

FROM SUPERMAN TO SUPER-MONSTER: Race and the Jewish-Comics Connection in the Twentieth Century

Jace Rosenthal
Department of English
April 6, 2021

Thesis Advisor:
William Kuskin, Department of English

Honors Council Representative:
Karen Jacobs, Department of English

Committee Member:
Elias Sacks, Program in Jewish Studies & Department of Religious Studies

For Madeline—

Without whom this thesis would not exist;
Thank you for your never-ending support,
your brutally honest critiques,
and your radiant laughter.

Love you always.

Table of Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	3
INTRODUCTION.....	4
 CHAPTER ONE: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE JEWISH-COMICS.....	8
THE JEWISH QUESTION.....	8
FROM FUNNIES TO SUPERHEROICS.....	17
 CHAPTER TWO: SUPERMAN AND THE JEWISH SHADOW: THE PREFIGURATION OF JEWISH WHITENESS.....	26
THE ORIGIN OF SUPERMAN.....	27
SUPERMAN AS SUPERJEW.....	38
IN BETWEEN THE LINES: SUPERMAN, CLARK KENT, AND THE SHADOW.....	41
 CHAPTER THREE: CAPTAIN AMERICA AS SUPERPATRIOT: CLAIMING WHITENESS THROUGH HYPER-PATRIOTISM.....	37
THE RISE OF THE SUPERPATRIOT.....	49
RED, WHITE, AND JEW.....	49
 CHAPTER 4: MAN OR MONSTER: THE JEWISH PARTICULARITY OF THE FANTASTIC FOUR'S THE THING.....	61
A HEIGHTENED SENSE OF DIFFERENCE: THE JEWISH ASSIMILATION PARADOX.....	62
FALLIBLE AND FEISTY: A NEW TYPE OF SUPERHERO.....	67
SYMBOLIC GHETTOIZATION: BIOPOWER, HYBRIDITY, AND THE GROTESQUE.....	71
SUPER-HUMAN TO SUPER-FREAK.....	77
 CONCLUSION.....	86
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	88

Acknowledgements

Dr. William Kuskin

Thank you for your guidance, support, and patience throughout this process. I would not have been able to complete this thesis without your encouragement and with the time and energy that you have put into working with me. And above all, thank you for pushing me when I needed it and for showing me compassion when I needed that too.

Dr. Karen Jacobs

Thank you for your excitement throughout this whole process, for your kind yet precise critiques, for your insights and your wisdom. Thank you for your support and understanding through the ups and down of the last year. And thank you for your endless patience.

Dr. Elias Sacks

Thank you for investing your time into this thesis and into me as a student. The passion that you bring to your work in the classroom is truly infectious (in a good, non-COVID type of way). Thank you with sticking with me throughout this process, and for your flexibility, patience, and understanding.

Hal Hannon

Thank you all your support over the years, for believing in me, and for pushing me to pursue what I love. Thank you for giving me the tools and the confidence to be where I am today. This thesis is not my success alone but is a product of your commitment to your students.

My partner

Thank you for all the support, encouragement, and snarky comments. Thank you for the late night/early morning reviews, for arguing with me about word choice, sentence structure, and phrasing. For helping me understand when I was wrong and when I could do better. Thank you with all my heart.

Introduction

In the years following the success of superhero movies, there has been increased academic attention on the Jewish history of comic books and their creators. While the Jewish backgrounds of influential comic book creators are now frequently acknowledged, popular culture downplays the Jewish themes pervasive within superhero narratives in favor of a universalistic approach that appeals to the dominant Christian culture. In response, both academic and popular sources have attempted to consider the role of Jewish themes, myths, and experience in the development of the comic book industry and the superhero archetype. Books such as Simcha Weinstein's 2006 *Up, Up, and Oy Vey!: How Jewish History, Culture, and Values Shaped the Comic Book Superhero*; Danny Fingeroth's 2007 *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero*; and Harry Brod's 2012 *Superman is Jewish?: How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way* have sought to investigate the relationship between Jewish comic book creators and their work. Although these books explore the uniquely Jewish perspective that Jewish comic book creators brought to their work, they struggle to articulate a cohesive argument for the prevailing Jewish character of comic books over the course of the twentieth century.

Undergirding Brod's, Fingeroth's, and Weinstein's books is the belief that Jewish creators produce Jewish content. While none of these authors rely exclusively on this belief, its presence shapes their arguments, resulting in a Judaization of the comic book text that attempts to locate an intrinsic Jewishness within the medium and the characters it produced. This process of Judaization requires anachronistic interpretations of either the creators' or characters' supposed Jewishness, wherein the reader—in this case, Brod, Fingeroth, or Weinstein—projects a more contemporary Jewish identity onto twentieth century American Jews without considering the

impact of a different cultural context. However, it is not important whether Jewish comic book creators had a strong Jewish identity or whether they participated in religious expressions of Judaism. Nor is it essential that such creators saw their creations as Jewish. Rather, the various representations of Whiteness presented through superheroes reveals how Jewish American comic book creators situated their own Jewishness in a larger sociocultural context. Superheroes are tools for navigating and leveraging a particular Americanized identity, the exact parameters and characteristics of which are dependent on the national and racial rhetorics of a given era. It is less the Jewishness of superheroes that matters than how comic book creators used the Whiteness of superheroes to represent their own experiences of a Jewish American identity.

Despite the sheer quantity of Jewish writers, illustrators, editors, and publishers in the early comic book industry, little consensus exists among comic book creators about the influence their Jewish upbringing bears on their work and the medium, as a whole. While *Captain America* co-creator Joe Simon, in an email correspondence with comic book writer and scholar Danny Fingeroth, claimed, “Jewish matters ‘had absolutely nothing to do with comics,’”¹ Al Jaffee of *Mad* magazine fame challenges Simon’s indifference, linking the presence of Jews in a budding comic book industry to discriminatory hiring practices in more prestigious artistic fields.² Likewise, in a one-on-one interview with acclaimed comic book creator and graphic novelist Will Eisner, Frank Miller, perhaps best known for *The Dark Knight Returns* in 1986, notes, “Jews created comic books”³ from Superman to Batman and beyond. Yet, Marvel Comics writer and editor Stan Lee sides with Simon. Writing in his foreword to Fingeroth’s book that, at the time, Jewish comic book creators never thought or talked about their shared Jewishness, Lee

¹ Danny Fingeroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero* (London: Continuum, 2007). 24.

² Harry Brod, *Superman Is Jewish?: How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way* (New York: Free Press, 2012). 2-3.

³ *Ibid.* vii.

concedes that Jewish experiences of anti-semitism might have impacted the formation of the early comic book industry and the style of story-telling with which it became closely associated.⁴ Lee, however, specifies that when creating comics “religion never really entered the picture,”⁵ which suggests that different conceptualizations of Jewish identity—as a religion, an ethnic identity, a cultural identity, or some combination thereof—result in different attitudes toward the role of Jewishness in superhero narratives. For Lee, the framing of Jewishness through a religious lens reveals not only his outlook on his own Jewishness, but points to the dominance of Protestant ideals throughout the twentieth century, in which religion becomes an increasingly private matter. Although these statements demonstrate the contested Jewishness of comic books as a medium, a dive into the material, social, and political conditions of early Jewish comic book creators reveals how the changing economic and social status of Jews throughout the twentieth century shaped the American comic book industry and the stories it produced.

The arguments of both comic book creators themselves and scholars like Brod, Fingerioth, and Weinstein reflect the different expressions of American Jewishness that were held by comic book creators during distinctive socio-historical moments. However, contextualizing comic books within isolated, particular socio-historical moments raises questions regarding the relationship between comic books, their authors, and the wider industry. Building on the foundation set by Brod, Fingerioth, and Weinstein, this thesis will consider not only the impact of the Jewish tradition on the development of the superhero genre, but will further investigate how comic books and superhero narratives, in particular, map how Jewish Americans negotiated their identity in the changing sociocultural contexts of twentieth century America. In chapter one, I will analyze textual and visual elements of hybridity in the first appearance of Jerry Siegel and

⁴ Fingerioth 9-10.

⁵ Fingerioth 9.

Joe Shuster's Superman in *Action Comics #1* in 1938 and Joe Simon and Jack Kirby's Captain America in *Captain America Comics #1* in 1941 in order to argue that the superhero initially emerged from assimilationist desires, navigating American ideals regarding Whiteness, masculinity, citizenship, and patriotism. Furthermore, in this section, I will demonstrate how the duality of the superhero and his alter-ego encapsulates the precariousness of Jewish identity in the early to mid 20th century American sociopolitical landscape. Chapter two will detail how the aftermath of the Holocaust radically transformed the superhero from super-human to super-monster. Turning to *The Fantastic Four #1*, I reveal through the monster rhetoric of Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's Fantastic Four superhero team debut how Jewish comic book creators complicated assimilation narratives by reimagining the superhero through the grotesque body, altered by the scars of Otherness. By examining these superhero texts within the social, historical, and political contexts of their initial publication and by relating these texts, among others, to one another, I will demonstrate how Jewish comic book creators' ethnoracial identities are inseparable from the work they produced. In this subconscious production, they used their medium to make claims about their ethnoracial identity at a time when Jewish identity oscillated between Whiteness and racial/ethnic Otherness, both within and outside of the Jewish American community. Thus, I argue that the superhero initially emerged from assimilationist desires amid the precariousness of Jewish identity in the early to mid 20th century American sociopolitical landscape, before becoming radically transformed in the aftermath of the Holocaust.

Chapter 1:

A Historical Perspective on the Jewish-Comics Connection

The comic book industry, particularly during the Golden Age (1938-1956) and Silver Age (1956-1970) of comic books, offers a rich, yet imperfect view into how Jewish Americans attempted to redefine the limits of their ethnoracial assignment. While comic books from these two periods do not directly discuss Jewish identity, the conflicts characters encounter reflect the social trends and dilemmas with which Jewish Americans grappled. From the early 1900s to the latter half of the twentieth century, Jewish identity responded to shifting categories of ethnoracial assignment. For the first half of the twentieth century, dominant American society, constructed by and designed to privilege White Protestants of Anglo-Saxon descent, often classified Jewish Americans as “off-white”⁶ or “conditionally white.”⁷ As the myths that animated American racial hierarchies in the latter half of the twentieth century responded to the legacy of the Holocaust, American racial and national rhetoric reclassified Jewish Americans as White. This process of reclassification, or Whitening, was not only imposed on Jewish people by the dominant White, Christian society, it was sought after and enacted within Jewish communities in order to gain access to greater social security and mobility.

The Jewish Question

If one phrase has haunted the Jewish people during the late modern era more than any other, it is that of the so-called “Jewish question,” or, less politely, also known as the “Jewish problem.” Coinciding with the rise of nationalism throughout Europe, the Jewish question pertained to the social, national, legal, and political status and treatment of Jews. The term first

⁶ Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says about Race in America* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1994), 1.

⁷ Brodtkin 60.

arose in Great Britain in response to debates about the Jewish Naturalisation Act of 1753, and similar debates on the Jewish question appeared across the Western world, attempting to address the possibilities and limitations of Jewish assimilation and emancipation. Later, Nazi Germany used the phrase to describe their Final Solution of total annihilation. Throughout the West, concerns with the “Jewish Problem” escalated in the 1920s and 1930s,⁸ but in America specifically, such social criticism of Jewish Americans represented deep anxieties about the stability of the nation’s strict Black-White racial binary. As a result, debate about the Jewish question not only subjected Jews to discussions regarding their legal personhood, it further tasked Jews with making themselves, their culture, and their religion acceptable within American racial, national, and social ideals.

In her book, *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says about Race in America*, published in 1994, anthropologist Karen Brodtkin adopts the phrase and employs it in the twentieth century American context, using it to describe the relationship between what she terms ethnoracial assignment and ethnoracial identity.⁹ Ethnoracial assignment “refers to the ways in which the dominant culture and popular understandings construct different categories of social and political beings.”¹⁰ This is based on “popularly held classifications and their deployment by those with national power to make them matter economically, politically, and socially to the individuals classified,” while ethnoracial identity is constructed within individual and communal experiences of racial assignment.¹¹ In other words, the categorizations of ethnoracial assignment results from the systematization and institutionalization of perceived difference, usually in relation to national origin, cultural background, religion, and class. For Brodtkin, the Jewish

⁸ Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 50.

⁹ Brodtkin 22.

¹⁰ Brodtkin 21.

¹¹ Brodtkin 3.

question seeks to articulate how Jewish Americans have historically negotiated their Jewish identities within the boundaries of their ethnoracial assignment.

Expanding on Brodtkin's analysis, historian Eric L. Goldstein's *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (2006) further examines the construction of whiteness in relation to Jewish identity and Jewish American history. While *How Jews Became White Folks* considers the impact of immigration status and class on the assimilability and Whiteness of ethnic European groups—predominantly southern and eastern Europeans, among other national and ethnic minority groups—, *The Price of Whiteness* elaborates on how Jewish Americans destabilized the juxtaposition of the Black-White racial binary. Identifying America's Black-White racial binary as the central mechanism in maintaining White hegemony, Goldstein argues that race and ethnicity form “salient aspects of social being from which economic practices, political policies, and popular discourses create ‘Americans.’”¹² Toni Morrison, in *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), states this relationship more concisely when she writes, “American means white.”¹³ Treated as a neutral category, Whiteness goes unstated; whereas racial, ethnic, and national difference is marked by qualifiers such as with “*African American*,” “*Mexican American*,” and “*Jewish American*.” In these examples, the presence of a preceding adjective before “American” suggests that there is something about these identities counter to American-ness, which reinforces the unspoken Whiteness of an unqualified American identity.

Neither Morrison nor Goldstein mean to suggest that this ideological framework accurately portrays American racial demographics. Instead, Goldstein argues that, despite such

¹² Goldstein 1.

¹³ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, 2019), 45.

attempts to present Whiteness as stable and monolithic,¹⁴ “the black-white racial dichotomy has functioned in American history less as an accurate description of social reality than as an ideology, which has been mobilized at critical points to control a much more complex and varied social landscape.”¹⁵ Within this framework, Whiteness relies on competing identities in order to define and orient itself within a changing sociopolitical landscape. And, because the hegemony of American Whiteness relies on a Black-White binary framework, non-Whiteness can only be understood in proximity to Blackness, and likewise, conformity to American practices of myth-making are accepted as manifestations of Whiteness. Certain “off-white,” or ethnic European, groups, such as the Irish, Italians, Poles, and Jews, would come to take advantage of this system, often at the expense of Black and Indigenous communities. Yet, at the same time, Goldstein challenges the notion of becoming White, and suggests, instead, that “Jews *negotiated* their place in a complex racial world where Jewishness, whiteness, and blackness have all made significant claims on them.”¹⁶ Such negotiations often occur at the axis of ethnoracial assignment and ethnoracial identity through (re)productions of power. Although ethnoracial assignment acts to confine identity to easily recognizable categories based on preexisting systems of power, productions of ethnoracial identity can utilize culturally significant symbols to generate new associations between categories. Bound by America’s rationalizing Black-White racial binary, Jewish Americans throughout the first half of the twentieth century were challenged with redefining the limits of their ethnoracial assignment.

Prior to the nineteenth century, Jewish communities in America were comprised mainly of Sephardic Jews from the Netherlands and England, as well as some small Spanish and

¹⁴ Goldstein 4.

¹⁵ Goldstein 3.

¹⁶ Goldstein 5.

Portuguese *converso*¹⁷ communities. By the mid-1800s, an increasing number of Jews from Western and Central Europe immigrated to the United States, seeing it as a nation “open to new influences,”¹⁸ not beholden to the anti-Jewish sentiment that historically characterized religious, economic, and political life in Christian Europe. German Jews, in particular, flocked to the United States, many of whom, seeking economic opportunities, participated in the colonization of the American West. During this time, “all Europeans in the United States were more or less equally white,”¹⁹ including Jews, which was further cemented by the upward mobility Jews participating in Western expansion experienced. However, despite the relative stability of Jewish communities during this time, the destabilization of the South after the Civil War (1861-1865) led to increased social discrimination against Jews, whose investment in the “emerging business infrastructure of the New South... led them to court the business of former slaves and to support the amelioration of racial tensions that might work against the growth of a new regional economy.”²⁰ Without the division between enslaved Black people and free Whites—a category that had included Jews—that had defined the socioeconomic structure of the antebellum South, Jewish Americans became disassociated with Whiteness and thrust into racial ambiguity. The uncertain racial status of Jewish Americans at the end of nineteenth century would set the tone for the next several decades, during which new, pseudoscientific theories about race would exacerbate the perception of Jewish ethnoracial difference.

¹⁷ *Converso* refers to Spanish and Portuguese Jews who were converted, often forcibly, to Catholicism. Many, but not all, *conversos* continued to practice Judaism in secret, to some extent; although, over generations and under ongoing pressure from the threat of the Spanish Inquisition, most *conversos* came to be fully assimilated. Some *conversos* settled in the Americas with the hope that they would face less persecution there.

¹⁸ Goldstein 12.

¹⁹ Brodtkin 54.

²⁰ Goldstein 52.

1880 would become the year that transformed Jewish life in America, although, not many recognized it at the time. Fleeing violent pogroms and economic hardships in Eastern Europe, waves of Jewish immigrants grew the American Jewish population “from about 200,00 to over one million during the last three decades of the nineteenth century.”²¹ And by World War I, the Jewish population in America had expanded to over two million,²² a majority of whom was newly immigrated and Yiddish-speaking. Whereas Jewish immigrants from Western and Central Europe had, in previous decades, spread across the United States, Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants largely remained in metropolitan centers like New York, where, “by 1915, one out of every four New Yorkers was a Jew, and in smaller metropolitan centers like Chicago, Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore the Jewish population hovered between 8 and 10 percent of the total.”²³ Not only did these rapidly changing demographics cause conflicts of integration within the Jewish community between middle-class German and Sephardic Jews and working-class Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazi Jews, they occurred at a time when ethnoracial identities were in flux.

