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Among Them but Not One of Them: A Xenological Exploration of the Otherness and Power of DC Comics' Superman

Abstract: With a view to exploring the relationship between DC Comics' Superman's engagement with posthumanism and science fiction, as well as posthumanism and planetarity, this paper will provide an analysis of various xenological aspects of the character, as an uncanny alien, in order to explore a range of conclusions that can be drawn from my central hypothesis that Superman is a character that is simultaneously a representation of onto-existential familiarity as well as Otherness and power that ultimately disrupts anthropocentric and geocentric frames of reference.

Keywords: Xenology; Superman; Power; Identity; Otherness.

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I. Introduction

While the preceding and, most likely, the following decade will continue to engage with the various onto-existential issues and debates surrounding the concepts of posthumanism, drawing on philosophical, scientific, theological, anthropological, sociological, artistic, cinematic, literary and theoretical frameworks and approaches in order to do so, the fundamental aspects of DC Comics' character Superman's myths have been engaged with posthuman speculation for nearly a century. With a view to exploring the relationship between the character's engagement with posthumanism and science fiction, as well as posthumanism and planetarity, this paper will provide an analysis of various xenological aspects of the character, as an uncanny alien, in order to explore a range of conclusions that can be drawn from my central hypothesis that Superman is character that is simultaneously a representation of onto-existential familiarity, as well as Otherness and power that ultimately disrupts anthropocentric and geocentric frames of reference. These will include providing a brief outline of contemporary critical approaches to xenological



speculation, so as to situate my own conclusions about the character within a wider stream of thought concerning onto-existential difference. I will then move on to discuss one of the central shortcomings of the study of radical alterity, namely the problem of alien unknowability specifically, the relationship between unknowability and Superman's multiplicity of identities and onto-existential instability.

In science fiction studies and criticism, the term xenology refers to a hypothetical science whose goal is the study and analysis of speculative extra-terrestrial societies as developed and inhabited by alien life forms. As such, xenology finds its terrestrial analogue in ethnology. Examples of xenological speculation in fiction and literary criticism include: Fredric Jameson's *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005); C. J. Cherryh's *Foreigner* series (1993-present); Donal Kingsbury's *The Moon Goddess and the Son* (1986); and Ursula K. Le Guin's *Planet of Exile* (1966). Furthermore, related to xenology is the term xenophilosophy, which appears in the work of German Indologist Wilhelm Halbfass. In Halbfass's cultural studies, his particular usage of the term xenology refers to the largely ethnographic study of how a culture positively or negatively defines and reacts to/against individuals or groups outside, alien or Other to it. I have elected to use xenological speculation as a strategy to explore the character's diegetic power and Otherness because such a strategy not only centralizes the fact that Superman is an alien, but allows for a fuller exploration of the tensions and interactions between extra-terrestrials and human beings within the context of the diegetic earths of the DC multiverse.

Another important term in this paper is "it". Throughout this paper, I will refer to Superman as "it". The convention of referring to the character using the pronoun "he" already performs various kinds of reductive violence that I argue cannot be overlooked. "He" superimposes anthropocentric codes, qualities and categories of being onto a being that is genetically and philosophically Other to them. As such, the third-person neuter pronoun "it" is the most accurate and basic term with which to discuss any ontological or existential aspects of the character. The fact that Superman is an alien is taken as a first principle here. It is an extra-terrestrial creature that expresses many seemingly identical superficial traits with human beings that, however convincing, must not overlook the fact of Superman's essential difference from any and everything human. Furthermore, "he", when considered fully, only accurately refers to one third of the personae "worn" by "Superman/Kal-El," namely "Clark Kent." I have privileged the use of the pronoun "it" in order to allow the being in question a greater degree of existential license, which I argue better allows us to apprehend what it is or can be without violently inscribing anthropocentric privileging and its various agendas onto the power it possesses and the Otherness that constitutes it.

My justification for discussing Superman by using the term "it" is due in part to the underlying ethic of this thesis being xenological. If, for example, I am to consider Jameson's xenological approach to reading texts that feature alien beings seriously, then I think that the retention of the term "it" is important because it highlights the fact that Superman is an alien. Regardless of the methodological approach one brings



to bare on the character, regardless of how complex or nuanced, it would not change the fact that, diegetically speaking, the character is an alien. The combination of this fact and my wish to maintain a careful sensitivity toward xenological appraisals of Otherness would call for a strategy that does not hem up the onto-existential complexities of the character by simply referring to an alien being as “he” because it looks like a robust human man. To do so would simply be an inaccurate retention of anthropocentric privileging, a privileging that the central hypothesis seeks alternatives to. To be clear, I do not believe that referring to Superman as “it” objectifies the character. On the contrary, I argue it draws attention to the fact that the character represents an interesting alternative to any human/inhuman dialectic precisely because it is *both* in interesting and challenging ways.

II. A Brief Outline of Xenological Speculation

In order to parse the concepts of Superman’s disruptivity in terms of power and Otherness xenologically, which I argue also necessarily involves identity, I will open this chapter by providing an overview of xenological speculation. The term “xenology” has been used variably to describe and discuss the tension between concepts including difference, Otherness, and the interaction between the known and the unknown, be it abstract or uncannily familiar. In *A Greek-English Lexicon* (1968), Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott state that the terms “xenology” derives from the Greek word *xenos*, meaning “foreign”, “alien”, “strange”, and/or “unusual”

in its noun form. As an adjective, the term means “stranger”, “wanderer”, and/or “refugee”. Alternatively, in *India and Europe: Perspectives on Their Spiritual Encounter* (1981), Wilhelm Halbfass uses the term to describe the cultural study of ethnocentric views held by different societies regarding different classes or types of foreigner. Within Halbfass’s Indological study, xenology refers to the ways that a given culture perceives, defines, and understands individuals or cultures alien or Other to it.

