate reader engagement to levels previously unseen in pop culture. In sum, *FF* #4 marks a dramatic turning point in the series that would set the stage for much of the groundbreaking experimentation to come in subsequent issues.

The story picks up in the immediate aftermath of *The Fantastic Four* #3. After defeating the villainous Miracle Man, Johnny and Ben confront each other in one of their many increasingly characteristic inter-family squabbles. However, this time, Johnny departs from the team angrily, swearing off allegiance to his allies. When we find the other three members at the opening of the following issue, Reed, Sue, and Ben embark on a mission to locate Johnny and persuade him to rejoin them in their superhero endeavors. The team splits up, with Reed and Sue chasing leads by interrogating various teenagers on the streets of Manhattan and investigating locations where they assume teenagers might be most likely to spend their time. Ben's search proves more fruitful when he approaches a garage that Johnny is known to frequent, working on hot rods with his friends when he is not off battling evildoers in his superhero guise. Ben confronts Johnny with the apparent intent of finishing the fight that ended abruptly in the previous issue. However, just as Ben is about to subdue Johnny, he undergoes an unexpected transformation, reverting to his human form, his rocklike exterior temporarily abandoning him.

Johnny takes this opportunity to flee the scene as Ben is distracted by the re-emergence of his past physical form.

Interestingly, when Johnny first departs from the team, Reed expresses his concern that he may use his powers as the Human Torch for nefarious purposes. This moment is emblematic of an early narrative trope that positions the individual members of the FF as potential threats to humanity were they to abandon their surrogate family unit and go rogue. No member of the team is articulated in this way as frequently or as forcefully as the Thing. As José Alaniz writes, "[A]rguably the most consistently recurring threat to the Fantastic Four's stability throughout the Silver Age was the Thing himself" (92). Unique for their time, the Fantastic Four's gravest threats are not those that come from outside but from within. Ben is consistently depicted as emotionally volatile, with a tendency toward violent outbursts that lead him to frequent physical and verbal confrontations with his partners, as well as the destruction of his inanimate surroundings. Sue voices her concerns for Ben's emotional outbursts in *The Fantastic Four* #2 when, after yet another of Ben's explosive tirades, she says to Reed, "[H]ow much more of this can we take! Sooner or later the Thing will run amok and none of us will be able to stop him!" As is the pattern, Ben channels his frustrations against his enemies, helping to save the day and preserve the team's more or less healthy functioning.

Ben's outbursts are demonstrative of what Ben Saunders calls his "profound emotional pain over his physical deformity and attendant experience of social isolation" (xxxii). It is made painstakingly clear in early issues just how distraught Ben is with his "deformity." He regularly expresses his feelings of isolation, and he blames Reed Richards for causing his transformation. Later in *The Fantastic Four* #2, when the team ventures into space to intercept the Skrull's alien spaceship, Ben has a veritable panic attack as the team once again passes through the cosmic

rays that granted them their powers. Ben screams and gyrates in terror for fear of what further malformities he might endure, but this time, the cosmic rays have the reverse effect, transforming him back into Ben Grimm, if only temporarily. For his part, Reed feels deep guilt for persuading Ben to embark on the fateful mission to space that forever altered his and his teammate's lives. Reed toils in his lab, endlessly searching for a cure for his friend, often finding some temporary solution to Ben's affliction. Reed's persistence in developing a cure serves the purpose of informing new readers of Ben's peculiar condition, as back issues were rarely available at newsstands, meaning if readers missed an issue, they had no way of catching up without Lee and Kirby's inclusion of flashbacks and recaps in subsequent issues. But it also demonstrates how profoundly Ben has been traumatized by his transformation, so when, in *The Fantastic Four* #4, he suddenly transitions to his old self again, presumably the result of lingering radiation from past exposure and experimentation, he is elated, and Johnny escapes.