The large-scale immigration of Eastern European Jews coincides with similar migration patterns for other Eastern and Southern European national and ethnic groups fleeing political and economic instability across Europe during the First World War (1914-1918) and the Great Depression (1929-1939). At the same time, from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, both Europe and America became increasingly preoccupied with fears of “mongrelization,”²⁴ using scientific racism to sanctify the belief that “*real* Americans were white

²¹ Goldstein 35.

²² "Total Jewish Population in the United States," Jewish Virtual Library, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jewish-population-in-the-united-states-nationally>

²³ Goldstein 36.

²⁴ Brodtkin 25.

and that *real* whites came from northwest Europe.”²⁵ Perpetuating the Teutonic myth, this belief divided the “Nordic or Anglo-Saxon race—the real Americans—” from the “inferior European races,”²⁶ which included Jews. Brodtkin further notes, “American anti-semitism was part of a broader pattern of late-nineteenth-century racism against all southern and eastern European immigrants, as well as against Asian immigrants, not to mention African Americans, Native Americans, and Mexicans.”²⁷ While Jewish Americans were certainly not alone in their ethnoracial assignment as non-White, Goldstein elaborates on the racial discourses that surrounded Jewish Americans during this time. In an article for *Popular Science Monthly*, an American quarterly magazine first premiering in 1872 and featuring popular science content for a general audience, writer J.G. Wilson “predicted that the Jew would ‘continue to be an unsolved problem long after the Pole and the Hun and Italian are forgotten.’”²⁸ That Wilson’s commentary on the question of Jewish ethnoracial assignment appeared in a science and technology magazine demonstrates how pseudoscientific models of biological race reinforced racial categories. Moreover, such commentary exhibits how White people, and society at large, functioned as the arbiters of Jewish racialness. Ethnoracial assignment was prescribed, and Jewish Americans were expected to conform their identities to that assignment.

Although this framework of Whiteness excluded Jews, they continued to occupy a racial space outside of Whiteness and Blackness. Not all social critics of the time aligned with Wilson’s perspective, which completely dismissed Jewish Americans as potential productive members of White society. Instead, some argued “not that Jews were already white, but that they were excellent prospects for assimilation into America, since they possessed many of the positive

²⁵ Brodtkin. 54. [Emphasis added]

²⁶ Brodtkin. 25.

²⁷ Brodtkin 26.

²⁸ Goldstein 49.

characteristics of white society.”²⁹ According to these critics, Jewishness alone remained too alien to be anything other than ethnoracially Other, yet Jewish Americans could change their ethnoracial assignment by conforming to social, cultural, and religious standards of White society. Goldstein notes that Nathaniel Shaler, dean of Harvard’s Lawrence Scientific School³⁰ from 1891 to his death in 1906, argued in his 1904 work *The Neighbor* that Jews could “become white through time, training, and most importantly, physical intermixture with the surrounding American population.”³¹ Goldstein’s highlighting of Shaler’s work in particular demonstrates how scientific racism, the Teutonic myth, and the general belief in White superiority during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries animated discussions about race and identity across the sciences and popular culture. Thus, to change a group’s ethnoracial assignment posed not only a potential challenge to racist beliefs, it threatened an entire institutional and ideological system. Assimilation offered a resolution to this challenge that could regulate unwanted social and cultural differences. Like Shaler, proponents of assimilation argued that Jewish Americans would have to be physically and culturally reformed through intermarriage, appropriate gender expression, and the Protestantization of Jewish religious values and practices. Even President Theodore Roosevelt claimed “Jews would have to expand their interests beyond the business world and ‘develop that side of them which I might call the Maccabee or fighting Jewish type’”³² in order to be integrated into American society and Whiteness. Assimilation into Whiteness, then, required Jewish Americans forgo their Jewish identity, “to disappear as a visibly distinct group in order to insure the larger society’s sense of stability and self-confidence.”³³

²⁹ Goldstein 47.

³⁰ Now the Harvard John A. Paulson School of Engineering and Applied Sciences (SEAS)

³¹ Goldstein 47.

³² Goldstein 48.

³³ Goldstein 50.

While anti-semitism in America would reach its peak in the 1920s and 1930s, the decades preceding experienced an escalation of anti-semitic violence and White vigilantism. Debates about Jewish proximity to Whiteness, enmeshed in ongoing anxieties about the Black-White racial binary, resulted in this rise of anti-semitism. Trends of urbanization and industrialization, various immigration waves, the economic weakening of the South, and the closure of the frontier around 1890, exacerbated these anxieties. Above other off-White ethnic groups, the Jewish racial image came to be synonymous with the moral and physical deterioration associated with urbanization.³⁴ The lynching of Leo Frank, a Jewish American factory supervisor in Atlanta, Georgia accused of the rape and murder of thirteen-year-old Mary Phagan, in 1915 demonstrates the intersection of old and new anti-Jewish sentiment; at once, it captures the invocation of the blood libel, the use of the greedy Jew stereotype, and claims of moral and sexual perversion. The Leo Frank incident alerted Jews across America to the precariousness of their social and racial position, and while Jews in America rarely suffered from overt physical violence, like that perpetuated against Leo Frank, the threat of becoming an outlet for racial anxieties led many Jews to “[deflect] antisemitism by emphasizing their whiteness.”³⁵

Although Jewish people enjoyed greater upward mobility than other European immigrant groups, compared to nonimmigrant White people, “that mobility was very limited and circumscribed”³⁶ as discrimination in employment, housing, education, and social clubs attempted to limit Jewish economic and social mobility. Locked out of corporate America and confined to a small number of professional occupations—largely in the garment business—due to anti-immigrant, racist, and anti-semitic barriers,³⁷ many Jews turned to new and artistic fields

³⁴ Goldstein 36.

³⁵ Goldstein 65.

³⁶ Brodtkin 33.

³⁷ Brodtkin 33.

in film, theatre, and literature.³⁸ In these fields, Jewish creators used storytelling to reimagine their Jewishness. Historically, both the American film industry, centralized in Hollywood, and the American comic book industry, which first began through the sale of newspaper comic strips, partially owe their conception and rapid growth to Jewish immigrants and their descendants. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Jewish creators, often first- or second-generation immigrants, developed these mediums, presenting stories that portrayed Jewish-coded lives without explicitly referencing Judaism. During these decades of rampant anti-semitism, ultimately exacerbated half-way across the world in Nazi Germany and wartime Europe, Jewish artists found ways to not only interact with their culture and community through movies and comics, while outwardly attempting to assimilate into American life, they would eventually construct a “male-centered version of Jewishness that was prefiguratively white and a specifically Jewish form of whiteness.”³⁹ Moreover, the success of the film industry allowed Jewish movie producers in Hollywood to “[invent] a parallel Jewish universe of bourgeois American whiteness” in their own lives, while presenting a “Hollywood version of Jewishness that was just as white and equally ‘American’”⁴⁰ on screen.⁴¹ Comic book creators, whether intentionally or unintentionally, utilize similar tactics through the figure of the superhero, whose hybrid embodiment of both Jewish and American values presents Jewishness as White and American.

From Funnies to Superheroics

³⁸ Goldstein 121.

³⁹ Goldstein. 139.

⁴⁰ Goldstein. 156.

⁴¹ Brodtkin cites slightly later examples, such as *The Gentleman's Agreement* (1947) and *The Goldbergs* (1949-1957), but we might also consider how the Jewish creation of non-Jewish characters and the portrayal of non-Jewish characters by Jewish actors similarly facilitate this process of ethnoracial transformation.

The racial discourses that attempt to orient Jewish Americans within a Black-White racial binary make up the ideological frequencies that run through the American sociopolitical landscape and that, as a result, informed the development of the comic book industry. Although the comic strip and comic book industries by no means began as Jewish ones, the relegation of the comic book as adolescent, “throwaway publication”⁴² opened the field up to Jewish creators who otherwise “couldn’t get into newspaper strips or advertising”⁴³ due to discrimination. As Jewish publishers came to populate the pulp and comic book publishing industries, more Jewish creators “drifted into the comic-book business” because “there was no [anti-Jewish] discrimination there.”⁴⁴ The lower literary status of comic books and its predecessors made it possible for Jewish creators to “create an alternate, idealized version of America” that reimagined Jewishness through the lens of Whiteness and American nationalism—what Brod terms “assimilation by idealization”⁴⁵ and which was similarly utilized in the early film industry. Looking back at the newspaper strip, pulp fiction, and early comic book industries provides a sense for how these mediums helped shape twentieth century American culture, as well as national and ethnoracial rhetorics.

The comic book emerged from the convergence of two mediums—the newspaper strip and the pulp magazine. To suggest that newspaper strips provided the form and that pulp magazines provided the content indicates a reductionist view of the complex socioeconomic structures that shaped their material forms and the social themes that informed their content. In part, the early comic book industry owes its success to the industriousness of its predecessors. Their cheap designs, mass printability, wide consumer appeal, and ability to convey social

⁴² Brod 2.

⁴³ Brod 2.

⁴⁴ Brod 3.

⁴⁵ Brod 3.

concerns, despite a low cultural and literary status, paved the way for the comic book and its initial boom in the 1930s and 1940s. The comic book inherited these features and more, while the longer form of the comic book enabled creators to deliver more complex and nuanced stories over multiple issues. Through the melding of these two mediums, the comic book industry and its creators were able to respond to a variety of economic needs, social issues, and national desires. Although critics of comic books have often dismissed them as “a convenient and inexpensive form of entertainment,”⁴⁶ this characterization ignores how comic books have effectively reproduced the cultural imaginary, while simultaneously offering challenges to dominant cultural modes.

From the inception of the newspaper comic strip in America, writers and artists used the comic strip to explore people’s relationships to American national rhetorics, highlighting, in particular, the tensions between cultural assimilation and ethnic and national associations. While sequential visual storytelling has existed throughout history in cultures all across the globe, the modern newspaper comic strip emerged in nineteenth century Germany. There it gained popularity before spreading westward, finally reaching America by the end of the nineteenth century. The first American comic strips, namely R.F. Outcault’s *The Yellow Kid*, which premiered in 1895 in Joseph Pulitzer’s *New York World*, and Rudolph’s Dirks’ *The Katzenjammer Kids*, which debuted in 1897 in William Randolph Hearst’s *New York Journal*, featured clever critiques on issues of class, immigration, and urbanization, dressed up in slapstick comedy. Dirks himself was an immigrant from Germany, and *The Katzenjammer Kids*, inspired by the earlier 1865 German comic strip, *Max und Moritz*, not only represents continuity between German and American comic strips, it serves as an extension of Dirks’ own hybrid, immigrant identity. Likewise, although Outcault himself came from a middle-class Ohioan background, *The*

⁴⁶ Ron Goulart, *Great American Comic Books* (Lincolnwood, IL: Publications International, 2001). 4.

Yellow Kid explores “class and racial tension of the new urban, consumerist environment,”⁴⁷ offering commentary on life in New York’s tenements, where cheap housing accommodated immigrant and lower income communities but exacerbated problems associated with overcrowding and poverty. Several decades later, Will Eisner’s *A Contract with God*, published in 1978, similarly addresses tenement life, focusing on Jewish immigrant experiences in the urban landscape that were inspired by his own childhood growing up in a tenement neighborhood. The endurance of these themes and conflicts reflects the immigrant foundation of the comic medium, the stories and concerns of which continue to shape the modern comic book and graphic novel industry. Outcault’s and Dirks’ comic strip success spearheaded America’s newspaper comic strip industry, and by the 1920s, comic strips were a staple feature in newspapers across the country.⁴⁸

Seeking to capitalize on the success of comic strips at the turn of the century, newspaper syndicates began offering reprinted compilations of their newspaper strip funnies. These compilations of Sunday funnies were the first comic books, assembling several dozen reprinted strips for a single title together into a single book. Published by the *New York Herald* and the *New York Journal* in the early 1900s, these comic books varied in make and size. Some, like those published by Hearst’s *New York Journal*, featured cardboard covers and colored pages, while others opted for cheaper black and white reprints. Size was similarly unstandardized, with some comic books measuring as large as 10 by 15 inches, yet others were significantly smaller, at only a few inches in height and width.⁴⁹ Although publishers continue to produce these types of comic book reprints today, the medium began to change in 1929 when Dell Publishing

⁴⁷ Mary Wood, *The Yellow Kid on the Paper Stage: Introduction*, 2004, <http://xroads.virginia.edu/~MA04/wood/ykid/intro.htm>).

⁴⁸ Goulart 8.

⁴⁹ Goulart 8.

released *The Funnies*. Considered more a “tabloid funny paper”⁵⁰ that presented the “Sunday comic section without the rest of the newspaper”⁵¹ than a true comic book, according to prolific comic book historian Ron Goulart, Dell’s *The Funnies* nevertheless paved the way for the standardized comic book with which modern readers will be familiar.

Famous Funnies, created by Harry I. Wildenberg with the help of Maxwell Charles “M.C.” Gaines and jointly published under Eastern Color Printing and Dell Publishing in 1934, followed *The Funnies* with several new features that led to the formation of the standardized comic book. Like *The Funnies*, Wildenberg’s *Famous Funnies* was one of the first comic books to include more than one character, but more crucially, it introduced the modern comic book format to the industry.⁵² While this format premiered with Wildenberg’s *Famous Funnies*, Gaines “pioneered the idea of folding the supplements in half, doubling the page count and producing an individual magazine-sized publication of comic strips.”⁵³ For his contributions to comic book content and form, Chris Ryall and Scott Tipton, in their book *Comic Books 101: The History, Methods, and Madness*, dub Gaines “the most important figure in all of American comics... responsible for helping launch the industry in the 1930s.”⁵⁴ Later, when Siegel and Shuster were initially unsuccessful in finding a publisher for their Superman strip, Gaines and his assistant Sheldon Mayer recommended the strip to Harry Donenfeld at National Allied Publications, the precursor to DC Comics. Without his intervention, Siegel and Shuster’s Superman might never have been published and, as a result, the superhero genre might never have taken off. But before the superhero boom launched by Superman’s first appearance in

⁵⁰ Goulart 15.

⁵¹ Ron Goulart, *Comic Book Encyclopedia: The Ultimate Guide to Characters, Graphic Novels, Writers, and Artists in the Comic Book Universe* (New York: HarperEntertainment, 2007), 163.

⁵² Goulart, *Great American Comic Books*, 18.

⁵³ Chris Ryall and Scott Tipton, *Comic Books 101: The History, Methods and Madness* (Cincinnati, OH: IMPACT, 2009). 29.

⁵⁴ Ryall and Tipton 29.

National Allied Publications' *Action Comics #1*, National Allied Publications, founded by Major Malcom Wheeler-Nicholson, debuted *New Fun* in 1934, radically altering the medium with the introduction of a comic book that contained all original content.⁵⁵ While *New Fun* featured traditional humor material, its inclusion of adventure strips forged the path for the adventure and superhero genres for which comic books have come to be known.

With the success of the newspaper comic strip and the early comic book, the 1920s and 1930s saw a greater expansion of the medium into new genres. Enter: the adventure strip, which would transform the comic industry and pave the way for the superhero.⁵⁶ These action and adventure strips borrowed, and sometimes directly adapted, features, archetypes, and stories from pulp fiction magazines. At the same time that newspaper comic strips were experiencing a publishing boom, so too was the pulp fiction industry. Named for the cheap wood pulp paper on which they were printed, pulp magazines were known for their sensational and frequently lurid stories in genres such as adventure, science fiction, romance, and horror.⁵⁷ Preceded by the dime novel, which emerged in the mid-nineteenth century and gained success during the Civil War with tales of westward expansion, pulp magazines captured "a complex anxiety about modern society that reflects concerns about crime, alienation, and strife associated with urban life."⁵⁸ As twentieth century America's geographical and sociopolitical landscapes became more urbanized, pulp fiction adventure heroes emerged as a means of mediating and assuaging new anxieties regarding "race, masculinity, and values shaped by European heritage and frontier experience."⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Ryall and Tipton 16.

⁵⁶ Ryall and Tipton 13.

⁵⁷ Julian C. Chambliss and William L. Svitvasky, "From Pulp Hero to Superhero: Culture, Race, and Identity in American Popular Culture, 1900-1940," *Rollins Scholarship Online*, October 2008, 28, https://scholarship.rollins.edu/as_facpub/2. 4.

⁵⁸ Chambliss and Svitvasky 4.

⁵⁹ Chambliss and Svitvasky 28.

In the 2008 article “From Pulp Hero to Superhero: Culture, Race, and Identity in American Popular Culture, 1900-1940,” authors Julian C. Chambliss and William L. Svitavsky identify the archetypal American adventure hero as a tool to re-assert White, middle-class American claims of racial and civil superiority. Chambliss and Svitavsky argue that the pulp fiction figures of the detective, the cowboy, and the natural aristocrat reinforce narrative themes of colonization, racial superiority, and heredity and serve as prototypes to the later figure of the superhero. The classic pulp fiction protagonist, replacing the dime novel’s cowboy, was the urban detective, who “became the equivalent of cowboy: a tough individual, possessing skill and courage, testing himself against the environment and the dangers created by this new type of living.”⁶⁰ These adventure hero archetypes—specifically, the cowboy and the urban detective—would set the stage for the superhero, who similarly reproduces the American monomyth’s redemptive arc and who initially attempts to “[overcome] the otherness of [America’s] immigrant past.”⁶¹ Chambliss and Svitavsky claim that classic pulp fiction figures—notably Edgar Rice Burroughs’ characters John Carter and Tarzan, Robert E. Howard’s Conan the Cimmerian, and Henry W. Ralston, John L. Nanovic, and Lester Dent’s Doc Savage—further assert White, middle-class ideals of a masculine individualism rooted in the displacement of the frontier. Early on in the developing comic book industry, some of these pulp heroes went on to have their own comic strips and books. 1929 saw the publication of a *Tarzan* comic strip, drawn by Hal Foster, with a comic book reprint of the strips quickly following. Published almost a decade before the popularization of the superhero, the *Tarzan* pulp novels and adventure strips influenced many later comic book creators, including Superman’s Siegel and Shuster.