As such, Halbfass’ xenology is the study of the various ways “self” and “Other” are defined within a historical context of colliding cultures. According to Brian Stableford’s *Science Fact and Science Fiction: An Encyclopaedia* (2006), xenology can also be defined as “an associate concept of exobiology, referring to a hypothetical science of extra-terrestrial, especially alien, society” with “analogical and extrapolative relationship to ethnology which is similar to that between exobiology and biology.”¹ Similarly, Robert A. Freitas Jr.’s *Xenology: An Introduction to the Scientific Study of Extra-terrestrial Life, Intelligence, and Civilization* (1979) provides an exhaustive outline of the principles of xenology, including the following interests and sub-disciplines:

the history of the idea of extra-terrestrial life; comparative planetology, stars, and galaxies; xenobiology (definition/origin of life, exotic biochemistries, and possible alien bioenergetics, biomechanics, sensations, reproduction, and intelligence); extra-terrestrial civilizations (energy sources, biotechnology, interstellar travel, alien weapons, planetary and stellar engineering, xenosociology, and extra-terrestrial

governments and culture); interstellar communication techniques; and the sociology, legal issues, and appropriate interaction protocols pertaining to First Contact.²

There are numerous other speculative models that address the religious, scientific, cultural, legal, and ecological outcomes of making contact with extra-terrestrials that are not, strictly speaking, defined as xenology, but are xenological in praxis. For example, Albert A. Harrison's "Fear, Pandemonium, Equanimity and Delight: Human Responses to Extra-terrestrial Life" (2011) examines a wide range of possible contact scenarios, including the interaction between extra-terrestrial and terrestrial civilizations based on mutual advancement, to the total subjugation of humanity. Other scholars engaging in xenological speculation suggest that such polarized scenarios depend on the level of aggression displayed toward humanity by alien species/civilizations, such as James W. Deardorff's "Possible Extra-terrestrial Strategy for Earth" (1986), the nature of extra-terrestrial ethics, such as Seth D. Baum's "Universalist Ethics in Extra-terrestrial Encounter" (2010), and the biological compatibility between extra-terrestrials and human beings, such as Steven Dick's "Extra-terrestrials and Objective Knowledge" (2000), in which he argues that the biological constituents for the encountering species' faculties of data processing, data delivery, and comprehension would determine the nature and rate of said encounter.

Some of the scenarios developed by cognitive psychologists, sociologists, physicists, astronomers, and futurists predict, broadly speaking, positive and

collaborative outcomes for humanity following such contacts. Harrison and Dick go as far as to suggest that such encounters might result in an advanced extra-terrestrial civilization imparting equally advanced knowledge to humankind in areas currently inaccessible to our species. In their paper "Contact: Long-Term Implication for Humanity" (2000), they speculate that such areas could include T.O.E (the theory of everything), faster-than-light travel, and the successful and safe manipulation of dark matter. Similarly, Allen Tough's 1986 essay "What Role Will Extra-terrestrials Play in Humanity's Future?" posits that extra-terrestrials interceding in human affairs might do so to prevent humanity from being destroyed by catastrophe and extinction-level events such as nuclear war or asteroid impacts; offering advice to humanity and its leaders as to how to avoid conflict and potential destruction, albeit dependent on the widespread consent of humanity; or forcibly aiding humanity to avoid destruction against its will. However, in Tough's text *When SETI Succeeds: The Impact of High-Information Contact* (2000), such an encounter with a highly morally, ethically and technologically advanced extra-terrestrial species, regardless of how collaborative or co-operative, is speculated to potentially lead to an atrophy of humanity's sense of achievement within the context of its own history.

Conversely, other scholars and scientists have posited scenarios in which the nature of the encounter is hostile. In Michiu Kaku's 2009 *Physics of the Impossible: A Scientific Exploration into the World of Phasers, Force Fields, Teleportation, and Time Travel* as well as in Geoff Boucher's 2012 article for *Los Angeles Times Hero*



Complex titled “Alien Encounters’: A Few Sage (and Sagan) Thoughts on Invasion,” both texts posit that any extra-terrestrial species able to safely locate and navigate to Earth would be able to easily destroy human civilization. Other contact scenario models and speculative frameworks focus on a specific area of human civilization that would be effected by an encounter with an extra-terrestrial species/civilization. These include theology, such as Ted Peters’ essay “The Implications of the Discovery of Extra-terrestrial Life for Religion” (2011); and the possibility of re-emerging or altogether new political power struggles within national and international governing bodies as speculated by Michael A. G. Michaud in *Contact with Alien Civilizations: Our Hopes and Fears about Encountering Extra-terrestrials* (2007).

According to Freitas Jr., xenology is both a composite and speculative analytical framework. It incorporates various terrestrial scientific and theoretical concepts, praxes, and disciplines ranging from semiology to ethnography, cosmology to fashion, theoretical physics to law. Freitas Jr. presents the various scientific and philosophical problems, questions and theories inherent to xenological thinking in an accessible and thought-provoking manner. That said, the text’s inability to answer the very same questions it raises is testament to the implicit problem of the concept of radical Otherness. For all Freitas Jr.’s thorough research and nuanced application thereof to questions and ideas of radical Otherness, the conclusions he draws in many, if not all of his text’s twenty-seven chapters, are speculative. In other words, what Fredric Jameson calls “The Unknowability Thesis” in chapter 8 of his text *Archaeology*

of the Future (2005), which is at the core of xenological speculation, simultaneously propels and undermines xenological inquiry itself. Essentially, “The Unknowability Thesis” concerns the content and limits of representation of alien otherness. While Jameson directs his analysis of the problem of radical Otherness in terms of unknowability primarily toward Stanislaw Lem’s sentient “ocean”-being in *Solaris* (1961), his discussion of “First Contact” with alien beings and the onto-existential and epistemological limits of subsequent human attempts to understand it also relates to Superman as a science fictional representation of alien Otherness. As such, the ethic of xenology has no recourse but to assume that Terran science has some purchase, however small, on basic universal principles and proceed accordingly. With that in mind, I have chosen to refer to the term and its substantive meanings, which essentially all refer to Otherness and difference, as a means of highlighting the thematic and narratological importance of Superman’s Otherness within the context of the character’s diegetic mythos and its representation of the interaction between human and non-human beings.