In his insightful work merging disability studies and superhero comics, Alaniz offers a revelatory methodological framework that can perhaps lead us away from a discourse of the hegemonic and the subversive. Alaniz proposes that Ben's superpowers be read as consistent with the experiences of disabled persons living in the US. Ben often finds it challenging to fit socially and physically with his surroundings after exposure to cosmic rays. As evidence, Alaniz points to Ben's first appearance in *FF* #1, where Ben is found shopping for clothes, failing to find anything big enough to fit him. When he witnesses Reed's signal in the Manhattan skyline, Ben tumbles through town, demolishing walls and city streets on his way to FF headquarters. Alaniz writes,

> The Thing, as absolute outsider, exposes the presumptions (social no less than architectural) of a city built to scale for the able-bodied. His inadvertent rampage—

comical because he is only trying to make his way across town, like any New Yorker—illustrates the barriers (of all sorts) unthinkingly placed in the way of unconventional physiques in 'democratic' modernity. (91)

Alaniz perhaps gestures towards the type of hegemonic/subversive reading we are trying to avoid in his reference to "'democratic' modernity," his use of scare quotes signifying the irony of a democratic society that insists on the exclusion of people with disabilities. Nevertheless, his reading helps illuminate the complex character mechanics in *The Fantastic Four*.

Ben is subjected to physical barriers due to his unusual size and strength, and he also undergoes a process of social othering due to his appearance. Alaniz points out, "he has no visibly human aspect to his identity" (91). Indeed, even the other three members routinely call him by his superhero moniker, the Thing, in favor of his given name, even as they almost exclusively refer to each other by their first names. Ben protests this common occurrence in *The Fantastic Four* #8 when he asks Sue, "How come you only call me 'Ben' when you want something?? All the rest of the time I'm just the Thing to all of ya!" The inclusion of quotation marks around the name "Ben" here suggests his increasing dissociation from his past self, as his alter ego, the Thing, absent of quotation marks, encroaches on and supplants his former identity.

In an emotionally potent sequence in *FF* #4, as Johnny escapes, Ben is devastated to realize that he is transforming back into the Thing (see Fig. 9). Kirby's three-panel sequence tracks Ben's movement as he slowly folds into himself, appearing to sob in the page's final panel. His words, equally devastating, speak to his perceived loss of humanity: "My hands! My arms! I'm turning back! Back into…into…a…thing!" Here, Ben is no longer "the Thing," the singular, renowned member of the Fantastic Four. The determiner "the" has been replaced with "a," erasing Ben's superhero identity and reducing his being to an indeterminate object,

suggesting Ben's perception of himself has been so corrupted that he can no longer interpret his existence as human.

Fig. 9: "Back into…into…a…thing!"; Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. "The Coming of…the Sub-Mariner!" *Fantastic Four*, no. 4, Marvel, 1962. *Marvel*, https://read.marvel.com/#/book/3330?stay=true.

Johnny escapes to a "men's hotel" in "the Bowery," where he encounters a bearded man with amnesia who will turn out to be the Golden Age superhero Namor, the Sub-Mariner. Here, Lee and Kirby demonstrate their tendency for what Saunders calls their "full-blown postmodern displays of self-reflexivity" (xxxiv) when they depict Johnny resting on a cot with a comic book in hand featuring Namor on its cover battling what appear to be Nazi soldiers. Kirby provides us with a close-up shot of the comic book cover in one panel (see Fig. 10). Namor's flailing fist slams into an enemy soldier's jaw, a gun turret positioned over one shoulder, and an explosive blast erupting over the other shoulder. The title "Sub-Mariner" splashes across the header. The cover is evocative of World War II-era superhero comic books that often depicted their title characters in battle with the Axis powers. Johnny places the artifact in its appropriate historical context when he thinks, "Look at this old, beat-up comic mag! It's from the 1940's!!"