⁶⁰ Chambliss and Svitavsky 5.

⁶¹ Chambliss and Svitavsky 4.

The exchange of stories, characters, and ideas between newspaper comic strips and pulp magazines results from the overlap in each industry of publishers, writers, and artists. Wheeler-Nicholson and Donenfeld of National Allied Publications and Martin Goodman of Timely Comics, among other publishers, as well as several prominent artists from the early comic book industry, all got their start in pulp magazine publishing. Under Wheeler-Nicholson, *New Fun*, renamed *More Fun* in 1936, appeared less like a compilation of rejected newspaper strips and more like a standard comic book, continuing to incorporate a greater volume of serial adventure strips.⁶² Despite ongoing financial troubles, Wheeler-Nicholson introduced two new titles over the next few years that display the increasing influence of pulp-inspired material. The first released was *New Comics* in 1935, shortly thereafter renamed *Adventure Comics*, and the second was *Detective Comics* in 1937. Although these titles grew in success over the years, their initial slow sales could not keep pace with Wheeler-Nicholson's ambition, and by 1937, debt forced Wheeler-Nicholson to sell part of the company to his printer and distributor, Harry Donenfeld.⁶³ After Donenfeld brought on his accountant Jack Liebowitz, who also co-owned All-American Publications with Gaines, as a partner through Detective Comics, Inc., the two ousted Wheeler-Nicholson entirely.⁶⁴ In 1938, the same year Wheeler-Nicholson exited the comic book business, Superman debuted on the cover of National Allied Publications' *Action Comics #1*, forever changing the comic book world.

Although other superheroes preceded Superman, including characters from the arsenal of his creators, the success of his first appearance revolutionized the genre, launching a new era for comic books in which the superhero stood front and center. Heavily influenced by pulp fiction adventure heroes, the superhero builds upon the themes outlined in Chambliss and Svitavsky's

⁶² Goulart 47.

⁶³ Ryall and Tipton 16.

⁶⁴ Ryall and Tipton 16.

article, engaging in imperialism both directly and indirectly through the aesthetics and “primacy of the white male body,”⁶⁵ while his dual identity manifests conflicting definitions of masculinity. When Chambliss and Svitavsky turn to the superhero, however, they struggle to consider how a dominant Jewish presence within the comic book industry influenced the early figure of the superhero. Although they acknowledge that immigrants during the first half of the twentieth century were rejected as White,⁶⁶ Chambliss and Svitavsky hesitate to incorporate the precarious social and racialized position of Jewish Americans into their critique. Since Chambliss and Svitavsky’s interpretation of the superhero is always bound to the White adventure hero, and since they do not contemplate the effects of a Jewish ethos or mythos on the superhero, they are unable to consider how the superhero might complicate, as well as affirm, American White supremacist ideals.

⁶⁵ Chambliss and Svitavsky 22.

⁶⁶ Chambliss and Svitavsky 9.

Chapter 2:

Superman and the Jewish Shadow: the Prefiguration of Jewish Whiteness

In 1938, National Allied Publications released the first run of *Action Comics*, the comic book anthology that radically changed the future of print media. Its cover brightly depicts a man clad in a skin-tight blue and red suit, hoisting a car above his head while a small group of men flee before this intimidating display of power. Flipping open the cover, readers are greeted by the comic's title and its namesake character: Superman, the character who would ignite the superhero genre and change the course of the comic book industry.

Created by writer Jerry Siegel and illustrator Joe Shuster, alongside the later help of a team of ghost artists including John Sikela and Wayne Boring, Superman took the world by storm, eventually becoming one of the most well known and beloved comic book characters of all time. Not only did *Superman* contribute to the success of *Action Comics*, the story inadvertently introduced superhero fiction into the world of visual literature. Yet, the Superman with which contemporary readers and moviegoers are familiar reflects the refinement, and to some degree, Christianization of his character over decades of subsequent issues, and who, as a result, appears distinctly different from his original conception. Born into a period of heightened anti-semitism, both in America and across the Atlantic in Europe, Superman emerges amid discourses of belonging, situated through nationalist rhetorics on the borders of Whiteness/Otherness and fascism/socialism. For his creators, Superman constitutes a claim to belonging through the positioning of his Whiteness. Rather than Superman representing an argument for why Jews *should be seen* as White, he prefigures Jewish Whiteness, showing that Jews *have already been* White. In other words, he functions as an assimilationist appeal that

positions Jewishness in proximity to Whiteness, normalizing Jewish difference through the reconfiguration of the body and the use of violence.

The Origin of Superman

Like most of their peers in the comic book industry, Superman's co-creators Siegel and Shuster hailed from immigrant Jewish families, whom had relocated to North America from Eastern Europe—Lithuania and Ukraine, respectfully—after an increase of anti-Jewish violence at the turn of the century. Despite a limited job market that owed itself to America's pervasive anti-immigrant sentiments and anti-Jewish hiring practices,⁶⁷ the Siegel and Shuster families, like many other Jewish families during the 1910s and 1920s, were able to establish an economically stable middle-class status. Siegel and Shuster would meet at Glenville High School in Cleveland, Ohio after Shuster's family moved from Canada to the United States. The Glenville area of their youth predominantly housed an upwardly mobile Jewish middle class, in which "Siegel and Shuster could potentially go a whole day without encountering non-Jews."⁶⁸ Glenville's majority Jewish population meant that Siegel and Shuster experienced a world that did not require them to think of Jewish and American as irreconcilable identities. Neither saw the experience of immigration nor of being American-born as foreign. While rising anti-semitism outside of such Jewish enclaves sometimes produced rhetoric that framed Jews as "primordially unfit to become Americans,"⁶⁹ Siegel and Shuster grew up as "average Americans."⁷⁰ In other words, the ethnic and economic homogeneity of Glenville's Jewish-American cultural landscape allowed Siegel and Shuster to function as (conditionally) White, middle-class men within the

⁶⁷ Karen Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says about Race in America*, 7th ed. (Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010). 63.

⁶⁸ Lund 141.

⁶⁹ Ibid. 150.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 144.

limited contexts of their Jewish suburb, despite broader American uncertainty about the Whiteness of Jews. Still, like most American Jews during the 1920s and 1930s, Siegel and Shuster would have been acutely aware that “American Jews were still unstable members of a racial culture dividing the country, further increasing native anti-Semitism from both sides of the ‘color line.’”⁷¹ Therefore, while Siegel and Shuster might have been able to project an Americanized, and thus Whitenized, identity in Glenville, their position in American society as Jewish-Americans remained precarious.

Not long after meeting, the two bonded over their love of science fiction and launched their partnership while working for their high school newspaper, *The Torch*.⁷² After high school, the pair met with mixed success trying to establish themselves as a writer-illustrator duo in both the literary and comic strip scene. Before the success of Superman, Siegel and Shuster served as freelancers for National Comics,⁷³ which would later rebrand as DC Comics in 1977, crafting title characters such as *Slam Bradley*, *Federal Men*, *Henri Duval*, *Radio Squad*, *Spy*, and *Dr. Mystic: The Occult Detective*.⁷⁴ These stories revolved around the types of pulp heroes, mainly detectives, that had become the equivalent of a cowboy⁷⁵ in the urban frontier, and who featured heavily in pulp novels and comic strips. Inspired by the superior physical and mental abilities of pulp fiction heroes, including strongmen like Howard’s Conan the Cimmerian and Philip Wylie’s *Gladiator* hero Hugo Danner, and costumed vigilantes like Johnston Mculley’s Zorro and Walter Gibson’s *The Shadow*, Siegel and Shuster’s earlier characters possess characteristics that borrow from and expand upon attributes introduced by their pulp fiction predecessors. While

⁷¹ Ibid. 150.

⁷² Harry Brod, *Superman Is Jewish?: How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way* (New York: Free Press, 2012). 5.

⁷³ Danny Fingeroth, *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero* (London: Continuum, 2007). 40.

⁷⁴ Brod 4.

⁷⁵ Chambliss and Svitvasky 5.

Superman is often credited as the first superhero, Siegel and Shuster's *Dr. Occult* appeared three years earlier in 1935 in National Allied Publication's *New Fun* #6 and in 1936 in Centaur Publication's *The Comics Magazine* #1 as *Dr. Mystic*.⁷⁶ In one of his first major story arcs under both titles, Dr. Occult dons a red cape and blue costume, making him National Allied Publication's first costumed superhero, as well as the first detective to appear in the premier feature of *Detective Comics*.⁷⁷ Possessing some of the characteristics of pulp fiction heroes, while anticipating the advent of the superhero, Siegel and Shuster's *Dr. Occult* represents a transitional figure in comic book history.⁷⁸

While freelancing for National Allied Publications, Siegel and Shuster were also attempting to sell their *Superman* comic strip to newspaper syndicates. Although Siegel and Shuster had been hoping to publish *Superman* in the adjacent but more prestigious comic strip industry, their initial efforts resulted in a string of rejection letters from newspaper syndicates. Although the comic strip and book industries had been building to a character like Superman, who innovated on the classic characteristics of pulp fiction heroes, many publishers, including National Allied Comics' Donenfeld, turned down the strip, fearing that "nobody would believe it, that it was ridiculous."⁷⁹ Despite the success of pulp fiction and comic book heroes who possessed similar powers of superhuman strength, speed, and invulnerability, the premise of an

⁷⁶ This dual publication of the character resulted from the departure of two National Allied Publications employees, managing editor William H. Cook and business manager John F. Mahon, who started their own comics publishing company after Major Malcolm Wheeler-Nicholson failed to pay them for their work on *New Fun/More Fun*. Their first publication, *The Comics Magazine* #1, primarily used inventory content from National Allied Publications; hence the featuring of *Dr. Occult*, who was renamed *Dr. Mystic* for trademark purposes. While *The Comics Magazine* #1 contained the first half of a *Dr. Occult* storyline under *Dr. Mystic*, the character finished that storyline with *New Fun* and continued under National Allied Publications.

⁷⁷ John Wilson, "10 Things Everyone Forgets About DC's Dr. Occult," CBR, December 16, 2019, accessed March 2021, <https://www.cbr.com/dc-doctor-occult-forgotten-facts-comics/>

⁷⁸ Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (MonkeyBrain, 2006). 185.

⁷⁹ Goulart 77.

alien superman was viewed as less believable. Then, after several failed publishing attempts, National Allied Publications debuted Siegel and Shuster's *Superman* in their first issue for *Action Comics* in June 1938. *Superman*'s premier was the outcome of cooperation between Gaines, who worked at the McClure syndicate at the time, and Donenfeld. But credit for publishing *Superman* should go to Gaines' assistant Mayer, who convinced Gaines to bring the comic strip back to Donenfeld at National Allied Publications, and *Action Comics* editor Vincent Sullivan, who was responsible for selecting the *Superman* strip for *Action Comics*.⁸⁰

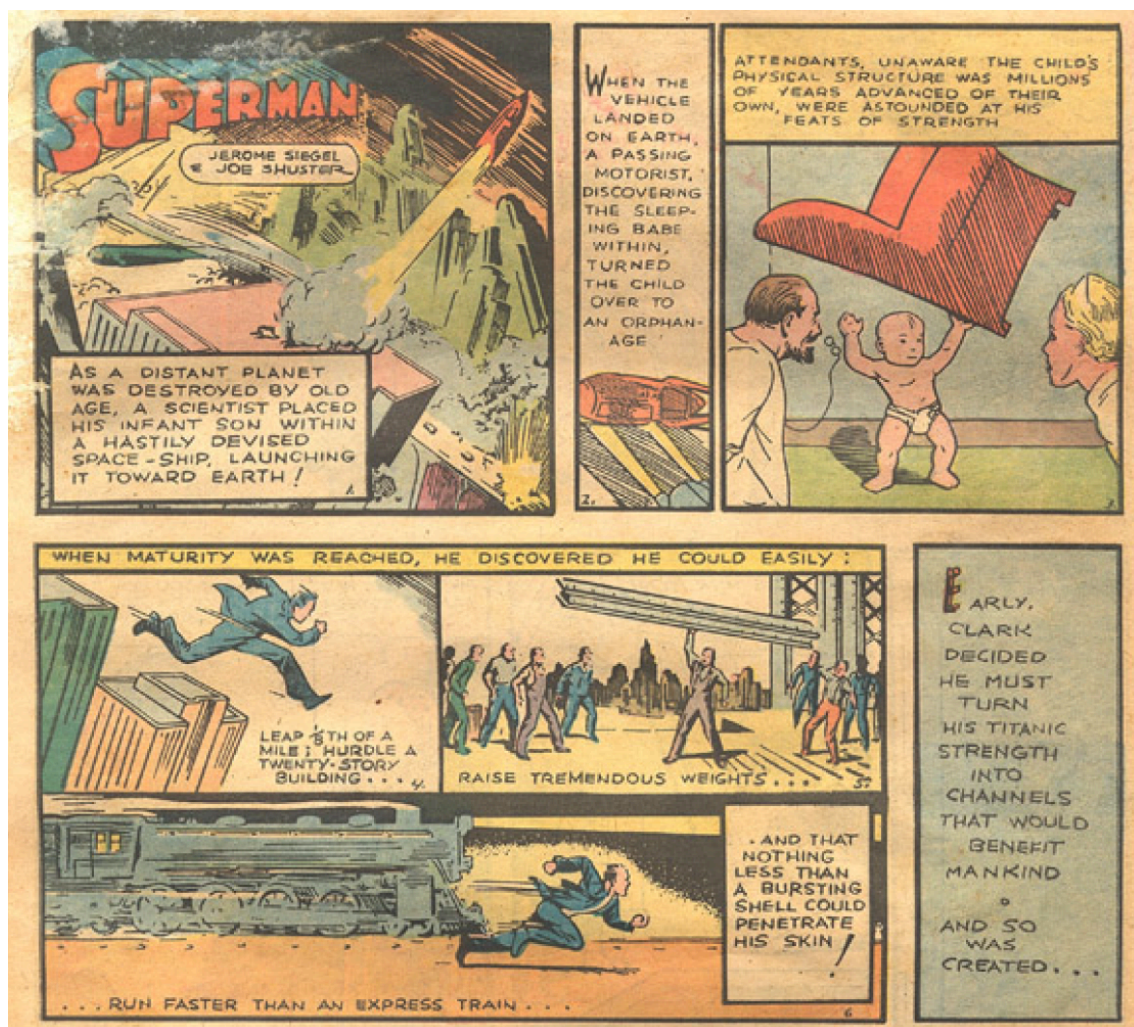
Inspired by a combination of biblical mythology and American pulp fiction, Superman represents the merging of a Jewish immigrant and an American identity. While Siegel specifically references the biblical character Samson, whose strict adherence to his Nazirite vows grants him superhuman strength, as an inspiration for Superman,⁸¹ many readers cite the clear similarities Superman's origin story shares with the biblical story of Moses as another example of Jewish influence. In the first panel of the "Superman" comic, the narration reads, "as a distant planet was destroyed by old age, a scientist placed his infant son within a hastily devised space ship, launching it toward Earth!" This description of Superman's origin resembles Exodus 2:3-10 when Moses' mother saves him from infanticide by sending him down the Nile River in a reed basket where the pharaoh's daughter eventually discovers him. In an online discussion about the Christianization of Superman in *Batman v Superman* (2016) on the microblogging platform tumblr.com, user *zionistmooncolony* rephrases this opening to emphasize the similarities between Superman's arrival on Earth and Moses' arrival in pharaoh's palace, describing how Superman's parents placed him in a basket and "floated him down a vast river... of stars and

⁸⁰ Goulart 75-77.

⁸¹ Fingerroth 32, Goulart 74.

particles... to a place where he could grow up, and where in the end, he was needed.”⁸²

Similarly, scholars like Brod and Fingerhuth indicate that Superman’s origin was not only influenced by biblical myth, it also resonates with the migratory experiences of Jewish Americans, who immigrated to the United States in order to escape persecution in Europe. Either way, whether Superman’s origins can be linked to biblical narratives or more recent Jewish history, fans and scholars alike have identified influences from Siegel and Shuster’s Jewish upbringings that have brought Jewish myths into conversation with American values.



⁸² zionistmooncolony, April 6 2016, “comment on,” *The Last Safe Haven in the Diaspora*, <https://zionistmooncolony.tumblr.com/post/142365152299/fromchaostocosmos-when-superman-man-of-steel>.