The problem of unknowability is primarily twofold. Firstly, humanity has not encountered extra-terrestrials extradiegetically, meaning that Otherness manifest in the idea of alien life-forms remains radically unknown. Secondly, despite the wide range of extra-terrestrials diegetically represented in science fiction, regardless of how uncanny or abstract, human conceptions of “alienness” are always-already reducible to anthropic frames of reference, and are always-already portrayed through fundamentally anthropic systems of thought and



action. Similarly, Stableford comments on the underlying anthropocentrism of xenological inquiry, stating that

ethnological perspectives took over from theological ones in the further extrapolation of long-standing discussions of the plurality of worlds, reconfiguring the notion of the inhabitants of other worlds as “alternative humankinds”. In a sense, the move is an extrapolation of the generalizing impulse of anthropology, viewing cultural development as a universal phenomenon of which the currently available examples happen to be human ones.³

Jameson also cautions against xenology’s latent predisposition toward anthropocentrism in *Archaeology of the Future* (2005). Freitas Jr. and Jameson both state, implicitly and explicitly, that the idea of the intercession of an alien being into a human history necessitates, even on a rudimentary basis, the production of new qualities, new ways of perceiving and new ways of being in ways that do not, in the attempt to produce descriptions, concepts, or symbols for these new qualities of being, simply reconfigure terrestrial concepts in alternative combinations in order to signify for life-forms that originate outside their frame of reference.

On the one hand, the concept of a radically different mode of life that does not inextricably refer to terrestrial spaces, praxes and histories in any way is a scientifically, philosophically, aesthetically and narratologically fascinating and attractive idea. Such hypothetical and radically Other modes of being simultaneously speak to

humanity’s fears and desires concerning power, powerlessness and onto-existential freedom in terms of the complex and myriad potentials of non-human being. On the other hand, xenological theories concerning Other modes of being are limited to an invariably human experience of being. There is no alien lexicon through which to think or even imagine the onto-existential experience of being Other. In short, the constituent categories typically referred to in the understanding of terrestrial forms of life named by Freitas Jr. – growth, feeding/metabolism, motility, irritability, reproduction, adaptation, and evolution – are terrestrial concepts of life. While characters like Superman expresses some but not all of the above signs-of-life, said categories of terrestrial being are too provincial to use as definitive criteria for assessing the Otherness of a Kryptonian. As a fictional representation of alien Otherness, the character Superman attests to and demonstrates these limits while, ironically, gesturing beyond them. Superman, therefore, occupies a liminal space between a representation of self (human being) and Other (alien). Despite its limits, xenology offers helpful ways of beginning to re-assess the character not only as a mild-mannered reporter, or small-town farmboy from Smallville, but as what the character is before or beneath, namely an uncanny alien being.

Jameson also refers to this representational problem as the “Chimera problem,” which refers to whether or not it is possible for human beings as they currently are to “imagine anything that is not already [...] derived from sensory knowledge (and a sensory knowledge which is that of our own ordinary human body and world).”⁴ Jameson offers two possible outcomes



regarding the Chimera problem. First, the Chimera, “the allegedly new thing, will be an ingeniously cobbled together object in which secondary features of our own world are primary in the new one.” Second, that “the new object will be pseudo-sensory alone, and in reality put together out of so many abstract intellectual semes which are somehow able to pass themselves off as sensory.”⁵ As such, the best albeit unavailable solution to the Chimera problem, and xenology by extension, is an alien lexicon. Whether or not such a solution is feasible, the latent disruption of terrestrial lexical systems by the onto-existential complexities of non-human life-forms calls to mind the necessity of new ways of speaking, conceptualizing, and symbolizing. Based on the idea of the interaction between alien life-forms with one another, this process of radical re-imagination applies not only to the thing perceived (the Other), but the perceiver (human beings) as well.

This idea, inherent in the Otherness of characters like Superman, is daunting, exciting, and terrible because it diegetically presents radical socio-economic, biological, scientific, and philosophical implications that aid in speculating on alternative ways of extradiegetic being. Though the problem of diegetically representing the Other in the form of alien life-forms presents seemingly insuperable conundrums, such attempts also present the opportunity “to be able to imagine a new [quality of being, which] is allegorical of the possibility of imagining a whole new social world.”⁶

In terms of my chosen method, when discussing Superman in terms of radical onto-existential difference or Otherness, it would seem that an appropriate strategy would be an extropian or transhumanist

approach. Extrope or Extropian(ism) refers to a set of scientific and ethical principles which focus on an approach to life that seeks to improve the human condition through the careful and ethical application of scientific and technological means. The extropian ethic is predicated on a technological constituent whereby extropian optimism and technocentric ethic suggest that the accelerated self-transformation of humanity to posthumanity will not only be technologically possible, but that it is a telos to be actively and joyously pursued. “Posthuman” is a term used by transhumanists to refer to what humanity could become if it were to succeed in using technology, hardware (for faster more durable bodies) and wetware (for improved psycho-emotional functions, including the transfer of consciousness between bodies), to overcome the limitations of the human condition.