Such metatextual references are a staple of Lee and Kirby's early work. We have already seen one example in *The Fantastic Four* #11, when Reed, Sue, and Ben respond directly to reader fan mail. Additionally, we find in *The Fantastic Four* #2 a reference to Lee and Kirby's

1950s science fiction anthology series *Strange Tales* and *Journey into Mystery* when Reed uses images of the monstrous aliens featured in these titles as a ploy to ward off the impending Skrull invasion. In *The Fantastic Four* #10, Lee and Kirby write themselves into the narrative as the authors of the in-world *Fantastic Four* comic book series, making the comics diegetic artifacts that exist simultaneously in the fictional Marvel comic book universe and our present reality. For Saunders, “These and similar moments blur the boundary between fiction and the real world and work to foster an illusion of intimacy between the authors, the audience, and the characters” (xxxiv). Indeed, such metatextual devices coupled with the growing interaction on display in the fan page demonstrate not just the breadth of the comic’s popularity, with readers of all ages writing in to express their adoration for the title, but also helped to facilitate fan engagement to unprecedented levels by incorporating fan commentary directly into the text and, in some cases, adapting story ideas proposed by fans in the letter column for future releases.

Fig. 10: “The Sub-Mariner!”; Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. “The Coming of…the Sub-Mariner!” *Fantastic Four*, no. 4, Marvel, 1962. *Marvel*, https://read.marvel.com/#/book/3330?stay=true.

Beyond the metatextual discourses prevalent in Lee and Kirby’s work, we can also consider these comics for their intertextuality. The comic book Johnny reads at the men’s hotel is not merely a moment of self-reflexivity, referring to prior Marvel Comics publications. By referencing recognizable cultural artifacts like the World War II-era Sub Mariner comic book, Lee and Kirby fix their superhero epic in the popular history of contemporary society. Rather than residing in fantasy settings such as those familiar to readers of DC Comics—such as Metropolis, Gotham City, or Themyscira—Marvel Comics superheroes famously populate otherwise real-world settings like Manhattan Island, grounding their narrative in a reality that

runs parallel to our own. Likewise, Lee and Kirby make frequent asides to recognizable landmarks, celebrities, artworks, and other cultural productions throughout their comic books.

For example, Johnny refers to the famous luxury hotel, the Waldorf Astoria, when he first takes a bed at the men's hotel, thinking, "Well, it's not the Waldorf, but it'll keep me safely hidden while I plan my next move!" The reference echoes Yockey's analysis in that it foregrounds class divisions by highlighting Johnny's displacement from his former upper-class residence at the Baxter Building. The other men at the hotel are depicted as unkempt with unshaven faces and ragged clothes, signifying their poverty, a condition Johnny is at risk of sharing by way of his separation from his friends and family. Later in the issue, when Ben ventures into the mouth of a giant sea monster the Sub-Mariner has let loose on the city, he invokes the Book of Jonah when he says, "All I've gotta do is slip thru that joker's teeth and get inside, like Jonah and the Whale." We might initially assume that the biblical story is only invoked given the parallel between Ben and Jonah's circumstances, but the reference to the Old Testament may likewise signal Ben's Jewish heritage. What initially appears to be minor asides may provide readers with a wealth of material ripe for close analysis of the themes in Lee and Kirby's comic series.

We might also consider visual examples of intertextuality. Here, it is helpful to define the term more clearly. Umberto Eco writes, "There is a procedure typical of the postmodern narrative that has been much used recently in the field of mass communications: it concerns the ironic quotation of the commonplace" (88). Eco describes this procedure as a series of visual cues meant to invoke recognizable referents from past cultural productions familiar to the audience. Notably, this is but one of many examples of how creators employ intertextuality, making up what Eco calls an "intertextual encyclopedia" (89), a potential toolbox for academics

and critics to adopt in service of examining the interactions between mass media productions and broader cultural trends and societal concerns. Given this definition, we might read moments of metatextual self-reference as one facet of a wider set of intertextual procedures.