Before this origin story in *Action Comics #1*, Superman was initially conceptualized as a psychically enhanced villain in Siegel's short story "The Reign of the Superman," published in their fanzine *Science Fiction* in 1933. Later that same year, Siegel realized Superman's potential as a hero, rather than villain. Consequently, when the duo turned their focus to comic strips, they then reinvented the character as a heroic superman. In a recollection of this drafting stage, Siegel has stated that he realized Superman would, "make a great comic strip character in the vein of Tarzan, only more super and sensational than that great character."⁸³ Inspired not only by Jewish myth, but also by the adventures of pulp heroes like Tarzan and Doc Savage, Siegel and Shuster gave their hero superhuman abilities and bulletproof skin. When the Kryptonian crime-fighter finally graced the cover of *Action Comics #1* in 1938, he "followed the recurrent theme of the [pulp] hero, always a white male, who rejected the corruption of society and took it upon himself to correct societal problems."⁸⁴ And, like the pulp hero, the superhero enacts the imperialist urge to domesticate the Other, usually through the colonizing projects of assimilation or suppression. In pulp fiction and later in comics, this domestication makes the foreign familiar through contact with the superhuman body, which is "juxtaposed with the inferior mind and body of the racial or gendered other."⁸⁵ With, for instance, Burroughs' adventure hero Tarzan, he overcomes the circumstances of his environment—being raised in the jungle by apes—due to the "innate racial traits" of his Whiteness and emerges as the "physically superior man."⁸⁶ For Tarzan, the jungle, the apes that raise him, and native Africans all encompass the foreign Other, existing outside of White, Western civilization, and their savagery must be placated through the colonizing force of his White body.

⁸³ Siegel via Goulart 80.

⁸⁴ Chambliss and Svitvasky 13.

⁸⁵ Scott Jeffery, *The Posthuman Body in Superhero Comics: Human, Superhuman, Transhuman, Post/human* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-54950-1_11. 76.

⁸⁶ Chambliss and Svitvasky 8.

As urbanization led to the displacement of the frontier within the urban cityscape, so too did the dawn of comic book superheroes relocate conflicts and anxieties “beyond the confines of a geographic frontier.”⁸⁷ Rooted in the American imperialist myth of the “frontier as a free and unpopulated periphery, requiring the colonized other to vanish,”⁸⁸ the world of Superman mirrored the ethnoracially homogenous suburb of Siegel and Shuster’s youth. Here, Siegel and Shuster’s erasure of ethnoracial Others operates as a form of “symbolic annihilation,” in which people of color are disempowered and erased from public consciousness.⁸⁹ Subsequently, the urban landscape depicted in *Superman* functions as pristine frontier and a White utopia, symbolically purged of ethnoracial and economic difference. Likewise, Siegel and Shuster not only remove People of Color from the world of Superman, they also remove Jews, in what Martin Lund, in his book *Re-Constructing the Man of Steel: Superman 1938–1941, Jewish American History, and the Invention of the Jewish–Comics Connection*, terms an “instance of defensive symbolic annihilation.”⁹⁰ Considering the publication of Superman alongside the 1930s steep upticks in anti-semitic rhetoric in both America and in Europe, the Whiteness of Superman and his world reflects a desire among Jewish Americans to claim Whiteness and American-ness in response to increasing anti-semitism. Lund further refers to this process of defensive symbolic annihilation as the “‘normalization’ of Jews *in absentia*.”⁹¹ In other words, the absence of Jews as a visibly recognizable Other further promotes Jewish American integration into Whiteness by removing Jewish difference in the context of a ethnoracially homogenous landscape.

⁸⁷ Chambliss and Svitvasky 18.

⁸⁸ Galaver, "The Imperial Superhero," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47, no. 1 (January 2014): doi:doi:10.1017/S1049096513001649). 110.

⁸⁹ Lund 143.

⁹⁰ Lund 152. [Emphasis added].

⁹¹ Lund 152.

With the erasure of the colonized Other, superheroes must face the internal conflicts of their own “divided personae,”⁹² frequently represented as a costumed alter ego. Thus, the Other can not only be encountered as something external to the superhero but as something internal as well. Comic book scholar Chris Galaver, quoting Albert Memmi in his 2014 essay on “The Imperial Superhero,” frames this encounter as a “production of imperial culture in which the colonized are reduced to... ‘an alter ego of the colonizer.’”⁹³ In Superman’s case, the homogeneity of his environment and the disappearance of the Other turns the conflict between the familiar and the foreign inwards, “perpetuating an artificial sense of difference between ‘self’ and ‘other.’”⁹⁴ Simultaneously acting as both the colonizer and the colonized Other, Superman’s object of domestication is the Jew. In the canon of the comics, this appears in the contrasting of Superman with his two other identities—the Kryptonian Ka-El and the journalist Clark Kent. The multiple identities of the superhero mirror the immigrant experience in America where ethnoracial assignment, national origin, and religious practice inform access to citizenship. American Jews, especially, found themselves caught between ethnic particularity and Whiteness. Metatextually, the Otherness of the Jew is being rendered familiar to a White audience through Superman’s White appearance, the racial and economic homogeneity of his environment, and use of archetypes that are very much embedded in Jewish and American mythologies. Likewise, while the world inhabited by Superman appears sanitized of racial, ethnic, or cultural diversity, Superman stands out as the “only one truly notable example of divergence”⁹⁵—the alien among the WASPs.

⁹² Chambliss and Svitvasky 18.

⁹³ Chris Galaver, "The Imperial Superhero," 108.

⁹⁴ Galaver 108.

⁹⁵ Lund 146.

Through the synthesis of Jewish myths and American values, as well as the external and internal confrontations of the colonizer and the colonized Other, Superman becomes the archetypal superhero. Over the course of the development of comics and the superhero genre, several key characteristics of the superhero emerge, located first in Siegel and Shuster's Superman. According to Peter Coogan in his 2006 book *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*, the superhero is defined by a moral mission, superhuman powers, and an identity represented by a codename and costume.⁹⁶ Similarly, in his 2012 article titled "The Ku Klux Klan and the Birth of the Superhero," Galaver cites Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet's 1983 'six-step progression' of the superhero's qualities, which overlaps with Coogan's list but adds that the superhero, in addition to having superpowers and a secret identity, must be human, specifically, "an adult white male who holds a white collar job in his secret identity."⁹⁷ While this progression mostly fits when applied to superheroes of the Golden and Silver ages, glaring problems develop once comics move into the later half of twentieth century. Moreover, the requirement of humanness raises questions regarding the legitimacy of that category, as well as failing to acknowledge the rhetorical power of Superman's extraterrestrial origins at a time in American history when one's immigrant background often signaled their ethnoracial assignment, affected their class status, and limited their social capital. Perhaps, then, it is Charles Hatfield's book *Hand of Fire: The Comics Art of Jack Kirby* that offers the most comprehensive definition, which centers the conflicts and convergences of identity that animate the superhero through the attributes of power, responsibility, justice, and a dual identity. In his list, he explains these attributes as emerging in

⁹⁶ Coogan 31-33.

⁹⁷ Chris Galaver, "The Ku Klux Klan and the Birth of the Superhero," *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 4, no. 2 (December 10, 2012): <https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2012.747976>. 201.

First, the contradiction between an agonistic individualism, often violently expressed (*power*), and an altruism that turns violence to prosocial, regenerative ends (*responsibility*); and, second, the contradiction between the spirit of antinomianism embodied by the figure of the vigilante (*justice*) and the spirit of obedience under law (another kind of *justice*)... third, less often acknowledged if no less fraught: a contradiction between self-effacement (Clark Kent) and flamboyance (Superman), the latter leading easily to the queering of this mostly male-addressed genre and often tipping over into a knowing, nudging campiness. After all, superhero stories typically rehearse masculinity via the extremes of deficiency—geekiness—and excess—a hyperbolic, almost self-parodying machismo.⁹⁸

Whereas Blythe and Sweet's list emphasizes the normativity of the superheroic White male body, Hatfield's definition, expanding Coogan's basic concepts, situates the superhero within "the continual rehearsal and readjustment of social and cultural contradictions."⁹⁹ Although not exclusive to the superhero genre, this situating recognizes the tensions that emerge when Jewish and American myths meet. By highlighting these tensions, his identification of these attributes provides an avenue for contextualizing and critiquing the fascistic tendencies of superhero violence amid an underlying orientation of Jewish Otherness.

Superman as SuperJew

Not only drawing inspiration from biblical mythology and well-established pulp heroes, Siegel and Shuster imbued Superman with elements drawn from their lived experiences as Jewish men. Although Chambliss and Svitavsky argue that Superman's physical embodiment of hypermasculine ideals reasserts the primacy of the White body, much like the Anglo-Saxon Tarzan,¹⁰⁰ Superman's body should be read as a response to ideas about Jewish masculinity and the Jewish body, which was perceived as sick, weak, and effeminate. To interpret Superman through this lens does not discount the ways in which his body reinforces White supremacist

⁹⁸ Charles Hatfield, *Hand of Fire: the Comics Art of Jack Kirby* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012). 110.

⁹⁹ Hatfield 110.

¹⁰⁰ Chambliss and Svitavsky 22.

ideals through its superior physicality; rather, it seeks to complicate his Whiteness in reimagining the Jewish body as a White body.

When pulp fiction followed the cultural shift away from the frontier and to urban centers, their narratives came to confront growing anxieties about masculinity. Namely, the city was seen as a physically dangerous and morally corrupting place, while simultaneously producing unmanly and weak men, a stereotype that was particularly associated with Jews.¹⁰¹ Like most Jewish men during this period, Siegel and Shuster would have not only been exposed to this stereotype, which characterized Jewish men as “non-heroic, weak, overly intellectual, and effeminate,”¹⁰² but would have felt immense social pressure to challenge it. During their youth, “both were physically small, and uninterested in physically rough competitive sports,” until, to combat the *nebbish* stereotype of the weak and submissive Jewish man, Shuster took an interest in bodybuilding.¹⁰³ This interest likely influenced Superman’s character design, as well as the duality between his superhero identity and his alter ego Clark Kent, who Brod describes as “a gendered stereotype of Jewish inferiority.”¹⁰⁴ Chambliss and Svitavsky similarly identify Clark Kent as embodying “a fear of manhood diminished by modern life, anonymous in the urban mob and made soft by the unhealthy environment of the city.”¹⁰⁵ Both authors clearly position Clark Kent as the Jewish “side” to Superman due to his demeanor, despite his WASPy, Midwestern upbringing, while Superman represents the White, masculine ideal. On one hand, Superman’s hypermasculinity, embodied in his impressive physique and super-strength, serves as a counter-narrative to the anti-Jewish stereotypes that would have been imposed on Siegel and Shuster by America’s dominant, White supremacist cultural framework. On the other hand, Superman

¹⁰¹ Chambliss and Svitavsky 21.

¹⁰² Brod 10.

¹⁰³ Brod 4-5.

¹⁰⁴ Brod 10.

¹⁰⁵ Chambliss and Svitavsky 21.

epitomizes how Jewish men bought into White ideals and how they attempted to inscribe Whiteness onto themselves through the manipulation, control, and regulation of their deviant bodies.

But in transforming Jewishness into Whiteness, it is not enough for Superman's body to appear White; it must also enact Whiteness through vigilante violence, one of the defining characteristics of superheroism, according to Hatfield. While critics have long critiqued Superman's displays of extrajudicial violence as a fascistic tendency, the characterization of Superman as an agent of fascism, White supremacy, and American imperialism must be complicated in order to consider the intersections of his perceived Whiteness and the Jewish American contexts of his origins. Galaver, in arguing that the superhero developed from tropes first established in Thomas Dixon Jr.'s *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905), and its better known film adaptation from director D.W. Griffith, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), suggests that superhero vigilantism reproduces an "authoritarian mission, imposing moral order on urban chaos."¹⁰⁶ As a result, superheroes perpetuate imperialist relationships by imposing order on the urban frontier, undermining the systems of order and justice already in place. Yet, displacement of the frontier and the internalization of the racialized Other in Superman's vigilantism "erase[s] much of the violence in the conflict between white civilization and the provocative other."¹⁰⁷ Unlike in Dixon's novels, Superman's restoration of social order does not seek to re-impose the racial order of a pre-Civil War South through the reenactment of genocidal violence against Black people. In fact, Superman, at least in his origin, *cannot* produce the same racialized dynamics essential to Dixon's novels and KKK propaganda because the first several *Superman* stories depict a racially and environmentally homogenized

¹⁰⁶ Galaver 198.

¹⁰⁷ Chambliss and Svitvasky 24.

world. That is not to suggest that Superman does not reproduce White supremacist ideology; instead, Siegel and Shuster reinforce the Black-White racial binary through the homogeneity and authoritarianism of Superman's Whiteness and through the erasure of the external Other. Thus, the erasure of racial Others constitutes its own type of racial violence, even though Superman's vigilantism occurs in the context of a White world, between visually White characters.



Action Comics #1 introduces Superman's brand of racially sanitized vigilantism as early as the second page of the first *Superman* comic, rendering it through Superman's leveraging of his physical might against a fearful citizen on his quest for restoring justice. In this sequence of events, Siegel and Shuster display a variety of Superman's superhuman abilities, most notably showcasing his otherworldly strength—first, when he bursts through the door, and again, as he lifts the governor's butler above his head. The page is split into two top rows, each with three panels, labeled 10-15, and a bottom row of two panels, labeled 16-17.¹⁰⁸ Panels 12-14 and 15-17 illustrate similar sequences of events, wherein Superman makes a request, the Butler rebukes him, and Superman responds with force, muscling his way further into the house. Nowhere on the page does the narration or the dialogue attempt to explain Superman's urgency or justify his actions. Thus far into the narrative, this series of actions, in addition to the first two panels in which Superman carries a bound and gagged woman, frames him as morally ambiguous, a theme which reoccurs throughout the comic. Only when each narrative sequence ends does Superman restore moral order. In this scene, as well as other fights and encounters that follow, the central conflict occurs between two White men. Yet, Superman asserts a particular type of Whiteness manifested through his physicality. Not only is he White, or visually read as such, but he embodies the rugged masculinity of the cowboy and other White vigilante figures. Despite the racial homogeneity of the scene, Superman leverages vigilante violence to reaffirm the Whiteness conveyed by his physicality.

At the same time, Siegel saw Superman as fighting not for the preservation of Whiteness but against the "horrors of privation suffered by the downtrodden."¹⁰⁹ In accordance with Hatfield's formula, Superman's vigilantism is tempered by a prosocial moralism that, in some

¹⁰⁸ Each panel throughout the *Superman* comic is marked with a number along the bottom border, beginning with 1 in the first panel of the comic and ending on 98.

¹⁰⁹ Fingerioth 41.

circumstances, may subvert White supremacist racial hierarchies. Almost all previous scholarship on the question of Superman's Jewishness highlights his commitment to social justice. While this commitment is culturally imbedded within the United States' historical legacy of imperialism, in which White paternalism sometimes masquerades as social liberalism, Lund situates Superman's prosocialism within the Jewish values of individual freedom and social justice.¹¹⁰ But, the Jewishness of Superman's prosocialism does not alone make him a Jewish superhero in the sense for which Brod and Fingerroth argue, nor does it disrupt the Whiteness he embodies and enacts. Instead, Lund identifies the Jewish American community's "tendency of linking Judaism and American values as fundamentally compatible"¹¹¹ as an essential component of Siegel and Shuster's formation of Superman's character and his interpretation of Whiteness. Critiquing Fingerroth for his suggestion that Siegel and Shuster conceived of Superman as a *tzaddik*, a righteous man, Lund notes that their "Jewish Glenville socialization and environment... had imparted in [Siegel] a strong sense of justice and communitarian obligation"¹¹² that would later be inscribed in *Superman*. Perhaps it was not Siegel and Shuster's intention to create a character immersed in Jewish ethics, but the association between Superman's sense of justice and the Jewishness of his creators does, however, complicate his Whiteness. Superman's prosocialism mirrors how many American Jews tended "to think of themselves as distinctly liberal politically, as invested in social justice and in identification with the underdog, and sometimes, as not white."¹¹³

In Between the Lines: Superman, Clark Kent, and the Shadow

¹¹⁰ Lund 93.

¹¹¹ Lund 95.

¹¹² Lund 95.

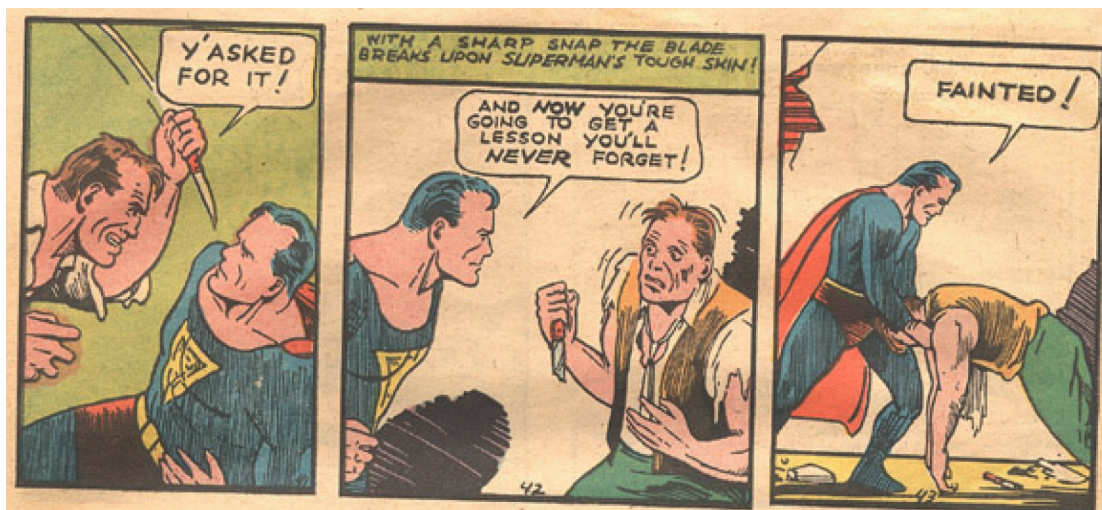
¹¹³ Brodkin 3.