As with xenology, there is an admittedly speculative aspect to this approach due to the fact that what a posthuman might be, do, or think is, as yet, unknown to modern science in any comprehensive way. That said, within the broad extropian ethos, the concept of “posthuman” can be contrasted with “human.” As such, posthumans could be described, broadly, as human beings, who through the ethical application of science and technology, would be able to overcome biological, neurological, and psychological imperatives that developed over thousands of years of evolutionary processes. As such, posthumans would, speculatively, be able to configure all aspects of their onto-existential conditions, from the nature of their physical form and its function, including aging and perhaps even death, their psycho-emotional



responses to phenomena and stimuli, and cognitive faculties including data processing and transmission that exceed human models heretofore experienced and understood. As such, transhumanists, extropians and futurists posit that genetic engineering, neural-computer integration, biomedicine and nanobiotechnology, regenerative medicine, and the cognitive sciences will be some of the techno-biological approaches instrumental in achieving the aforementioned transhumanist goals. Such thinkers and texts in the field include, but are not limited to, Max More (*Principles of Extropy* Version 3.11, 2003 and *Extropy: The Journal of Transhumanist Thought*, 1990); Teilhard de Chardin (*The Future of Man*, 1959); FM-2030, born Fereidoun M. Esfandiary (*Woman, Year 2000*, 1972); Robert Ettinger (*Man into Superman*, 1972); Damien Broderick (*The Judas Mandala*, 1982); Natasha Vita-More ("TransArt," 1982); Robert Pepperell (*Post-Human Condition*, 1997); and Ray Kurzweil (*Human 2.0*, 2003)

One of the primary reasons transhumanist and extropian models of speculating on radical onto-existential difference are insufficient when considering the Otherness of an alien being, albeit fictional, is based on the fact that transhumanism and extropianism rely on 1) an anthropic "base" or raw material to be 2) technologically transmuted, developed, or altered. Superman, as a fictive representation of alien Otherness within the context of the character's diegetic mythos, is 1) biologically and, therefore, onto-existentially non-human and 2) does not require technological power in order to exhibit what diegetic humans would regard as psycho-physical abilities or powers far beyond not only any human body, but any machine fashioned

by human engineering. However, being that the character is a Kryptonian, I have chosen to discuss the Otherness of Kryptonians as presented in the DC Comics hyperdiegesis by referring to xenological speculation because, though flawed, xenology attempts to maintain a sensitivity toward the onto-existential Otherness of non-human beings, and is therefore helpful in providing a basic speculative framework through which to make observations about said characters, as well as discuss them.

III. Kryptonian Xenology

Any xenological exploration of Superman as a Kryptonian must contextualize the historical representation if the character's homeworld, namely Krypton itself. Chris Roberson's "Jewel Mountains and Fire Falls: The Lost World of Krypton" appearing in *The Man from Krypton: A Closer Look at Superman*, edited by Glenn Jeffeth (2005), offers a helpful starting point. Before John Byrne and Mike Mignola's *Superman: World of Krypton* (2008), *The Krypton Chronicles* Vol. 1, No. 1-3 (September-November 1981), written by E. Nelson Bridwell, illustrated by Curt Swan, like other noteworthy examples of world-building including Frank Herbert's *Dune* (1965), rigorously and methodically detailed the diegetic representation of Kryptonian culture and history within the Superman mythos. This included appendices detailing glossaries of Kryptonian words and phrases, maps of the planet, and an annotated family tree of the House of El. The original narrative and aesthetic representation of the planet Krypton functioned incidentally in the character's burgeoning mythos. It was essentially little



more than an aesthetic footnote or space wherein which the diegetic details of Jor and Lara-El's inability to prevent the cataclysmic destruction of their world and the launching of their offspring Kal-El toward the earths of the DC multiverse took place. As a place that simply existed to be destroyed in order to facilitate the genesis of the character's terrestrial adventures, Siegel and Shuster's depiction of the planet, a distant green orb suspended in the blackness of intergalactic space, showed nothing of the planet's history, science or culture, let alone topography or biospheres. This sparsity of detail endured for two decades following the planet's original debut in *Action Comics* No. 1 (1938) due in large part to the numerous non-cohesive narrative and aesthetic representations of the planet by DC's various artist/writer teams that followed. However, a small number of creators, under the guidance of Weisinger's strong editorial vision that promoted consistency and invention regarding the diegetic representation of Superman's home world, resulted in the broad codification of the fictional planet's history, culture, language, geography, science and religion. This included the variegated approach to the provenance of Superman's powers and abilities. As Glen Weldon notes in *Superman: The Unauthorized Biography* (2013),

For thirty-two years, the comics had stuck with Siegel and Shuster's original explanation that Superman's abilities were due to his status as a member of Krypton's "super-race" of beings capable of leaping tall buildings and learning calculus while still in the nursery – and to Earth's lesser gravity. Yet in *Action* #262 (March, 1960), the

notion of a Kryptonian "super-race" goes away for good (perhaps due to Wertham's attacks?) and is replaced, for the first time, by another explanation. As Superman explains to Supergirl (in *Action Comics* #252, her debut), their powers now derive partly from Earth's lesser gravity and partly from "ultra solar rays that penetrate the Earth day and night". The idea that a yellow sun gives superpowers (and that a red one takes them away) was a late development in Superman's history, but one that has remained with him ever since – even as many other Weisinger-era innovations have fluttered in and out of continuity. This strange, detailed, pseudo-scientific apportioning of powers – the need to pore over and explain, to take nothing as read – is a major theme of Weisinger-era Superman.⁷

Much like the development of Superman itself over the character's publication history, the narrative and aesthetic development of the character's home world can be broadly divided into three stages ranging from 1934 to 1950, 1950 to 1970, and, lastly, 1970 to 1985. The first stage was marked by simplistic and uncoordinated development of the fictional planet, primarily at the hands of Superman's creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster. The second stage was marked by Weisinger's elaborative, inventive and expansive additions to the character's entire mythos. The third stage can be regarded as a period of refinement, codification and delimitation.