Lee and Kirby frequently employ intertextuality throughout *The Fantastic Four*, such as in the series' premiere issue when the superhero team travels to "Monster Isle" to battle the mysterious Mole Man. The island is evocative, both in name and appearance, of Skull Island, home to King Kong in RKO Pictures's classic monster film. Likewise, upon reaching the island, the Fantastic Four embark on a journey beneath the Earth's surface that readers familiar with Jules Verne's novels will likely recognize. Indeed, the Mole Man voices the similarities when recounting his origin story: "I've found it!! It's Earth's center!" In *The Fantastic Four* #2, more visual cues are implanted for initiated audience members. When the team boards the enemy Skrull spaceship, they attempt to dissuade the alien invaders from attacking Earth by showing them several falsified documents attesting to the monstrosities that defend the planet. Among these is an image depicting "an army of giant monstrous insects," which Kirby visualizes as a cluster of giant ants taller than skyscrapers marching through a city street. Connoisseurs of giant monster films popular in the 1950s will recognize this as an allusion to the 1954 Warner Bros. production *Them!* in which giant radioactive ants attack the nation. Kirby rhymes his visuals in this way with popular cultural touchstones that his youthful readers will likely recognize, enhancing their enjoyment of the material while also hinting at broader cultural discourses taking place through popular media at the time.

Among the contemporary concerns circulating through popular culture at the time of *The Fantastic Four*'s initial release are the anxieties surrounding the advent of nuclear technology and the accompanying capacity for global nuclear holocaust, as well as parallel fears of

environmental destruction brought about by nuclear contamination. Such anxieties play a fundamental role in *FF* #4. When Johnny discovers that one of the men at the hotel is the long-lost Sub-Mariner, amnesia stricken for undisclosed reasons, he rushes the sea-dwelling prince back to the ocean in hopes that this will revive his memory. Johnny's intuition proves correct, but his act of goodwill has dire consequences for this and future Fantastic Four adventures. Upon reaching his Atlantean home, Namor is devastated to realize that his kingdom has been destroyed, brought to rubble by atomic weapons. "The humans did it, unthinkingly, with their accursed atomic tests!" he cries. Here, the coloring is of note, as the ruins of Namor's once great kingdom are coated in lime green with a neon yellow cloud radiating in the background, signifying the contaminating effects of nuclear weapons testing (see Fig. 11). Kirby's characteristic action lines extend vertically from the pile of debris, creating the illusion of pulsating toxicity. The destruction wrought on Namor's kingdom bespeaks the threat of nuclear technologies to upend ecosystems, but it also touches on the collateral damage neighboring nations might suffer as sites of the proxy war between the US and the Soviet Union. Interestingly, where other early Fantastic Four comic books embrace the jingoistic rhetoric of anti-communism, no mention is made of the Soviets in this particular issue. The tragedy befallen the Atlanteans lies squarely at the feet of the United States.

Fig. 11: "It's all destroyed!"; Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. "The Coming of…the Sub-Mariner!" *Fantastic Four*, no. 4, Marvel, 1962. *Marvel*, https://read.marvel.com/#/book/3330?stay=true.

Namor is understandably incensed at this discovery, and his initial response is to enact revenge against humankind. Thus begins a decades-long conflict spanning the greater Marvel mythology across titles. To enact his revenge, Namor awakens Giganto, an enormous whale-like creature asleep in the depths of the ocean "for ages" prior to Namor's rallying cry. Giganto

lumbers toward Manhattan, intent on the city's destruction, with all the might of the US military failing to stop his approach. If we understand this predicament as resulting from humanity's encroachment on the natural world, our scientific and technological experiments wreaking havoc on the environment, then we might read Namor's aggression as a metaphor for nature's inevitable response to our catastrophic negligence, thereby configuring the comic as an allegory for environmentalist awareness. In this way, the comic presents a forward-thinking vision of humanity's relationship with its natural surroundings, predicting future crises such as climate change and other related environmental concerns.