While the whole *Superman* comic tells several stories regarding Superman's background and his encounters, the eighth page of *Action Comics #1* is the first to draw a sharp distinction between the personalities of Superman and his alter ego Clark Kent. As with the second page of the comic, Superman's use of violence identifies him as a White vigilante on a quest to restore moral order. Yet, the moral ambiguity introduced later in the comic through the divergence of two identities complicates this legacy. Instead, this page emphasizes themes of identity, masculinity, and power that recur throughout the comic, situating Superman as a morally ambiguous character, whose sense of morality is not inherent but adapts to his different personas. By examining different elements of visual storytelling, such as the page layout, character position, and characterization, the conflict between the masculinities and moralities of Superman and Clark Kent becomes evident. This conflict, however, goes beyond the text of the comic book page, reproducing the tensions between Whiteness and Jewishness, and even more specifically, between a socially enforced ethnoracial assignment and a self-described, culturally specific identity.



Looking at the page as a whole, the grid follows a standard deviation on the traditional 3x3 grid, yet each row of panels occurs at a different time, a different place, with Superman/Clark Kent portraying different personas. As the reader moves through the panels, Superman transitions from his violent, hyper-masculine, and Whitened superhero persona to the passive, *nebbish* Clark Kent. In the first row of panels, Superman grapples with a domestic abuser. The action flows consecutively between the first two panels, the abuser attempting to stab Superman but the knife snapping on his tough skin. Meanwhile, the third panel, in which the abuser has fainted in Superman's arms, leaves more to the imagination. While most readers

might interpret this panel as following the first two within the same relative temporal space, the abuser fainting from the previous demonstration of Superman's physical superiority, as well as from Superman's threat that he's going to teach the abuser a lesson, the gutter allows for an alternative reading. Since time is not fixed within comics, the passage from one panel to the next might occur chronologically or non-linearly, or time might be experienced as stretched or shortened both between and within a panel. In this instance, the reader can conceive of events taking place *in the gutter*, the negative space between the panels. Perhaps Superman followed through on his threat, the violence transpiring in the space between the panels, with the reader shown only the aftermath. This interpretation, by removing scenes of explicit violence, allows Superman to maintain his image as the 'good guy', while simultaneously preserving his heightened masculinity.



Like the page's layout, the position of the characters in relation to one another and to the reader reinforces societal notions of masculinity and power as representations of Whiteness as differently presented in Superman and Clark Kent. Returning to the first three panels, Shuster adds to the tension of the scene by initially positioning Superman beneath the knife-wielding abuser. With Superman leaning back, the abuser coming down on top of him, Shuster places

Superman is not only in a vulnerable position but also a feminized one. Interestingly, the domestic violence victim, who appears on the previous page, disappears from the comic as their fight ensues. Once the victim is displaced from the comic, the fight becomes not about her rescue or restoring justice; instead, the fight becomes a battle over the 'correct' presentation of White masculinity. In the second panel, order is restored as the dynamic between the characters flips, with Superman reasserting his dominance as he stares the now scared abuser down. After the fainting of the abuser in the third panel, Superman towers over the unconscious man, fully in control. Catching the man as he faints, Superman is not only portrayed in a position of dominance, but he is also presented paternally, demonstrating to the reader his ideal of masculinity, of Jewish-White hybridity. Nevertheless, in the second row of the grid, after Superman disguises himself as Clark Kent, he returns to an inferior role. Although he remains kneeling above the unconscious body of the abuser, he positions himself beneath the entering police chief. Despite Clark Kent being introduced a few pages earlier, it is on this page where he is first positioned as submissive.



Even without dialogue, the layout of the page and the relationality of the characters speak to the contrasting masculinities of Superman and Clark Kent. Throughout the page, however, the

comic's textual components, alongside other modes of characterization, both reinforce these differences and draw into question Superman's/Clark Kent's moral and personal identity. The binary between Superman and Clark Kent breaks down in the fourth panel, when the reader first encounters Superman's transformation into the 'ordinary' citizen and journalist Clark Kent. This scene, through the layering of Superman's/Clark Kent's clothes, constructs Superman as a man of three interfolded identities: Superman, Clark Kent, and a shadow self, who is at once both and neither, a physical manifestation of the gutter's liminality. Accompanying text in the panel refers to him as Superman, suggesting that Superman is his core identity. The position of his superhero suit underneath his civilian clothes supports such a claim, yet the text also refers to the suit as a "uniform,"¹¹⁴ an outfit worn specifically for work. At the same time, the page, as well as the comic as a whole, depicts Clark Kent as succeeding Superman. In other words, Clark Kent is framed as a façade, containing a different interior personality than the one he presents to the world. The presence of Superman's/Clark Kent's shadow merges the two personalities into one figure and removes any physical markers of difference. However, this shadow figure merely indicates the possibility of union; it does not enact it. At the same time, the projection of the shadow represents Superman/Clark Kent's internalized Otherness as the missing aspect that unites his identities. While both the identities of Superman and Clark Kent work on multiple levels to assimilate him into Whiteness, he cannot shake the shadow, which signals both the possibility of union and the Otherness of his alien origins.

For the rest of the page, Clark Kent interacts with Lois Lane, who begrudgingly agrees to go on a date with him. While they are dancing, some men at a nearby table plot to "cut in" on their dance. Though the page ends there, both its beginning and end revolve around violence

¹¹⁴ Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, *Superman, Action Comics #1*, (New York, NY: DC Comics, 1938), panel 44.

directed toward and enacted upon women characters. Similar to both instances, this violence acts as a plot device for setting up Superman's masculinity in contrast to Clark Kent's passivity. The women are otherwise secondary. The reader understands Superman's masculinity not in relation to women (even Lois Lane is not eager to spend time with him and is hurt when he does not come to her defense), but as emerging through conflicts within himself and with other men. The question of power, then, orients itself within a dialectical struggle between the identities of Superman and Clark Kent.



Although *Superman* comics have changed throughout the years, adapting and altering details and stories to fit different cultural moments, *Superman* continues to explore the conflicts of power, masculinity, and identity set up in its very first run in *Action Comics #1*. Utilizing the full potential of the page, Siegel and Shuster grapple with society's various interpretations of masculinity and the limitations of ethnoracial assignment through the juxtaposition of the action hero Superman and the sheepish Clark Kent. Readers might be inclined to read the portrayal of Superman's masculinity positively, an interpretation the page's layout and the character's physical position often reinforces, but they might also be led to question duality in the face of liminality. In another sense, although Superman prefigures Whiteness through the visual reading

of the body and through his enactment of a masculinity rooted in Whiteness, the repeated destabilizing of Superman's social and physical position and the presence of the shadow offers another reading. Thus, while page layout, character position, and characterization each play a role in depicting an idealized form of masculinity, they simultaneously offer subversive readings of masculinity, morality, and identity through moments of absence—the gutter, the shadow, and the displacement of female characters.

Chapter 3:

Captain America as Superpatriot: Claiming Whiteness Through Hyper-Patriotism

Jewish American assimilatory practices and concerns about anti-semitism converged on the cover of Timely Comics' *Captain America Comics #1* (1941) and throughout the issue, which depicts Captain America, clad in his red, white, and blue suit, punching Hitler. The iconic cover not only drummed up support for joining the war against Germany, it also represented American values regarding individualism, patriotism, and masculinity through a character created by Jewish writer-artists Joe Simon and Jack Kirby. Like Superman and the other superheroes that came before him, Captain America, the superhero alter-ego of Private Steve Rogers, negotiates Jewish ethnoracial assignment through the visual presentation of his Whiteness, coded not only in his physical appearance, but additionally through the hyper-patriotism of his values. *Captain America Comics #1* not only prefigures Jewish Whiteness, as the *Superman* comics do, it presents liberal Jewish values as American values more broadly. This equation of Jewishness with Whiteness and American-ness allows Jewish American comic book creators to disassociate their pro-war stance from their Jewishness, framing it, instead, as the appropriate American response.

The Rise of the Superpatriot

The Jewish American project of acculturation, assimilation, and ethnoracial reconfiguration continued well into the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, seemingly expedited in America by the rise of anti-semitism in Europe, which escalated in 1933 when the Reichstag passed the Nuremberg Laws, stripping German Jews of their citizenship rights, and reached its zenith in 1941 when the Third Reich's policy of systematic mass murder of European Jewry

officially began. Across the Atlantic, Jewish Americans, still grappling with their uncertain ethnoracial assignment amidst the minefield of American racial politics, recognized that if “anti-Jewish racial policies could take root in ‘civilized’ Germany... similar measures [could] emerge in America as well.”¹¹⁵ A rising pro-fascist movement in America, inspired by fascist movements overseas and motivated by White discontent at the unresolved racial questions of the past decades, amid an already heightened anti-semitic environment, seemed to confirm these fears. While some Jewish Americans responded to Nazis and their American sympathizers with increased racial and cultural pride, others, like Reform leader Julian Morgenstern, cautioned against such subscriptions to “racial nationalism,” arguing that it could affirm accusations of Jewish tribalism and a “growing Jewish consciousness” that threatened the stability of hegemonic Whiteness.¹¹⁶ Yet, despite uncertainty with how to respond to claims of Jewish racial inferiority, Jewish Americans recognized the situation abroad as one of serious gravity that would impact not only the lives of European Jewry, but of Jews all over the world. While the U.S. government wavered ambivalently over whether to join the war effort, Jewish Americans were ready to go to war, both physically and ideologically.

The trends of the comic book industry shifted to reflect the pro-war sentiment of many Jewish Americans, including those directly involved in comic book production and distribution, and in the years leading up to America joining the war, the comic book industry became a pro-war propaganda machine.¹¹⁷ Superpatriots, as well as more classic adventure hero types, exploded across the pages of comic books from every major comic book publisher in the industry. While “other superheroes were in the business of fighting crime,”¹¹⁸ comic books about

¹¹⁵ Goldstein 185.

¹¹⁶ Goldstein 185.

¹¹⁷ Jeffery 80.

¹¹⁸ Fingerioth 57.

superpatriots championed a pro-war stance by envisioning soldiers of the American cause already participating in the war effort against the Axis Powers. Scott Jeffery, in his 2016 book *The Posthuman Body in Superhero Comics*, suggests that the emergence of the superpatriot signals a turn away from a socialist ethic and toward the incorporation of “the superhero into the establishment.”¹¹⁹ Whereas before the superhero served as a “champion of the oppressed,”¹²⁰ the superpatriot represents the imperialist and capitalist needs of the state. However, Brod, in *Superman is Jewish?*, links the emergence of the superpatriot to Jewish American investment in the defeat of the Nazis, claiming,

The Jews were conspicuous among identifiable demographic groups for their vigorous support for both a domestic social justice agenda and wholehearted U.S. enlistment in the war against the Nazis. The other demographic that lined up with Jewish opinion was the comic book superheroes.¹²¹

Considering, as Brod does, the Jewish demographics of the comic book industry, the superpatriot not only defends American interests, but also transforms American interests into those that align with Jewish social, political, and ethical interests. Thus, superpatriot comics are a type of twofold propaganda; they influence the people on behalf of the state, and they influence the state on behalf of a certain segment of its population.

Red, White, and Jew

MLJ Magazines, the precursor to Archie Comics, debuted Harry Shorten and Irv Novick’s character The Shield in *Pep Comics #1* in early 1940, the first superpatriot to grace the pages of a comic book. He swiftly met competition from Quality’s Uncle Sam, created by Will Eisner, and Fawcett’s Minute-Man, created by Charlie Sultan. But in March 1941, a mere nine

¹¹⁹ Jeffery 80.

¹²⁰ Jeffrey 79.

¹²¹ Brod 68.

months before America joined the Allied forces, Timely Comics, now Marvel, released *Captain America Comics #1*, whose title character overtook the other superpatriots in popularity, rivaling even Superman in terms of popularity and readership.¹²² Created by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, born Hymie Simon and Jacob Kurtzberg, respectfully, to Jewish immigrant parents, Captain America hardly stands out as unique when compared to other superpatriots, who all share a similar star-spangled getup and verve for defending America against foreign enemies with snappy catchphrases.

¹²² Jeffery 80.



Yet, while other superpatriots were willing to throw fists with nondescript Nazi enemies, the cover of Captain America's first issue features him greeting Hitler with a powerful punch as he simultaneously deflects bullets from Nazi soldiers with his shield. As Brod notes in *Superman is Jewish?*, "Simon and Kirby intended that cover and all their Captain America stories to be recruitment posters and inspirational stories for U.S. mobilization for the war,"¹²³ but that cover

¹²³ Brod 66.

functioned as more than just effective pro-war propaganda. By placing Captain America, an embodiment of American patriotism and progressiveness, in combat with Hitler, creators Simon and Kirby, and by extension Timely Comics, give a specific name and face to America's enemy in a way that other superpatriotic comics before them had avoided. Not only was Captain America "the first major comic book hero to take a political stand [against Hitler]" specifically, but Simon also remembers Captain America as his and Kirby's "way of lashing out against the Nazi menace" in the period before the United States officially entered the war.¹²⁴ The cover of *Captain America Comics #1* was as much wish fulfillment for Jewish Americans as it was prophetic, allowing Jewish creators and comic book readers a space to vent and share in their frustrations against the Nazi regime, while rallying support for the war.

The story that introduces Captain America further addresses not only the Axis threat abroad, but also emphasizes the threat of the Fifth Column at home in America. Disseminating racist propaganda, the pro-fascist, pro-German Fifth Column caused particular anxiety for Jewish Americans, as well as immigrant communities and communities of color. Jewish Americans and other minorities, however, were not the only ones concerned with domestic sympathizers, saboteurs, and spies, and the United States government, though complicit in their own racialized systems of oppression, charged many Fifth Columnists with "undermining the war effort and espousing an enemy ideology."¹²⁵ Simon and Kirby, whose work and later memoirs indicate acute awareness of such concerns, illustrate the threat of the Fifth Column on the cover of *Captain America Comics #1*. Despite the central action of Captain America clobbering Hitler with a right hook, the plot of the issue focuses not on foreign enemies, but pro-Nazi saboteurs and spies on American soil and within the military itself. The cover exhibits a preoccupation

¹²⁴ Simon via Fingerioth 57.

¹²⁵ Goldstein 191.



with the Fifth Column, hinting at the issue's plot with details nearly hidden amongst the fray. In the lower left hand corner of the page, a pink notepad reads "sabotage plans for U.S.A.;" while in the background, a purple TV screen displays video of a "U.S. munitions works" facility mid-explosion.¹²⁶ On the first page, two saboteurs lurk in the foreground, preparing to detonate explosives at another American munitions factory. The comic names the Fifth Column directly with narration above the panel labeling the "threat of invasion from within" as "great as the danger of foreign attack."¹²⁷ This introduction does more than provide a set up for Captain America. Between the cover page and the opening segment, it explicitly ties the Fifth Column in America with the Third Reich. Jewish apprehension about the Fifth Column's ability to "inflame racial hatreds"¹²⁸ and generate greater anxiety about Jewish ethnoracial assignment becomes, through Captain America, interwoven with concerns for persevering American democratic values.

While the issue's instant popularity demonstrates its effectiveness as propaganda and as an instrument of catharsis for Jewish Americans, a substantial population of anti-war activists, including pro-German organizations, received it less than enthusiastically. If *Captain American Comics #1* expressed a disdain for the Fifth Column, then those who held beliefs in alignment with the Nazis expressed an equal contempt for the comic and its authors. Simon recalls that his

¹²⁶ Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, *Captain America Comics #1*, (New York, NY: DC Comics, 1941), cover image.

¹²⁷ Simon and Kirby 1.

¹²⁸ Goldstein 191.

and Kirby's "irreverent treatment of their Fuehrer [*sic*] infuriated them," resulting in "a torrent of raging hate mail and vicious, obscene telephone calls," in which the theme was "'death to the Jews.'" ¹²⁹ The character design, posing, and visual effects of the cover all work together to convey a sense of Captain America's might against an otherwise unprepared, ineffective foe. Compared to Captain America's bulging, defined muscles and chiseled jaw, Hitler appears blundering, unfit, and old, the contortion of his face not only an expression of pain, but emphasizing wrinkles, jowls, and a double-chin. In addition, Captain America, with his athletic physique, blond-haired, and blue-eyes, appears to fit the White, Aryan ideal of both America and Nazi Germany. Thus, the cover shows Hitler and the Nazis being bested by the vision of the Aryan ideal. Similarly, Captain America's brawl with the Nazis—on the cover, within the issue, and throughout the comic book series—shows that, in the comic book's timeline, America *has* joined the war against the Axis Powers, implying that, in the real world, America will come to do so as well. Lastly, the anti-semitic rhetoric levied by Captain America's real world opponents highlights a general awareness of the Jewishness of his creators and, perhaps, of the comic book industry as a whole, and it further underscores the fragility of the Jewish position in America prior to the end of WWII.

Further into the comic, the focus shifts from America's problem with the Fifth Column to its solution: the blond-haired, blue-eyed, scientifically enhanced Captain America. A paragon of American Whiteness and patriotism, Captain America manifests, through the language of his metamorphosis and the Whiteness of his character design, Simon and Kirby's negotiations with their own Jewish American identities. Likewise, Captain America's popularity demonstrates Simon and Kirby's, Timely's, and, perhaps, the greater comic book industry's awareness of the intersection of nationalist and racial rhetorics. Not yet enhanced by super-soldier serum, the

¹²⁹ Simon via Fingerioth 58. Brackets in original.