Throughout the first decades featuring the planet Krypton in print, "Krypton is presented in only the most cursory



fashion, with contradictory details. The reader is given very little sense of it as a living planet with a culture of its own.”⁸ The original appearance of Krypton occurred in the Superman newspaper strips drawn and illustrated by Siegel and Shuster in 1934 that never saw publication in their original form. In the twelve-part newspaper strips the duo originally intended to publish, the reader is given not only interesting insights into the origins of the character, but of its home world also. Of said twelve strips, ten were concerned with the destruction of Krypton, as well as introducing the reader to Superman’s fictional forebears Jor-El, preeminent scientist of Kandor (Krypton’s capital city), and Lara-El, its spouse.

Originally, the xenological elements of the Kryptonian species were simply hyperextensions of human faculties, as can be noted in the fact that Siegel and Shuster treated Krypton as a world ruled by hyper-evolved “super-men.”⁹ This unpublished miniseries would later be reformatted as a comic strip in which the nature and history of the planet Krypton were reduced to a single page which focused on the description of Kal-El’s powers in a diegetic terrestrial environment that broadly reflected extradiegetic socio-political, cultural and historical reality. Neither the last days of Krypton, nor Jor or Lara-El were mentioned. Krypton would only be properly named in 1939 following the publication of *Action Comics* No. 1. In *Superman* Vol. 1, No. 1 (1939), the reader is also given a diegetic explanation of the ontological effects of the differences between Kryptonian and terrestrial climates on Kryptonian physique. According to Siegel, “Superman came to Earth from the planet Krypton, whose inhabitants had evolved,

after millions of years, to physical perfection. The smaller size of our planet, with its slighter gravity pull, assists Superman’s tremendous muscles in the performance of miraculous feats of strength.”¹⁰ Though crude, this explanation offered a first step in developing a xenological profile of the fictional Kryptonian species.

In 1945, the character’s origins were retold in the debut issue of Superboy appearing in *More Fun Comics* Vol. 1, No. 101. In this text, the xenological profile of Krypton was re-assessed. While Krypton remained a technocratic planet whose social and physical infrastructures were predicated on advanced technology, it was no longer inhabited by a race of superbeings, but rather by beings seemingly indistinguishable from terrestrial humans. This marks another important aspect of the xenological profile of the Kryptonian species; namely, that “all of Superman’s abilities now stem from the fact that he is a Kryptonian on Earth, and not because all Kryptonians had been supermen.”¹¹

This problem of the unknowability, or at least undecidability, concerning Superman’s xenological onto-existentialism has also been acknowledged by writers and illustrators of the character. According to Will Murray article “Superman’s Editor Mort Weisinger” re-printed in Michael Eury’s *The Krypton Companion* (2006),

The Space Race of the late 1950s and ‘60s also forced Weisinger to stay his toes with kids who liked fantasy, but demanded a recognizable dose of realism mixed in. Students at MIT monitored the feature for violations of the laws of physics. When hundreds of letters complained about Superman



taking Lois Lane into outer space without the benefit of a pressure suit, Weisinger decreed that from that point on, Superman had to place her in a NASA-style astronaut garb... Perhaps most significantly, Mort Weisinger reinvented the Man of Steel for this increasingly sophisticated audience. "Why Should Superman fly?" he once asked rhetorically. "So he came from another planet and there's a difference in gravity. Why should he be able to fly? Why should he have X-ray vision? It's contrary to science and reason. I originated the concept that in a world circling a yellow sun his powers are multiplied, and that yellow sun gave him these abilities. There are things that originators of Superman didn't figure out; they gave us this fabulous character without explaining why all his fabulous attributes existed."¹²

The second stage of the narrative and aesthetic development of Krypton in print came at the hands of Jerry Siegel and Mort Weisinger, most notably in *Action Comics* Vol. 1, No. 242 (July, 1958). The narrative introduced the technological supervillain Brainiac into the character's mythos. As a collector, Brainiac's diegetic telos is to travel throughout the universe discovering alien worlds and civilizations and subsequently using its advanced technology to shrink their premier cities, subsequently storing them in what appear to be clear bell jars. In the text, Brainiac attempts to shrink Paris and other world capitals on that story's earth. Infiltrating the villain's spacecraft, Superman discovers the bottled city of Kandor. The character is able to tour the once capital city of its bygone world,

discovering its technology and agriculture, thereby presenting the reader with a clearer example of the socio-culture and history of the fictional planet. Another fuller exploration would emerge through the publication of *Action Comics* Vol. 1, No. 252 (May, 1959) the following year. In the story, Superman accidentally travels back in time to a pre-cataclysmic Krypton. While there, the character is mistaken for an extra in a science fiction film being shot, meets its forbears Jor and Lara-El, witnesses their marriage, and even falls in love with the Kryptonian actress Lyla Lerrol. This story added another element to the xenological profile of the Kryptonian species in that it contrasted Krypton's red sun to earth's yellow sun, identifying this difference as the source of the character's powers on a diegetic earth, albeit without providing a scientific, or even pseudo-scientific, explanation for the character's abilities from that point to its present incarnation. In *Superman* Vol. 1, No. 141 (November, 1960), Krypton's geography was named, introducing the reader to such fictional xenogeographic locations as pre-cataclysmic Krypton's Rainbow Canyon, Jewel Mountains, Hall of Worlds, Gold Volcano and Meteor Valley. By 1961, *Superman* Vol.1, No. 146 (July, 1961) coalesced these disparate elements into the first broadly cohesive xenological profile of the Kryptonian species. Despite the notion of Krypton being a fictional world located light-years away from a diegetic earth, this text presented Kryptonians as reterritorialized middle-class Americans living in a technological utopia featuring weather control towers, metal-eaters and metal maids.