As the military fails to repel Giganto, the FF takes action. But when their powers prove ineffective in combating the ancient creature, they turn to the tools of modern science to help save the day. Ben elects himself for what appears to be a suicide mission, strapping a nuclear bomb onto his back and forging ahead into the mouth of the now-sleeping beast (see Fig. 12). The bomb detonates inside the creature's belly, killing the monster as Ben narrowly escapes his own death. The miracles of modern science are configured here as humanity's salvation, even as modern technologies caused the current catastrophe in the first place. Science is at once a threat and savior, as articulated in *The Fantastic Four*. It is of note that the Fantastic Four are themselves miracles of science, their constant victories proving in each issue the virtues of scientific progress. Namor, however, is still on the loose, and when he attempts to kidnap Sue Storm, whom he has fallen in love with at first sight, Johnny uses his powers to create a "man-made tornado" that lifts the Sub-Mariner into the sky, alongside Giganto's deceased body and hurtles him back into the ocean, saving the city from

Fig. 10: "A nuclear bomb strapped to his back!!"; Stan Lee and Jack Kirby. "The Coming of…the Sub-Mariner!" *Fantastic Four*, no. 4, Marvel, 1962. *Marvel*, https://read.marvel.com/#/book/3330?stay=true.

certain doom. In Ben's selfless act of heroism and Johnny's cunning use of his abilities, the Fantastic Four prove that humanity has conquered nature through mastery of the modern sciences.

The story offers contradictory visions of the role of science and technology in the modern world. Humanity is seen to have caused tremendous havoc on an unsuspecting population through their negligent experimentation with devastating technology. At the same time, these technologies provide the only means by which humanity can be saved from the ensuing chaos it has brought on itself. The relatively complex dynamics of this otherwise simplistic text make it difficult to categorize such a tale in terms of the hegemonic or subversive. It would be a mistake to reduce the ethical and moral implications of this and other superhero narratives to an either/or ideological paradigm. Likewise, we should resist the temptation to interpret these competing themes as indicative of the genre's lack of sophistication. Rather, the comic's resistance to conform to a predetermined theoretical framework should be read as consistent with the sometimes paradoxical, often messy, and frequently unbelievable conditions of our political and social realities.

CHAPTER VI

HOW WE READ: CONCLUSIONS

We are left with several approaches to superhero studies that offer various methods for articulating the multifaceted nuances of the comic book's most famous genre, a genre linked to the medium in intricate ways, so much so that the very word "comics" is enough to conjure images for many readers of superpowered beings in spandex and capes. It might be argued that this alone is reason enough to investigate how the superhero melds so seamlessly with the medium's form and conventions. In an era when the superhero—through comics, film, television, video games, toys, fashion, and various other cultural productions—retains more cultural capital than it ever has, now is an ideal time for researchers to embrace the genre, acknowledging its fundamental place in comic book history and the many ways it has contributed to the evolution of a comics language. Why have comic book superheroes withstood the test of time, crossing generations to build a collective of fans, including children, adolescents, and adults? What about the superhero resonates with audiences in such profound ways?

We have many tools at our disposal to answer such questions. Comics theory, while running the risk of serving first to justify the theory itself and assessing the subject second, a potential risk with all methodological frameworks, provides us with the necessary mechanisms to extract meaning from the comic book's melding of form and content that could lead to insights into the superhero's marriage to the medium that privileged its birth. Intertextual readings, including analyses of metatextuality and genre hybridity, afford us procedures to grapple with the superhero comic book's interactions with other cultural productions, helping to reveal how popular artifacts engage the political and social issues most relevant to their audience. Various other methodologies, some not explicitly discussed here, may also be employed, such as

historical, psychological, aesthetic, or environmental analysis. Political and ideological analyses have their place, too. However, we should guard against privileging such readings at the expense of the many other analytical approaches available to us, surrendering other important critical insights for the sake of validating our preferred theoretical frameworks.

The Fantastic Four are not merely a superhero team but a family. Fawaz writes, “[T]he family and the team became synonymous as a chosen kinship whose connections were never assured but required reaffirmation through acts of willed solidarity” (90). As such, the Fantastic Four may be inescapably political, as the family is itself a politicized unit. In this case, our readings may always be political, and, as readers, we may unavoidably depend upon our ideological persuasions to inform and make sense of this material. Such an observation returns us to the fundamental question underlying Sedgwick and Frank’s reflections that began this article: how do we read? The question proves vital, not only for superhero studies but for all literary and cultural analysis. The answer may ultimately say more about our motivations for reading than it does our subject.

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