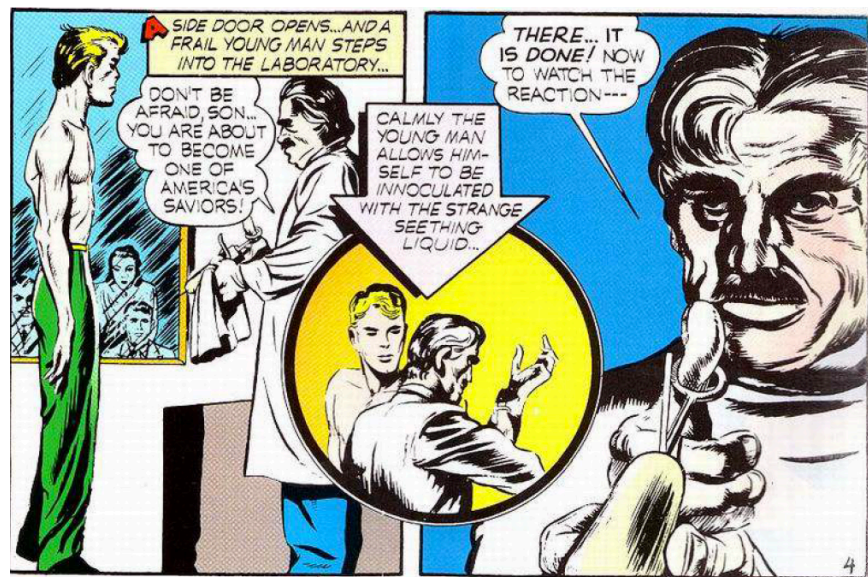
narration describes Rogers as “frail,” and shortly after, the scientist who inoculates him explains that, before agreeing to the experiment that will transform him into Captain America, Rogers “volunteered for army service, and was refused because of his unfit condition.”¹³⁰ According to Jeffery, this description of Rogers “evokes eugenics in its language—Steve Rogers is ‘weak’ and ‘unfit,’ whereas he becomes a ‘perfect specimen’ following his metamorphosis.”¹³¹ During the first half of the twentieth century, the eugenics movement was reaching its height, both in America and Nazi Germany. In the United States, legal and medical institutions widely accepted eugenics practices, such as anti-miscegenation laws and forced sterilizations, as part of a larger program of scientific racism. Jewish Americans were one group targeted by eugenics programs, though less aggressively than other groups, evidenced by Shaler’s calls for the physical intermixture of Jewish Americans with White Americans, in order to dilute their ethnoracial distinctiveness. While it may seem odd, then, for two Jewish American comic book creators to adopt this language, Simon and Kirby’s use of eugenics language and imagery in Steve Roger’s character design demonstrates both the pervasiveness of pro-eugenics rhetoric in the American consciousness and how such rhetoric could be appropriated to challenge the stability of ethnoracial categories without disrupting White hegemony. While the serum unlocks Roger’s physical potential, amplifying his Whiteness and transforming him into the American ideal, it is not only scientific intervention that enables his metamorphosis. It is not eugenics alone that creates Captain America; rather, he is transfigured by his act of hyper-patriotism. In other words, Captain America is not someone who is born, he is created through his commitment to American values. Thus, Jewish Americans can be similarly transformed through this patriotism into ideal American citizens and soldiers.

¹³⁰ Simon and Kirby 5.

¹³¹ Jeffery 80.

Furthermore, Captain America's character design and the visual portrayal of his metamorphosis reinforce Simon and Kirby's reconfiguration of Jewishness as Whiteness. Although featured on the cover and the first page, and while the comic introduces Captain America's enemies early on in the comic, Captain America/Steve Rogers himself does not properly appear until the fourth page, and even then, Kirby places him in the page's fifth panel, his body positioned in profile and his head turned away. In contrast to the cover page, where Captain America's physicality calls attention to itself, this version of Steve Rogers is defined by his passivity. In this

physical state, Rogers' body is acted upon, but after receiving the super-soldier serum that turns him into Captain America, his body becomes an agent of action. Like Rogers, the Jewish position in America



disempowers Jewish Americans from self-defining their own ethnoracial assignment. Instead, the limits of their ethnoracial assignment require that they negotiate their ethnoracial identity within a circumscribed system. Whiteness, however, does not collapse the boundaries of assignment and identity either; rather, by constructing Whiteness as a neutral category, it entirely removes the need for either category. With the serum injected, Rogers' body begins to grow, bursting out of the panel's frame, spilling into the gutters, and "violating borderlines as if the action they

depict is impossible to contain.”¹³² Throughout the scene, the changing figure of Rogers unites the page’s seven panels, with each of three medium shots depicting a different stage in his transformation, “overlap[ing] and join[ing] successive panels and in effect creat[ing] a descending column down the middle of the page.”¹³³ Moving from a state of imperfection to perfection, it is through the ideal White form of Rogers’ body as it transforms into Captain America that the disparate panels come together. Thus, the Jew, represented by Rogers, and the White American, signified by Captain America, are united through the White body.

From Superman in 1938 to Captain America in 1941, comic book creators utilize similar



tactics to prefigure Jewish American Whiteness through the figure of the superhero, whose hybrid embodiment of both Jewish and American liberal values argues for an assimilationist framework of Jewish American experience. Through *Captain America #1*'s damning portrayal of both Nazis and their American supporters, as well as the physicality of Captain America's idealized Whiteness,

creators Simon and Kirby negotiate their sociopolitical position as Jewish Americans. This negotiation, however, relies on the perpetuation of a visual-textual language of Whiteness that leans toward a pro-eugenicist stance. As such, the imperfections of Rogers' body—that is, his Jewishness—must be erased for him to appropriately inhabit Whiteness.

Chapter 4:

Man or Monster: the Jewish Particularity of the *Fantastic Four*'s the Thing

Exemplifying the optimistic patriotism of the interwar, wartime, and early postwar period, the Golden Age of comic books showcased heroic protagonists defined by their otherworldly and superhuman abilities. After the decline of the superhero in the postwar period, comic book publishers attempted to reinvent the superhero to appeal to an audience with new cultural and political concerns. On one hand, the unleashing of the atom bomb during World War II transformed the American social landscape, fueling existential anxieties about mass destruction that only increased during the Cold War. On the other hand, society struggled to grapple with the emerging definition of genocide and the destruction of European Jewry during the Nazi regime.

By the late 1950s, superheroes were in fashion again, marking the start of the Silver Age of comic books. This time, however, their creators positioned them not as super-humans, but as super-freaks, humans transformed into monsters through atom-altering forces. The evolution of the superhero into a monster-hero reflects further maneuvering between the categories of ethnoracial assignment and ethnoracial identity. By reimaging the White body of the superhero through the grotesque body of the super-monster, Jewish comic book creators grapple with the intersection of Holocaust memory, Jewish particularism, and acceptance into Whiteness. As a result, the Silver Age of comics is characterized by inter- and intrapersonal conflicts in which the monstrous body manifests the trauma of the Holocaust, challenging the stability of assimilation and reshaping Jewish ethnoracial identity. Introducing the super-monster to the world of superheroes, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's *Fantastic Four* illuminates the conflict between Jewish

assimilationism and particularism through the contrasting of its character's negotiations with superhuman-ness and super-monstrousness.

A Heightened Sense of Difference: the Jewish Assimilation Paradox

After the Holocaust, which ended alongside World War II in 1945, a combination of factors, including the prefiguring of Jewish Whiteness through pop culture, greater Jewish American affluence and social mobility in postwar America, and attempts made by the United States to distance their racial rhetoric from the anti-semitism, racism, and eugenics of Nazi Germany, resulted in Jews ascending to the category of Whiteness. In a post-Holocaust America, “the same folks who had promoted nativism and xenophobia were eager to believe that the Euro-origin people whom they had deported, reviled as members of inferior races, and prevented from immigrating only a few years earlier, were now model middle-class white suburban citizens.”¹³⁴ In other words, scientific racism, insofar as it distinguished between European peoples, had fallen out of vogue. Additionally, economic expansion in the postwar period contributed to the growth of America's middle class, which allowed Euro-American men, including Jewish men, to become suburban homeowners,¹³⁵ seemingly signifying the gateway to WASP-dom.

Goldstein notes that, despite a gradual but troubled process of assimilation throughout the interwar years, “it was not until the Allied victory ushered in a new period of optimism and social stability that the Jew ceased to operate as a significant symbol of social anxiety”¹³⁶ for the White establishment. This change in status was the result of the era's increased commitment to liberalism. While liberalism enabled Jewish Americans and other ethnic Europeans to participate in mainstream Whiteness, the assimilationist subtext of the superhero comics of the 1930s and

¹³⁴ Brodtkin. 26.

¹³⁵ Brodtkin. 51.

¹³⁶ Goldstein 193.

1940s, particularly in titles featuring Superman and Captain American, aided in laying the groundwork for post-war Jewish American assimilation. Although comic production slowed during the war, due, in part, to supplies rationing and the enlistment of many comic book creators, comic book characters' expressions of patriotism and American values underscored the Roosevelt administration's campaign for national unity and social responsibility. Immigrant-born superheroes like Superman and superpatriots like Captain America argued to a broader public that previous definitions of 'American' had been too narrowly defined. Yet, the acceptably White bodies of Superman and Captain American reinforced a racial divide in who could be included under this new definition, which reflected larger trends in liberal policies that re-categorized Jews and other ethnic Europeans as White, while maintaining the White-Black racial binary.¹³⁷

At the same time, the Holocaust and the years after brought another wave of Jewish immigration, once again altering the Jewish American social landscape. On one hand, American Jewish organizations provided Holocaust survivors with financial and material assistance, and they fought against Congress when it attempted to pass an immigration bill that made it “almost impossible for survivors to enter this country.”¹³⁸ On the other hand, the presence of survivors—whose trauma made others all too aware of their Jewishness and whose displacement made them too foreign, too placeless—threatened Jewish Americans' fragile sense of belonging. Survivors reminded Jewish Americans that they, too, were vulnerable, that only “a short generation earlier, Jews had been far from the American mainstream.”¹³⁹ Although the late 1940s and 1950s saw acceptance of Jewish Americans into the White mainstream, the rapid proliferation and

¹³⁷ Goldstein 192-193.

¹³⁸ Deborah E. Lipstadt, *Holocaust: An American Understanding* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 26.

¹³⁹ Lipstadt 27.

exploitation of anti-semitism across Europe that occurred prior to and during the Holocaust, despite increased Jewish assimilation in Western and Central Europe, left Jewish Americans uncertain of the stability and permanence of their Whiteness in America.

While Jewish Americans were left to reckon with newfound revelations about the limits of assimilation and the seeming ceaselessness of anti-semitism, they were also in the midst of major social and political events of the postwar period, such as the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, and 1960s counterculture. As much as the postwar period was a time of tension between a renewed vision of progress and ideas about mutual cooperation, it was also marked by Cold War fears of communism and internal racial tensions. For Jewish Americans, this shift posed another potential threat to Jewish security as accusations of being a communist collaborator were, and still are, closely associated with anti-semitic dog whistles. Even though many Jewish Americans supported and participated in pro-union and socialist-leaning activism during the early twentieth century, anti-semitic public figures tended to employ such accusations without evidence as a means of framing Jews as un-American, both nationally and ethnoracially. During Roosevelt's presidency, several of his opponents, including Mississippi politicians Senator Theodore Bilbo and Congressman John Rankin, as well as Representative Martin J. Dies of Texas, chair of the House Special Committee on Un-American Activities, attempted to undermine his policies and campaigns for inclusive nationalism by levying such charges against Jewish Americans.¹⁴⁰

Shortly after the war ended in 1945, Senator Joseph McCarthy continued this practice when he energized the American populace into a fervor over uprooting supposed communist plots. Brodtkin describes her own family's experience during this time, referring to McCarthy as

¹⁴⁰ Goldstein 191.

“evil incarnate.”¹⁴¹ Likewise, according to Brodtkin, the trial and execution of the Julius and Ethel Rosenberg at the height of McCarthyism in 1953 on charges of espionage “heightened [her family’s] sense of difference.”¹⁴² Deborah Dash Moore, in her 1988 article “Reconsidering the Rosenbergs: Symbol and Substance in Second Generation American Jewish Consciousness,” aids in contextualizing Brodtkin’s comment, writing that during the Rosenberg trial “at stake was an understanding of what was required of a Jew in America.”¹⁴³ With Jewish defendants, an all-Jewish legal team, a Jewish prosecutor, and a Jewish judge, the Rosenberg trial tasked a Jewish courtroom with how well they could perform their American-ness before a Gentile jury. The court case left the impression that the Jewish community as a whole was on trial as much as the Rosenbergs. Combined with the recent trauma of the Holocaust, McCarthyism and the Rosenberg trial heightened the tensions that American Jews felt in regards to their newly assigned ethnoracial status and their particularist identity as Jews. Despite enjoying social integration into the White establishment in the postwar period, an undercurrent of paranoia ran through Jewish American life in the early 1950s.

As widespread anti-communist fears died down in the late 1950s and the Civil Rights movement continued to build momentum, taking precedence in the American sociopolitical landscape, the question of Jewish American loyalty died down once again. But even in this moment of ethnoracial comfortability for American Jewry, “Jews often looked to racial liberalism as a surrogate for expressing ethnic distinctiveness, since it allowed them to identify as part of the white mainstream’s political culture without making them feel as if they had

¹⁴¹ Brodtkin 9.

¹⁴² Brodtkin 9.

¹⁴³ Deborah Dash Moore, "Reconsidering the Rosenbergs: Symbol and Substance in Second Generation American Jewish Consciousness," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 8, no. 1 (Fall 1988): <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27500639>. 22.

abandoned their legacy as a persecuted minority.”¹⁴⁴ Widespread support for the Civil Rights movement, especially in its earlier years, was publically framed by most Jewish Americans as an extension of the pro-social, liberal ethic with which the Jewish American community had come to be associated. More discreetly, Jewish Americans connected their involvement in Civil Rights work with Jewish history. While Jews frequently turned to the language of Exodus to emphasize Black-Jewish solidarity, many also linked the White supremacist aspirations of White Southerners to fascism and Nazism, more specifically. Documenting her experiences during the Civil Rights movement in “Notes from the American Revolution—1962”, published in *The Reconstructionist*, Betty Alschuler notes that, while at a bus stop in Marionsville, Kentucky, she sees a Southern White teenage boy who she imagines wearing a Nazi uniform.¹⁴⁵ Similarly, Holocaust theologian Richard Rubenstein, in another article for *The Reconstructionist* in 1963, titled “The Rabbis Visit Birmingham,” compared the Birmingham police to fascists, writing that police brutality “was fascism in everything but name.” He continues, claiming that Black people would not be “the only ones whose freedom would be lost by the continuation of enforced segregation. The white community would have to be kept under continued surveillance, lest some of its members seek opportunities for reconciliation between the community.”¹⁴⁶ Rubenstein’s quote indicates that Jewish Americans felt motivated to participate in the struggle for racial equality not only out of a sense liberal responsibility, but because they felt that their long-term safety was interconnected with the fight against racism. Jewish activists like Rubenstein understood that anti-blackness and anti-semitism were both products of White

¹⁴⁴ Goldstein 212.

¹⁴⁵ Betty Alschuler, “Notes from the American Revolution—1962,” ed. Michael E. Staub, in *The Jewish 1960s: An American Sourcebook* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 13.

¹⁴⁶ Richard Rubenstein, “The Rabbis Visit Birmingham,” ed. Michael E. Staub, in *The Jewish 1960s: An American Sourcebook* (Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2004), 28.

supremacy. While the conflict had changed, Jewish anxiety about the stability of their ethnoracial assignment remained consistent.

Together, these moments of increased anxiety for Jewish Americans over their ethnoracial assignment indicate that, despite acceptance into Whiteness, they retained a sense of Otherness. While the postwar period ushered in a new era of White liberalism that accepted Jews and other ethnic Europeans as White, the heightening of Jewish difference during and after the Holocaust left Jewish Americans scarred. In the post-Holocaust period, assimilation seemed like a fragile, half-hearted promise that could shatter at any moment. This skepticism toward assimilation produced a resurgence of Jewish particularism that was held in tension with a continued desire to disappear into the supposed cultural diversity of the United States. Against this cultural background, the comic book industry birthed a new type of superhero that communicates the tensions of the Jewish American community, caught between the liberal optimism of assimilationist rhetoric and the historical and lived experiences of Jewish Otherness.

Fallible and Feisty: A New Type of Superhero

For almost two decades, the superhero genre had been producing material entrenched in assimilationist and imperialist narratives. While superhero comics challenged the previous era's notions of Whiteness, they did so not in order to disrupt White hegemony, but to broaden the definition of Whiteness. When the Silver Age of comics kicked off in 1956 with DC's publication of *Showcase #4*, comic book heroes of the Golden Age were comfortably positioned within Whiteness—a position increasingly shared by their Jewish creators, who in the postwar period enjoyed a greater level of social and racial acceptance compared to any other decade in American history. While the racial and cultural matrixes of the postwar American sociopolitical landscape turned toward liberalism, the trauma of the Holocaust left Jewish Americans uneasy

about the promises of assimilation and generated a stronger particularist identity. Mounting Cold War tensions intensified the sense of alienation Jewish Americans experienced in their newfound Whiteness, and comic book narratives shifted to reflect this sense of social instability. As comic books incorporated more general Cold War tropes, such as “genetic mutation, accidental exposure to radioactivity, and the Space Race,” superheroes and their superpowers “were counterbalanced by deformities, disabilities, and social stigmas,”¹⁴⁷ actualizing on the comic book page characters from out of the anti-semitic imaginary. But by “turning subhuman monsters into heroes,”¹⁴⁸ comic book writers from the Silver Age, responding to a world changed by the Holocaust, complicate notions of Jewish Whiteness and challenge assimilationist rhetorics.