The third stage of Krypton's diegetic narrative and aesthetic development



occurred under the editorship of Julius Schwartz, who took up the position following the resignation of Weisinger in 1970. With the diligent historiographical study of the preceding portrayals of Krypton, writers E. Nelson Bridwell, Cary Bates, Elliot S. Maggin, Marv Wolfman, and Dennis O'Neil used a series of stories published under the title "The Fabulous World of Krypton" that ran throughout the early 1970s *Superman* titles to codify the Kryptonian mythos. These stories read like vignettes, each using only a few pages to highlight and explore a specific aspect of Kryptonian culture and history. Such aspects include the planet's colonization by two lost space travelers named Kryp and Tonn, their descendants' barbarity and civil war, and their slow re-development toward technological superiority. These stories also featured hyperdiegetic legends about the planet's pre-cataclysmic heroes including Hex-Le and Rik-Ar, a Spartacus-esque leader of a slave rebellion against a despot named Taka-Ne. Other narratives focused on Superman's forebears more closely, detailing the contents of Jor-El's personal diaries, for example. As such, "The Fabulous World of Krypton" miniseries helped distill a clear diegetic vision of the alien world of Krypton. It is clear that Byrne and Mignola's representation of Krypton in *Superman: The World of Krypton* (2008) is highly indebted to the scholastic intrepidity of Bridwell, which subsequently allowed the team to draw on Bridwell's accumulation of detailed aspects of Kryptonian culture and history, including but not limited to the months of the Kryptonian calendar, its units of measurement including time, the titles and forms of social address, deportment and decorum, funerary customs,

weddings, technology, and helial worship of Rao, their sun and premier deity.

IV. Superman, Xenological Unknowability and Tridentity

Despite any moral or ethical considerations of what or who Superman is diegetically, such considerations must also give an account of the character's xenonto-existentialism that gestures beyond the anthropocentrically normative method artists and writers have used to represent the character. This task is not altogether straightforward. The determination of what the character is or might be is, bio-physically, not entirely within the purview of diegetic Terran science. How can any Terran or extra-terrestrial, extradiegetic or diegetic, assume that based on its physiological similarities to the human species, the character's body produces some of the non-physical phenomena common to human beings as well? Does Superman dream, or fantasize? Does Superman have an identical emotional spectrum to human beings and if not, is the character able to feel, dream, or imagine in ways human beings cannot? Initially, these questions and considerations might appear unnecessarily painstaking. However, I argue that these aspects of the character's diegetic being are a fundamental part of its Otherness and the Otherness of its body. Its uncanny similarity to human beings invites the reader's inter-diegetic comparison of the differences between fictional Kryptonians' bodies and the lives of those bodies against both extradiegetic and diegetic representations of human bodies and their lives. This conscious or unconscious comparative process is, by definition, xenological



in that a human being compares her/his human being to the being of an alien, in Superman's case, a Kryptonian. The character's body's uncanny likeness to that of a human male who engaged in regular physical exercise, makes the task of imaging the nature of Superman's alien body somewhat easier. This is to say that it is not so highly abstract – like the “oceanic” organism of Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris*, for example – so as to be mystified in ostensibly epistemic and ontic riddles.

Instead, with Superman, the reader is given an imagining of an alien body, a physique of the Other, that is an uncanny reflection of an extradiegetic human body. Its anthropomorphism, in this sense, is functionalist in so far as it facilitates the reader's identification with it, making the narrative function in its dissemination of the various themes associated with Superman, from solitude to heroism. Essentially, this anthropomorphism is a method of contextualizing and domesticating or terraforming the Otherness of the alien body through the actual conceptualization and aesthetic representation of the alien body itself. Here terraforming refers to the theoretical process whereby typically inhospitable extra-terrestrial geologies, atmospheres, topographies, or ecologies of planets, moons, or other bodies are made to conform to terrestrial standards as dictated by Earth's biosphere and therefore habitable. However, the character consistently embodies a sense of anthropomorphic privileging that invites the reader to assume that the character is at all understandable because it resembles her or him. Superman, as an aesthetic and narratological representation of Otherness therefore fulfills a “necessarily normative [function], and reestablishes

the model of a norm even there where it is unthinkable.”¹³ As such, the alien body, as represented by the character, is a space which is underpinned by a tension between the representable and the unrepresentable. With Superman,

if we emphasize the latter side of the tension, we then begin to tilt back towards the notion that genuine difference, genuine alienness or otherness, is impossible and unachievable, and that even there where it seems to have been successfully represented, in reality we find the mere structural play of purely human themes and topics.¹⁴

As stated above, Jameson's configuration of the Chimera problem is one of perception. That is, how a human being might regard an alien in a way that was faithful to the onto-existential reality of said being, diegetic or otherwise.

With Superman, I argue that the Chimera problem manifests itself in terms of the tensions between identity, power and Otherness, and the character's three personas, namely “Kal-El of Krypton,” “Clark Kent of Smallville,” and “Superman of Earth,” which I refer to collectively as the character's “tridentity.” While it may seem appropriate to regard any identarian tension within the character in terms of a dualism between “Clark Kent” and “Superman,” I argue that the character's onto-existential configuration is triangular as opposed to binary. Looking at Superman's tridentity more closely, I propose that “Superman” is a sign that refers to one third of a fractured and displaced entity. Beside, within, underneath, or above Superman are also “Clark Kent” and “Kal-El.” These three

primary signs refer to attributes, characteristics and modes of being of an entity of power and Otherness commonly referred to “Superman” within the character’s diegetic mythos. While such an observation may seem overly pedantic, sensitivity to the fractured nature of the character is essential in reading it xenologically, as well as reading the nature of its power xenologically also. The fact that the signs “Superman,” “Clark Kent,” and “Kal-El” are put in place of, over, under, or alongside one another in the place of the thing itself, reflects how the character’s power and Otherness defer all the above-mentioned signs in any categorical or definitive way.