After almost a decade of disinterest in superhero comics, during which the industry nearly collapsed due to a combination of bad press, self-censorship, and lack of distribution, much of which resulted from the implementation of the Comics Code Authority,¹⁴⁹ the genre experienced a revival that began with *Showcase #4* in 1956, a title published by DC’s branch All-American Comics. The success of *Showcase #4* hinged on the premier of its cover character: an all-new, rebooted version of The Flash by Julius Schwartz. Following the success of Schwartz’s *The Flash*, DC pursued similar resurrections for other fan favorite characters, such as Green Lantern, Hawkman, and the Atom.¹⁵⁰ Rivaling DC, Marvel managed to relaunch their superhero lineup in 1961 with the debut issue of the *Fantastic Four*, which challenged Golden Age assumptions about the White, assimilated conformity of the superhero with their first super-monster. Rather than begin by revamping old, familiar titles, Marvel went to work crafting a new

¹⁴⁷ Charles Hatfield, *Hand of Fire: the Comics Art of Jack Kirby* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012). 116.

¹⁴⁸ Hatfield 116.

¹⁴⁹ Ryall and Tipton 19.

¹⁵⁰ Ryall and Tipton 19.

type of superhero that fit the postwar era. “Grotesque and paranoid,”¹⁵¹ the Silver Age superhero seems more like a creature from a horror comic than from the same genre as the sanitized Superman. But it was exactly the “edgy, post-nuclear amalgam of superheroes and monster comics”¹⁵² that appealed to readers during this era, which had been transformed by the horrors of the Holocaust and atomic bombings. While Schwartz might have headed the superhero revamp over at DC, writer-editor Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby over at Marvel Comics, formerly Timely, produced the majority of works for which the Silver Age is best known. Under Lee’s editorial eye, Marvel revolutionized the industry, reformulating the superhero and expanding continuity between titles beyond what any other comics company had attempted to accomplish before, eventually building out the Marvel multiverse. Yet, before Lee’s cosmic scheme brought Marvel to new heights, Kirby’s monstrous transformation of the superhero would define the Silver Age by manifesting through the superhero body the postwar anxieties of the American Jew, specifically, and the American public, more broadly.

The success of Marvel Comics during the Silver Age is most often attributed to Stan Lee, who, as Marvel’s editor-in-chief, had a hand in developing all of Marvel’s titles during this time; however, the defining features of the Silver Age—the combination of the grotesque, the technological sublime, and a cosmological mythos—owe their introduction and synthesis to Kirby. During the Golden Age, in spite of Kirby’s positive start at Timely/Marvel with the success of Captain America, financial conflict with company head Goodman led to his and Captain America co-creator Simon’s early release in 1942. Nonetheless, Kirby returned to Marvel after Simon left the comic book industry in the mid 1950s. Although Timely/Marvel had prospered during the superhero boom of the Golden Age, after the near crash of the comic book

¹⁵¹ Hatfield 100.

¹⁵² Hatfield 101.

industry following World War II, Timely/Marvel stepped back from the forefront of the industry and focused on staying afloat, following trends rather than setting them.¹⁵³ Before DC initiated the superhero comic comeback, Kirby worked with Lee and inker Dick Ayers, alongside artists Steve Ditko and Don Heck, on a series of horror and monster comics during their surge in the 1950s.¹⁵⁴ When Marvel sought to get back into the superhero game after DC's string of successful superhero titles in the late 1950s, the collaboration of these creators led to a superhero revival that "remained close to the monster comics in style and tone."¹⁵⁵

Complementing Kirby's knack for the grotesque spectacle, Lee pushed for narratives with more emotional complexity and maturity. On Marvel's transition from derivative work to innovative superheroics, Lee recalls wanting to write "the kind of characters [he] could personally relate to; they'd be flesh and blood, they'd have faults and foibles, they'd be fallible and feisty, and... inside their colorful, costumed booties, they'd still have feet of clay."¹⁵⁶ Together, Lee and Kirby would go on to create a pantheon of characters that paired monstrous forms with emotional depth, but Lee and Kirby were first given the opportunity to create such a character when Goodman tasked them with constructing a team of superheroes that could compete against DC's popular *The Justice League*. In response to Goodman's order, Lee and Kirby developed the *Fantastic Four*, a superhero team composed of Mister Fantastic, Human Torch, Invisible Girl, and the Thing. While each of these characters moves away from the pietistic morality of late Golden Age heroes, the *Fantastic Four*'s the Thing epitomizes this new type of superhero.

¹⁵³ Goulart 246, Hatfield 100.

¹⁵⁴ Goulart 248.

¹⁵⁵ Hatfield 102.

¹⁵⁶ Lee via Goulart 248.

Symbolic Ghettoization: Biopower, Hybridity, and the Grotesque

While not necessarily intentional on the part of Jewish comic book creators, the transition from superhero to super-monster signals an attempt to articulate Jewish American sociopolitical uncertainty in a post-Holocaust, post-atomic world. The Holocaust had left Jewish Americans deeply impacted by their trauma, such that it permeated their individual and communal sense of identity. Yet, the increased economic and social mobility of Jewish Americans in the postwar period prompted the spread of Jews out of the city and into the suburb. The rise of a Jewish presence in the suburban landscape seems to signal the fulfillment of assimilationist promises. But, while it allowed Jewish Americans to leave the tenement districts of the city and submerge themselves in White American culture, it contributed to a Jewish American identity that was based in the Jewish individual, rather than the spatially proximate community. Living in White suburbs, some Jewish Americans nonetheless saw themselves as set apart. As a result, Jewish particularism in the post-Holocaust period can be considered a form of symbolic ghettoization, in which Jews are physically integrated into society, but continuously threatened by the bio- and techno-politics of the Holocaust and modern anti-semitism. This experience of Jewish particularism takes physical form on the comic book page through the transformation of the superhuman into the super-monster, a hybrid being that, like the Jew, defies easy categorization.

By and large, the assimilationist aspirations of iconic Golden Age superheroes like Superman and Captain America had succeeded, paralleling the assimilatory progress of Jewish Americans in the first half of the twentieth century. On the Jewish-comics connection during twilight years of the Golden Age, Brod suggests that, like the increasingly assimilated lives of Jewish Americans, Golden Age superheroes “had become clean, safe, and suburban... now part

of the mainstream establishment more than outsiders.”¹⁵⁷ Brod’s analysis reads as a critique of Jewish and superhero assimilation, framing them as abandoning a more authentic—more *Jewish*—experience, but fails to recognize the assimilationist arguments present in the origins of the superhero. Continuing on, he claims that superhero comics of the Golden Age’s later years “lacked the energy that came from the struggles of the generation who’d come out of the city tenements,” unlike the superhero that initially birthed the Golden Age. He then contrasts this lack of energy with the Silver Age’s “return to urban grittiness” and to “the energy of the ethnic streets of New York.”¹⁵⁸ Brod’s romanticization of the Silver Age as a return to the Jewish particularity of a pre-assimilation ethnoracial identity that he associates with early Golden Age creators misconstrues developments within the comic book industry. Recognizing Stan Lee and Jack Kirby for their formative contributions to the Silver Age superhero resurgence, a point on which most, if not all, comic book scholars and historians agree, Brod further credits the Marvel writer-artist team with reinvesting in narratives of Jewish particularism. While Silver Age superhero comics, particularly those from Lee and Kirby, do resonate with some Jewish American concerns about a renewed investment in Jewish particularism through the use of hybridity and monster tropes, they speak to larger currents in Jewish American sociopolitical consciousness, rather than the personally held convictions of Silver Age comic book creators.

The problem with Brod’s statement, however, lies not with his emphasis on Jewish particularism, but with the distinction he draws between Golden and Silver Age creators, many of whom operated in both periods of comic book history. For example, both Lee and Kirby were active in the comic book industry throughout the Golden Age, and they even previously worked alongside each other when Kirby, after Captain America’s success, served as Timely’s art

¹⁵⁷ Brod 83.

¹⁵⁸ Brod 83.

director and Lee worked as an editorial assistant. By locating the Golden Age Jewish-comics connection exclusively in the tenement, Brod's nostalgia for the Jewish community of the city tenements reveals his own biases, in that it ignores the influence of the middle-class Jewish ethnoburb, from which several prominent comic book creators, namely Siegel and Shuster, hailed. Contrary to Brod's claims, the Jewish particularism of Silver Age superheroes is not a return to the Jewish tenement, but is an extension of Jewish post-Holocaust anxieties and collective trauma. Despite assimilation, the Post-Holocaust Jew undergoes a symbolic ghettoization, the trauma of the Holocaust reaffirming the immutability of Jewish difference.

This crisis of Jewish particularism not only roots itself in post-Holocaust trauma, it extends from society's hyperawareness of the nuclear threat in the post-atomic age. For Americans broadly, and Jewish American's specifically, technological advancement serves as a source of both optimism and anxiety in the post-Holocaust, Cold War era. Media produced during this time manifests the public's growing skepticism toward technology in various forms. In comic books, the origins of Silver Age superheroes, Marvel characters in particular, "invoking radioactivity and scientific accidents, reveal a fearful or at least cautionary view of emerging technologies"¹⁵⁹ that defined twentieth century modernity. Origins based on technological interference and biological disruption, such as the radioactive accident that gives the Fantastic Four their powers, draw on the Cold War's atmosphere of technological anxiety. Unlike Golden Age heroes who willingly undergo biological enhancement, such as Captain America, Silver Age characters most often find themselves the victims of atom-altering forces.

In their most grotesque forms, superheroes and super-monsters are the accidental, biological byproducts of technological progress in the postwar period. Under the modern state, "the combined force of new technologies of warfare, new administrative techniques that

¹⁵⁹ Hatfield 120.

enhanced state powers of surveillance, and new ideologies that made populations the choice object of state policies and that categorized people along the strict lines of nation and race”¹⁶⁰ enables mass scale violence by reducing the individual to a powerless nonentity. The Holocaust typifies this type of modern state violence, which “constitute[s] the ultimate fulfillment of biopolitics and surveillance that define modernity,”¹⁶¹ but the destructive power of nuclear weaponry poses a similar threat, to the extent that both types of mass killing require “the inclusion of some groups and the eradication of others who are deemed enemies.”¹⁶² Unlike Golden Age superheroes, who are invested in their Whiteness and American-ness through the internalization of colonial narratives, super-monsters embody the post-Holocaust Jewish trauma of statelessness. The differentiation of population appears in both settler colonial contexts and in the rise of modern European nation-states, which occurred in Western Europe after the French Revolution and in Eastern Europe after World War I. In *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt outlines how, in the latter situation, totalitarian regimes utilize the denationalization of stateless minorities to frame such populations as internal enemies, thus providing justification to deprive them of human rights.¹⁶³ By extension, Nazi Germany’s execution of the Holocaust relied upon the classification of Jews as a stateless, and thus, rightless minority. In the face of modern state violence, the super-monster functions as an expression and reclamation of personhood. Rendering the body totally unrecognizable, the transformation of the superhero into the super-monster rejects the techno-political processes of the modern state that reduce

¹⁶⁰ Eric D. Weitz, "The Modernity of Genocides," ed. Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan, in *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 54.

¹⁶¹ Weitz 54.

¹⁶² Weitz 59.

¹⁶³ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1985), 269-272.

individuals into faceless, rightless populations. Through the literal dehumanization of the body, the super-monster calls attention to its humanity.

Dually hybridized through technological intervention and through the conflict of Jewish American identity as something both assimilated and particular, the super-monster responds to postwar trauma through the continued negotiation of Jewish-American Otherness in the American sociopolitical landscape. By introducing super-monsters to the superhero genre, Silver Age comic books capture the hybridity of Jewish trauma and identity through the super-monster's hybridization of genre. Lee and Kirby's "early Marvel superhero stories were a hybrid of heroics, drive-in sci-fi, and fantastic horror,"¹⁶⁴ capturing and capitalizing on the sense of technological dread that permeated the Cold War period. Combining elements of science fiction and horror with superheroics, Lee and Kirby test not only the boundaries the superhero genre had established over two decades prior, they further question the boundaries of the human.¹⁶⁵ In his book, Hatfield likens the super-monster to Noël Carroll's 1990 definition of the fusion figure, outlined in *The Philosophy of Horror* and based upon Freud's collective figure, which he describes as "a composite figure that 'unites attributes held to be categorically distinct and/or at odds in the cultural scheme of things unambiguously one, spatio-temporally discrete entity.'"¹⁶⁶ In other words, the fusion figure transgresses categorical distinctions, such as hero/horror, human/inhuman, man/monster.¹⁶⁷

The super-monster executes these categorical transgressions through the genre in which it's positioned and through the deviancy of its body. While the enactment of violence *through* the White superhero body functions as a means of regulating the superhero's race, the bio- and

¹⁶⁴ Hatfield 103.

¹⁶⁵ Hatfield 116.

¹⁶⁶ Hatfield 117, Carroll, Noël. *The Philosophy of Horror*. New York: Routledge, 1989. 43.

¹⁶⁷ Hatfield 117.

techno-political violence enacted *on* the super-monster body displaces a seemingly stable ethnoracial identity. Through the interference of radioactivity, or some other bio-technological force, the super-monster body is dispossessed of Whiteness, in that its new physicality does not inhabit discrete ethnoracial categories. Just as the super-monster body reasserts the Otherness underlying the origins of the superhero, the comic book as a medium similarly defies racial stasis through its queering of the body. The comic book differs from other expressive mediums in its hybridity, functioning as both visual and literary; thus, it “represents a site of departure for typical ways of thinking about and categorizing the body.”¹⁶⁸ Because “a comic’s sequentially is metonymical, consisting of interrelated panels depicting isolated, *static* moments that must stand in for an entire series of actions,”¹⁶⁹ the fragmentation and objectification of the superhero body across panels results in a hybridization that draws the superhero’s Otherness to the forefront. Although Superman’s enactment of violence, in its projection of White masculinity, represents the struggle “to contain one’s Jewishness so that it conforms to whiteness,”¹⁷⁰ “the sheer *otherness* of the superhero body—its strange powers, its anatomical exaggerations, its continual reconceptualizations—” resists, producing a lingering sense of Otherness. Although the Whiteness of the classic superhero attempts to stabilize the queerness and visual-textual hybridity of the comic book page, there are moments when such stability lapses. For instance, during Captain America’s metamorphosis, his body continuously disrupts the distinctness of the page’s panels, bursting forth into the gutter as it swells in size in an almost grotesque transformation. Yet, unlike Captain America, whose Whiteness and American-ness is eventually

¹⁶⁸ Aaron Taylor, ““He’s Gotta Be Strong, and He’s Gotta Be Fast, and He’s Gotta Be Larger Than Life”: Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 2 (2007): doi:10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00382.x). 347.

¹⁶⁹ Taylor 348.

¹⁷⁰ Brodtkin 166.

stabilized through the completion of his transformation, the super-monster body remains queer, unable to assimilate into Whiteness.

Furthermore, Carroll identifies the Thing as extending from the composite animal structures of the folk imagination, comparing him to medieval gargoyles and Lamassu, entities of Assyrian origin depicted most frequently as winged lions.¹⁷¹ Hatfield, meanwhile, more explicitly links the Thing to the Jewish myth of the golem, a creature with biblical roots that gained popularity in the eighteenth century throughout Central Europe. In most iterations of the myth, the most popular version being Rabbi Loew's Golem of Prague, a rabbi forms the golem out of clay, either to have him perform simple tasks or to safeguard the community against pogroms. Although Lee and Kirby's the Thing does not feature the golem's more explicitly Jewish features, his brownish-orange, rocky skin and hulking form evokes the clay figure of Jewish myth. Thus, the Thing, through his own grotesque form and through his association with the golem, transgresses the categories of living/unliving, man/golem, and hero/horror.¹⁷² With the Thing's visual similarity to the golem, considering the super-monster as a manifestation of post-Holocaust trauma and Jewish American ethnoracial anxiety becomes increasingly poignant. As the formative super-monster, the Thing's hybridity of being, situated in a hybridization of the superhero, science fiction, and horror genres, conveys the layered and conflicted experience of a Whitened Jewish American identity.

Super-Human to Super-Freak

Fantastic Four #1, published in 1961, not only solidified Marvel Comics as a brand under Stan Lee's editorial leadership, it reimagined the entire superhero genre. In *Fantastic Four*

¹⁷¹ Carroll 45.

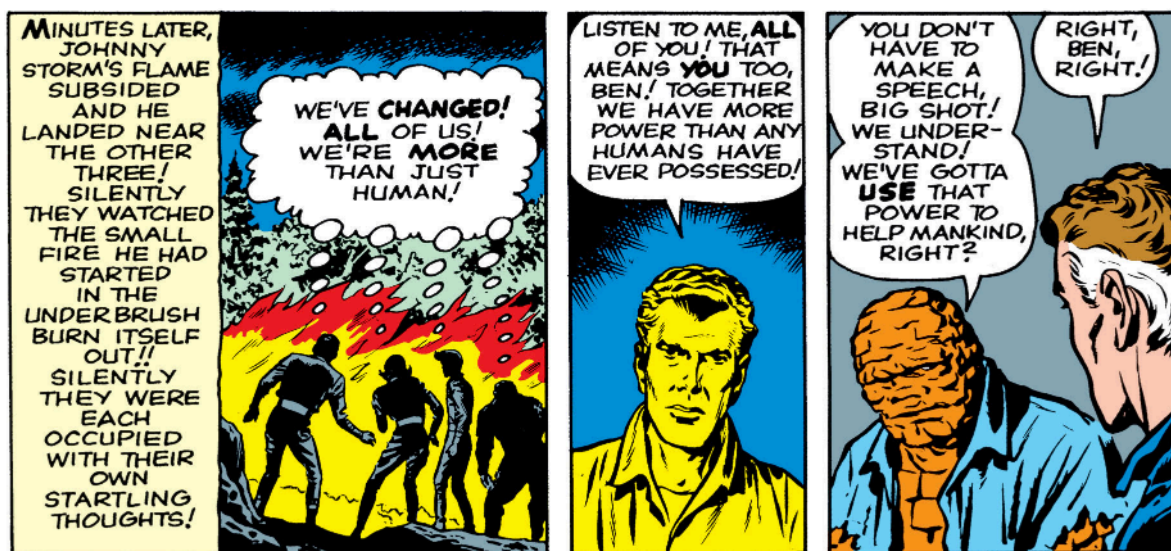
¹⁷² Hatfield 117.