V. Unknowability, Onto-Existential Flux, and *Action Comics No. 1*

Being that the character is, as Kal-El, Clark Kent, and Superman, an onto-existential multiplicity, I argue that the character is always-already elsewhere in an onto-existential sense: its being always-already troubles the anthropocentric aspects of its appearance. To show this, I will analyze the concept of speed in *Action Comics No. 1*, referring to Grant Morrison’s analysis of this text in *Supergods: Our World in the Age of the Superhero* (2011), to argue that the speed of the action in *Action Comics No. 1* has more than just narratological consequences. It also problematizes the existential categories of identity and *telos* with regard to Superman. I will demonstrate how this phenomenon is exemplified in the character’s debut on the cover of *Action Comics No. 1*. This cover presents a depiction of power that disrupts, defers and breaks through all attempts at establishing an essential, totalizing signification,

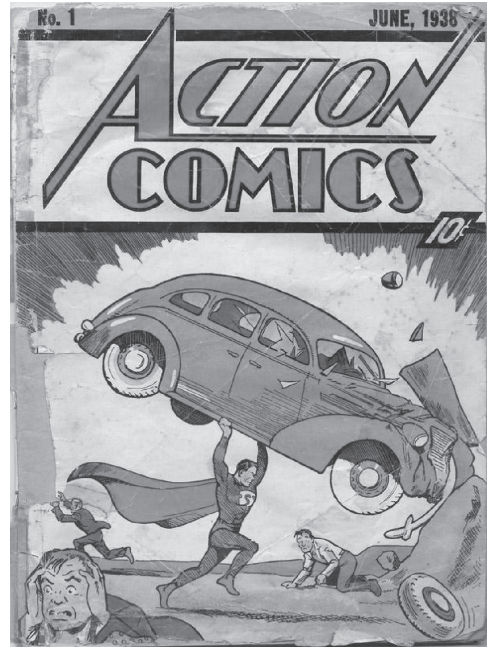


Fig. a: taken from *Action Comics No. 1* (1938) written by Jerry Siegel, illustrated by Joe Shuster

a symbol or series of symbols to completely represent the fundamentally alien power of its Otherness within the diegetic context of the world the narrative establishes.

If one considers the cover of *Action Comics No. 1* (see Figure a above), one notices that there are no nationalistic symbols or palpable political signifiers to identify the depicted figure as for or against any ideology of any kind. The ambiguity of the figures in both the background and foreground, their socio-economic class and/or moral alignments further compound the indeterminateness of the depicted figure’s basic narrative, affiliations (if any at all), and its basic *raison d’être*. The focus of Shuster’s composition is entirely on this being, which simultaneously raises and refuses to answer the mystery of who or what it is, or why it is doing what it is doing. What is



apparent is the power of this creature, moving from left to right through the image's equator, leaving a wake of destruction and hysterical Munchean dread that cannot be totally silenced by the muteness of the medium. It looks like a man, with black hair on a head with all the familiar features on a body that is uncannily similar to that of a robust human man. It wears a form-fitting blue and red costume where an escutcheon rests on its chest within which sits a lonely yet proud "S," a red charge on an undivided aureate field. The use of heraldic terminology here is meant to draw attention to how little the reader actually knows about the destructive figure depicted at this point.

While later in its mythos, it becomes clear that there is a degree of synchronicity between the use and meaning of Kryptonian and terrestrial heraldic devices, in the scene of its debut, the meaning of its arms, its parentage, house, and purpose remain inconclusive. This sense of mystery permeating its spectacular display of power further compounds the sensationalism of what it is doing, weightlessly lifting a green vehicle above its head, on its toes, as if it were about to take flight despite the weight.

The image is ambiguous due to its lack of narratological context. As Morrison points out, "the cover image is a snapshot from the climax of the story [the reader] is yet to see," thus creating an effect where "by the time the world catches up to Superman, [it is] concluding an adventure [the reader has] already missed."¹⁵ Expanding on Morrison's insight, the character has, in this sense, always-already outrun itself as well as the reader's understanding of it. While the cover of the comic book primarily depicts an entity of power, it also

suggests that said figure is also a creature of speed. This combination of power and speed breaks through and disrupts narratological stability whereby the fundamental aspects of a sequential narrative are undermined while, paradoxically, being presented in sequential form. This innovative storytelling technique creates an atmosphere of charged kinematics in which progression and regression occur simultaneously. In terms of being, and the staticity reductive definitions of being rely on, the absolutist claim to an inextricable link between Superman and moral ideology or nationalistic symbolism is effectively outrun by what is actually depicted. *Action* No. 1 suggests that the only absolutism that can be reliably referred to regarding the character is the supremacy of the Othering power of its body. Compared to the relationship between Superman and its power, other considerations become increasingly superfluous as this aspect of the character, encoded in the aesthetics of both cover and subsequent text, though narratologically fragmented, is still nevertheless visually succinct. This is noteworthy because the cover of *Action* No. 1 already depicts a mode of being that intimates an independence from nationalism or moral ideology, a force of greater significance in relation to the character's being, namely both its Otherness, and the power thereof.

From the cover, "a freeze-frame of frantic action," up until Superman transforms into Clark Kent, "Superman is in constant motion."¹⁶ Siegel abandons conventional linear story setups of typical action stories of the period in favor of a more startling, dislocated narratological style. For example, the first panel of the narrative does not labor itself with an explication of



the intricacies of moral, ideological, or nationalistic categorizations of the character as a means of apprehending or endorsing its actions. Rather, the action proceeds from the exiguous reasoning that “early Clark decided he must turn his titanic strength into channels that would benefit mankind,” leaving out fundamental questions such as “why?,” “under whose authority or prompting?,” “in what theatre or sphere?,” “to what degree?,” and “in what ways, exactly?” in a way that foregrounds the actions of the figure in question.¹⁷ This palpable sense of propulsion, speed, and power presents itself both visually and linguistically. This is immediately apparent as, by the tenth panel, the pace of the narrative in which the reader’s attempts to follow Superman continues to accelerate is represented by the caption box of page two that reads, “[a] tireless figure races thru the night seconds count... delay means forfeit of an innocent life.”¹⁸ The errors of spelling and punctuation suggest that Superman is propelling through the narrative, from panel to panel, at a speed greater than the speed required to document its movement, the speed of language to record it, and the speed of thought to comprehend it. It is as if both the reader and the writer are attempting to, but just barely, keep apace with Superman and the unidentified gagged and bound blonde woman under its arm. At this point in the narrative, the “S” on its chest, whose shape is also shown to mutate, could signify anything from Savior, Subverter, Survivor, to Subject.

This relationship between the character’s onto-existential instability and time is similarly, albeit aphoristically, expressed in Steven T. Seagle’s *It’s a Bird...* (2004), where Seagle contemplates the “S”, stating:

“S”: Consider the “S.” Serpent swirl of the alphabet set. More so than any other Roman letter... the “S” wields surprising powers. Like the ability to plural. It can make a “word” into “words.” Turn an isolated tragedy... into an epidemic. Multiply a symbol into symbols at the drop of a consonant. The “S” can also possess. Take what it wants through association. It can turn “Father Time”... into “Father’s Time.” A single letter that can literally steal time. Making many out of one. Owning what it touches.¹⁹

This combination of speed and power points to one conclusion: the adopted morals and ethics of this so-called protector are already surpassed by something more elemental to it namely, the power of its body. In *Action No. 1*, the character is introduced as a being whose nature, power, actions, and motive have outrun the reader’s comprehension.²⁰

The image-text experience of *Action No. 1* evokes a sense of being privy to an aesthetic loop whereby the real-time visualization and comprehension of the character’s actions lay beyond the ability of human faculties. In terms of an ontological reading of Superman, *Action No. 1* presents problems that include the highly theoretical consideration of whether the human beings of the DC Multiverse are or have ever been able to not only apprehend, but experience Superman in any kind of total way. Moreover, because of its power, the fact that Superman is able to manipulate diegetic space-time suggests that time and space cannot be relied on as absolute grounds for experiencing or encountering Superman. However, within the context of *Action No.*

1, there simply is no time to consider these and other complex physical and philosophical questions which are, paradoxically, both evoked and deferred by the narrative and aesthetics of the comic itself. The reader is, keep in mind, attempting to catch up to the cover, to comprehend the who, what, where, how, and why of the figure depicted before the narrative commences, but narratologically after the narrative has already concluded. By the eleventh panel on page two, Superman arrives at the Governor's estate. There is no internal monologue, no thought bubbles, nor speech balloons to suggest any verbal or thought exchanges between either Superman and himself, Superman and the bound and gagged blonde woman whom it is carrying and the reader, or Superman with the reader. The overall sense of ambiguity is maintained by the speed at which the narrative simultaneously progresses and regresses. At this early point of tension in the narrative's action, the reader cannot conclusively declare why Superman is doing what it is doing, where it is doing what it is doing, to or for whom it is doing what it is doing, when it is doing what it is doing, or, according the basic laws of extradiegetic physics, how it is doing what it is doing. In addition, it is not clear whether Superman is saving or abducting the aforementioned woman. As such, the stability and staticity required to know Superman are constantly deferred, disrupted, and delayed by the character's being, of which speed and power are essential aspects. Interestingly however, the cover of *Action No. 1* is the climax of the story and depicts the climactic event, which appears on the last page, on the cover, simultaneously before and after the story has transpired (see Figure b above). This sense of temporal and narratological volatility is



Fig. b: taken from *Action Comics No. 1* (1938) written by Jerry Siegel, illustrated by Joe Shuster

what makes *Action No. 1* such a brilliant debut for this being whose onto-existential movement and flux would later ossify into a modern archetype, a genre, and a modern folklore figure because it emphasizes an easily overlooked but nevertheless vital fact: both the character's thematic and aesthetic origin are essentially unstable.

Vis-à-vis *Action No. 1*, the reader is essentially experiencing the residue of Superman's actions, as if Siegel and Shuster's aesthetics had created a new form of long-exposure photography for superbeings.²¹ Through the blurred lines of a being that is constantly in motion in onto-existential terms something essential remains. The only constant in the incomplete equation of the reader's disjointed comprehension of the character is the potency of Superman's speed and power. This irreducible aspect of



the character's being is disruptive because it always-already produces complex and problematic barriers for developing an understanding of what Superman is whereby "[always-] already [the reader is] compelled through the narrative at [a simulacrum] of Superman's speed and required to focus on the most significant, most intense elements of every scene as if with [mock] supersenses."²² Since the narrative at the point of the cover of *Action No. 1* is technically already over, the reader would indeed require supersenses to apprehend Superman's actions, as well as super faculties of comprehension to understand it in real-time. As a result, "the only solution is to be swept up in the high-velocity slipstream of [its] streaming red cape, one breathless step behind [it]."²³

To be clear, I do not propose that the sense of temporal and existential fracture

in Superman is indicative of a diminishment of power but rather is a direct result thereof. It is precisely because the character's power persists despite the fractured nature of anything originary about it, its identities, extra-terrestrial and terrestrial alike, its home planet, and the distance it always-already experiences from its host planet that the pervasiveness of its disequilibrium functions. Ultimately, Superman illustrates that power does not necessarily require a consistent or stable origin, particularly in terms of a rigid understanding or structuring of identity, for it to exert itself and disrupt any and all pre-existing conditions of being and the phenomena in which it emerges. In this way, *Action No. 1* innovatively suggests that it is not a question of where or why power comes from with Superman. Rather, it is a question of where it will be and why it will be there.

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