#1, writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby, alongside un-credited inker George Klein, explore changing ideas about science, masculinity, and identity in the Cold War American sociopolitical landscape. The emergence of the monster, as both hero and villain, in superhero comics reflects a new, alternative means of understanding the self in relation to society. While *Fantastic Four* #1 details the exploits of the Fantastic Four team as they face off against the villainous Mole Man and his monstrous pawns on the mythic Monster Isle, the issue also provides the Fantastic Four's origin story. In this moment of transformation, spanning pages 11-13, Lee and Kirby demonstrate how the characters re-conceptualize and locate themselves within the category of the monstrous. On page 13 in particular, Lee and Kirby utilize the page and the characters to negotiate conflicting conceptions of personhood in the post-atomic, post-Holocaust age. Throughout the page, Lee and Kirby challenge the constructs of the superhero and the super-monster through the page layout, character imagery, and text. Ultimately, in this page, Lee and Kirby reframe the superhero, as well as themselves, through the lens of the monstrous, radically mutated by the traumas and anxieties of a post-World War II world.



At first glance, page 13 appears relatively conventional in its formulation, but minor and unique adjustments to the layout of the grid, alongside the framing of individual panels and their contents, enhances the narrative themes of the page. Although the standard grid follows a 3x3 pattern, *Fantastic Four #1* most often employs a variation where one row contains only two panels. Page 13, however, can be read as returning to the 3x3 format or as containing one extra, text-only panel. In both cases, page 13 deviates from the standard of the comic at the height of

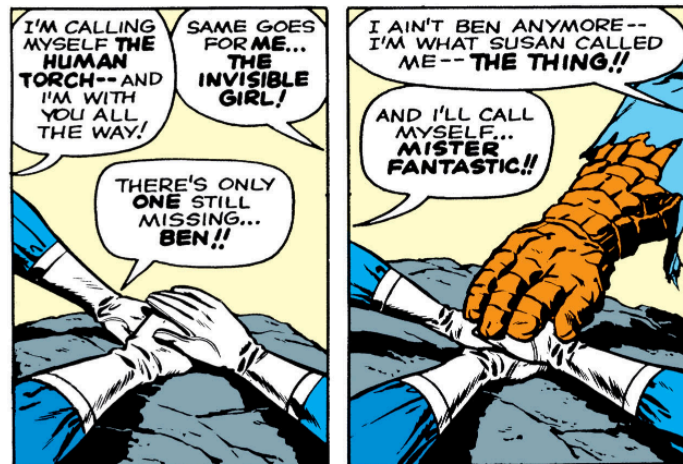
the Fantastic Four's origin story, just as the scientifically mysterious cosmic rays transform the team members of the Fantastic Four into deviant, not-quite-human beings. Additionally, the page's grid consists of a series of smaller panels that are read in quick succession, which mimics the intense and adrenaline-driven scene as the Fantastic Four attempt to make sense of their newfound powers. Drawing the attention of the reader amid the chaos of the page, the centrally framed Dr. Reed Richards preaches to his compatriots about the potential of their newly acquired powers. Backlit by a striking blue hue and encircled by inky black shadows, Kirby frames Richards alone as worthy of individual status, whereas the previous panel alternatively depicts the characters as a team, united by their atomic metamorphoses. By highlighting the individuality and superhuman-ness of Richards, Lee and Kirby position him alongside the superheroes of the Golden Age. While masculinity is defined less by a chiseled frame and dashing looks, when compared to iconic Golden Age superheroes like Superman and Captain America, Richards nonetheless embodies a new iteration of American masculinity similarly rooted in a sense of individuality and authority.



Meanwhile, Lee and Kirby contrast the super-heroic masculinity of Richards with the monstrous transformation of Ben Grimm. Although Johnny Storm refers to both Richards and Grimm as monsters in the first panel of the page, Kirby's depiction of the body, on its own and in one character's position to another, tells a different story that emphasizes the grotesqueness of Grimm's altered form. In the panel prior to Richards' individual shot, the Fantastic Four is shown gazing together at a fire ignited by Johnny's flaming body, while they contemplate their own superhuman powers and bodily changes. Grimm, however, stands furthest to the right, partially cut out of the frame and entirely obscured in shadows. This position signals his difference from the group and his

opposition to Richards, who stands on the left side, once again centrally located within the panel. The panel at the end of the row continues to underscore the juxtaposition of Richards and Grimm.

While talking with Richards, Grimm



faces the viewer from a $\frac{1}{4}$ view, slightly hunched in a diminutive and submissive posture, despite his imposing figure. Within the layout of the page, this depiction of Grimm is positioned directly next to the central portrayal of Richards, the only space between them the gutter that separates the two panels. This placement within the grid allows the reader to interpret not only the separate implications of Richards' transformation into a superhero and Grimm's mutation into a monster, but it encourages the reader to place them in comparison with one another. Shifting from the dichotomous portrayal of Richards and Grimm, the next two panels orient Grimm's position within the team as an outsider. The two panels show each team member placing their hands

together as a sign of solidarity, with Grimm being the last to join. His hand, orange, rocky, and enlarged, stands out against those of his teammates, whose hands are all indistinguishable in their identical blue and white suits. Thus, even though Grimm participates in the collective identity of the Fantastic Four team, his permanent physical difference continues to set him apart. Finally, in the last panel, shadows obscure only Richard's and Grimm's faces, hinting not only at their rivalry, but that their conflicting identities remain unresolved. Unlike during the Golden Age, where Richards' positioning as a traditional superhero would have gone unquestioned, this Silver



Age comic demonstrates that the superhero is henceforth always positioned in relation to the monstrous.

Complementing Kirby's oppositional rendering of Richards' and Grimm's internalization of their super self, Lee's dialogue further compels the reader to reorient their ideas of superheroes through the events of this page. When Johnny refers to his friends as monsters, he locates their grotesqueness, their monstrosity as a side effect of atom-altering cosmic rays. While, like many other superheroes, the origin of the Fantastic Four can be characterized as the result of an otherworldly force, it can likewise be attributed to an atomic power

that renders the body permeable. In different ways, each of their powers results from and offers protection against atomic forces. For example, the cosmic rays transform Grimm into a golem-like being with rocky skin that appears nearly impermeable, while Richards' body is transmuted into an elastic, absorptive material. The discovery of their powers leads to the team simultaneously remarking to themselves that they are now "more than just human," and the ambiguity of this statement allows each character to form their own sense of superhuman-ness.

For Richards and for the others, they reframe the monstrosity of their altered selves through a superhuman and superhero framework. But for Grimm, his self-conception occupies a more liminal space that positions him closer to the monstrous. As the Fantastic Four adopt their superhero identities, they take on a new persona, referring to themselves as The Human Torch, The Invisible Girl, Mister Fantastic, and the Thing. Yet, everyone but Grimm states that they will “call” themselves by this name, suggesting the intertwining of their original and superhero identities. Grimm, instead, states that he “ain’t Ben anymore” once becoming the Thing; his monstrous transformation entirely reshapes his understanding of who and what he is, positioning him as an outsider within the group and society at large. Among these instances where the dialogue explores the Fantastic Four’s relationships to their transformations, this final scene articulates how postwar technologies inspired tensions between the superheroic and the monstrous. Grimm’s reconceptualization of the altered self not only investigates fears regarding atomic energy and scientific unknowns, it demonstrates a shift toward the monstrous both inside and outside comics.

By placing *Fantastic Four #1* within its historical context, as a postwar narrative, the reconceptualization of the hero *as* the monster may be identified as a negotiation of Jewish identity in the 1960s. Considering that both writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby come from Jewish backgrounds, one can conceive that the Fantastic Four’s negotiations between superhero and super-monster mirror an internalized conflict within the creators regarding Jewish assimilation and particularism. Though not necessarily an intentionally introspective work, *Fantastic Four #1* nonetheless offers a look into the effects of the Holocaust on American Jewish identity. While Jews faced marginalization within American society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it was often easier for Jewish men to negotiate their position of societal

power through expressions of masculinity. As a result, comics by Jewish writers, artists, and editors during the Golden Age explore themes of duality and masculinity, as evident with Superman. But during the war and during the Holocaust, Jewish difference was brought to the forefront of the global stage. Ben Grimm/the Thing, then, represents how Jews in the post-Holocaust period saw themselves within society, as monsters among men, unable to escape their Otherness. Thus, *Fantastic Four #1*, through its comparison of Richards and Grimm, provides insight into how masculinity and power became tools, especially for Jewish Americans, in the negotiation of societal difference. But while Richards, Susan, and Johnny are able to maintain some sense of human-ness, in addition to their new, superhuman powers, Grimm is transformed by the modern age into a monster.

Setting the tone for the Silver Age, Lee and Kirby's introduction of the super-monster on page 13 of *Fantastic Four #1* found resonance among audiences, both young and old, due to its expression of post-atomic and post-Holocaust anxieties. By situating the Fantastic Four along a spectrum of superhuman to super-monster through the visual and textual devices of page layout, dialogue, and imagery, Lee and Kirby give voice to the myriad of identities that emerged in the postwar era. Furthermore, Lee and Kirby's Jewish upbringing is etched onto this page as the Fantastic Four negotiate what it means to be a monster. In *Fantastic Four #1*, the role of the monster, best articulated through the character Ben Grimm/the Thing, interrogates the hyper-American, individualistic masculinity of the traditional superhero. Although Lee and Kirby situate Dr. Reed Richards as being akin to the Golden Age superhero, his identity exists not in a void, but specifically in relation to Grimm's monstrosity. Therefore, page 13 of *Fantastic Four #1* facilitates the birth of a new superhero, one that can only be interpreted through the monster.

While the visual-textual positioning of Gimm and Richards comments on the emerging differences between the Golden Age superhero and the Silver Age super-monster, at the core of Grimm and Richards' division are the differences between Jewish American ethnoracial assignment and identity from the pre-war era to the postwar period. *Fantastic Four #1* neither rejects the assimilationist ideologies characteristic of the Golden Age, nor does it take Jewish Whiteness as a static, immutable truth. Instead, the comic book places Jewish assimilationist beliefs in dialogue with Jewish particularism. The development of the super-monster as a metaphor for a particularist Jewish American identity, circumscribed by Holocaust trauma and post-Holocaust anxiety does not, however, equate Jewishness with monstrosity. Rather, it manifests the scars of the Holocaust through the body of the super-monster, reclaiming anti-semitic tropes that frame the Jewish body as not only set apart from Whiteness, but as a wholly inhuman, grotesque Otherness.

Conclusion

Over the course of the twentieth century, the superhero has served as a manifestation of Jewish American negotiations with ethnoracial assignment and identity, at times, drawing them closer to Whiteness and, at other moments, challenging assimilationist rhetoric. The themes and characterizations of Golden Age superheroes like Superman and Captain America assert an Americanized, and thus, Whitened identity, which both mirrored and helped to realize the assimilationist ambitions of their creators and the Jewish American community, more broadly. With uncertainty regarding Jewish ethnoracial assignment dominating Jewish American relations in the early twentieth century, superhero comic books came to serve as a forum for prefiguring Jewish Whiteness through the textual and visual erasure of Otherness. The introductory issue of *Superman*, however, demonstrates the lingering sense of Otherness experienced by Jewish Americans through the internalized conflicts of Superman's multiple identities. Although Superman himself represents a claim to Whiteness, his shadow hints at the conflicts of a hybridized Jewish American identity.

Only a few decades later, during the Silver Age, the assimilationist position of the wider Jewish American was challenged by the events of the Holocaust and the resulting residual trauma, leading to the rise of the super-monster in the comic book industry. Unlike Superman and Captain America, who represent assimilationist appeals to Whiteness, the super-monster reimagines Otherness by co-opting and reassembling anti-semitic caricatures. In other words, the Silver Age materializes the hybridized Otherness of the shadow in the super-monster, exemplified by Lee and Kirby's the Thing. What has been lurking beneath the surface of superheroes has been drawn out by shifts in Jewish American social position and ethnoracial identity, despite the rise of a Whitened, Jewish middle class in the postwar years.

Considering together major works of the Golden and Silver Ages of comic books illuminates the socially and culturally embedded experiences of comic book creators from these periods. From this perspective, the defining themes and characters of these two periods reflect not only broader social currents within mainstream society, but relay the social, political, and cultural negotiations of the Jewish American community to which many creators belonged. Although such negotiations with and productions of an Americanized identity changed over time to address the issues of a particular era—namely the pre- and post-war periods, which correlate roughly to the Golden and Silver Ages, respectfully—, comic books reiterated, reinforced, and sometimes challenged the Jewish American ethnoracial position in American society. Unlike the amorphous arguments made by Brod, Fingerth, and Weinstein, which similarly cast superheroes as metaphorically Jewish, the socio-historical contextualization of superhero comic books reveals that superheroes are not themselves directly Jewish. Instead, Jewish comic book creators, specifically, and the Jewish American community, more broadly, repeatedly attempted to redefine the limits of their ethnoracial assignment and identity through the figure of the superhero. Despite a greater number of non-Jewish creators working within the comic book industry, superheroes continue to be shaped through the Jewish-comics connection of their past, with ongoing questions of assimilation, ethnoracial assignment, and national identity defining the superhero genre.

Bibliography

- Alschuler, Betty. "Notes from the American Revolution—1962." Edited by Michael E. Staub. In *The Jewish 1960s: An American Sourcebook*, 12-18. Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2004.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York, NY: Harcourt Brace, 1985.
- Brod, Harry. *Superman Is Jewish?: How Comic Book Superheroes Came to Serve Truth, Justice, and the Jewish-American Way*. New York: Free Press, 2012.
- Brodin, Karen. *How Jews Became White Folks & What That Says about Race in America*. 7th ed. Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010.
- Carroll, Noël. *The Philosophy of Horror*. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Chambliss, Julian C., and William L. Svitvasky. "From Pulp Hero to Superhero: Culture, Race, and Identity in American Popular Culture, 1900-1940." *Rollins Scholarship Online*, October 2008. https://scholarship.rollins.edu/as_facpub/2.
- Coogan, Peter. *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre*. MonkeyBrain, 2006.
- Dash Moore, Deborah. "Reconsidering the Rosenbergs: Symbol and Substance in Second Generation American Jewish Consciousness." *Journal of American Ethnic History* 8, no. 1 (Fall 1988): 21-37. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27500639>.
- Fingeroth, Danny. *Disguised as Clark Kent: Jews, Comics, and the Creation of the Superhero*. London: Continuum, 2007.
- Galaver, Chris. "The Imperial Superhero." *PS: Political Science & Politics* 47, no. 1 (January 2014): 108-111. doi:doi:10.1017/S1049096513001649.

Galaver, Chris. "The Ku Klux Klan and the Birth of the Superhero." *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 4, no. 2 (December 10, 2012): 191-208.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/21504857.2012.747976>.

Goldstein, Eric L. *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006.

Goulart, Ron. *Comic Book Encyclopedia: The Ultimate Guide to Characters, Graphic Novels, Writers, and Artists in the Comic Book Universe*. New York: HarperEntertainment, 2007.

---. *Great American Comic Books*. Lincolnwood, IL: Publications International, 2001.

Hatfield, Charles. *Hand of Fire the Comics Art of Jack Kirby*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012.

Jeffery, Scott. *The Posthuman Body in Superhero Comics: Human, Superhuman, Transhuman, Post/human*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016. https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-54950-1_11.

JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh: The Traditional Hebrew Text and the New JPS Translation. 2nd ed. Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 2003.

Kirby, Jack and Joe Simon, *Captain America Comics #1*, New York, NY: DC Comics, 1941.

Kirby, Jack, and Stan Lee, *Fantastic Four #1*, New York, NY: Marvel Comics, 1961.

Lund, Martin. *Re-Constructing the Man of Steel: Superman 1938–1941, Jewish American History, and the Invention of the Jewish–Comics Connection*. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2018.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. New York: Vintage Books, a Division of Random House, 2019.

- Rubenstein, Richard. "The Rabbis Visit Birmingham." Edited by Michael E. Staub. In *The Jewish 1960s: An American Sourcebook*, 23-30. Lebanon, NH: Brandeis University Press, 2004.
- Shuster, Joe and Jerry Siegel, *Superman, Action Comics #1*, New York, NY: DC Comics, 1938.
- Taylor, Aaron. "'He's Gotta Be Strong, and He's Gotta Be Fast, and He's Gotta Be Larger Than Life': Investigating the Engendered Superhero Body." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 40, no. 2 (2007): 344-60. doi:10.1111/j.1540-5931.2007.00382.x.
- Weitz, Eric D. "The Modernity of Genocides." Edited by Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan. In *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*, 53-73. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Wilson, John. "10 Things Everyone Forgets About DC's Dr. Occult." CBR. December 16, 2019. Accessed March 2021. <https://www.cbr.com/dc-doctor-occult-forgotten-facts-comics/>.
- zionistmooncolony, April 6 2016, "comment on," *The Last Safe Haven in the Diaspora*, <https://zionistmooncolony.tumblr.com/post/142365152299/fromchaostocosmos-when-superman-man-of-steel>.