

Ramzi Fawaz, *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 368 pp.

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Reviewing Ramzi Fawaz's *The New Mutants*, the first book on comics in Karen Tongson and Henry Jenkins's Postmillennial Pop series, is a complex task. While some have praised Fawaz's plea to reimagine the comic book superhero as a queer figure of the radical imagination, others—most prominently Marc Singer in *Inks: The Journal of the Comics Studies Society*—have dismissed the book's argument and methodology. This bifurcated response foregrounds the book's merits as well as its flaws, challenging readers and reviewers to appreciate Fawaz's important revisionary project but also to grapple with its oversights and omissions.

Fawaz begins by suggesting a transformation from the comic book superhero as a nationalist icon (e.g., Superman and Captain America) to the social outsiders and biological outcasts popularized by Marvel in the early 1960s (the Fantastic Four, the Incredible Hulk, the X-Men). Here the superhero emerges as a "distinctly 'queer' figure" (22) whose nonnormative body undermines mainstream notions of gender, sexuality, race, and class. Through cross-cultural encounters that question the confrontational logic of Cold War politics, this figure comes to embody values of internationalism and universal citizenship. Characters with "flexible" (10, 11)—i.e., shape-shifting, mutated—bodies do not only undermine conventional gender and racial binaries, but they also inspire debates between comic book producers and their audiences. These debates, most prominently in letter columns, produce collectively imagined radical alternatives to the social and political status quo. Superhero comics therefore "make fantasy a political resource for recognizing and taking pleasure in social identities and collective ways of life commonly denigrated as deviant or subversive," Fawaz argues (4). They "suture together current social and political realities with impossible happenings to produce figures that describe and legitimate nascent cultural desires and modes of social belonging that appear impossible or simply out of reach within the terms of dominant political imaginaries" (28). They do so, according to Fawaz, by creating visual allegories and cultural corollaries between comic book content and sociopolitical realities outside of the text. The queerness of the superhero is thus a largely metaphorical one: a fantasy uncontained by binary categories, and one that privileges flux over stasis. *The New Mutants*, then, is less about LGBTQ themes and characters than about the reappreciation of the superhero's potential for creating a radically queer imagination.

Fawaz acknowledges his counterintuitive—which is not to say false—premise: to discover political radicalism in a popular genre not generally known for its political progressivism. For Fawaz, the superhero's "radical political possibilities [are] contained in a fantasy form that was not produced by self-proclaimed left-wing activists or artists but rather emerged as the product of an ongoing negotiation

between competing liberal and radical visions among creators and readers of comic book texts" (14). As an interactive format that connects producers and readers through letter columns, however, the superhero comic book functions as a "generative site for imagining democracy in its most radical form" (7). It is not so much a "site . . . of political oppression" but a "potent cultural resource . . . for articulating new forms of social and political affiliation" (21).

Moving through the history of superhero from the 1950s to the 1980s in seven chapters, Fawaz draws innovative connections between the comic books and their cultural contexts. He juxtaposes the Fantastic Four with the veneration of plastic and the fascination with household materials such as Saran Wrap and Tupperware in the 1950s and 60s; he usefully distinguishes between the space operas and urban folk tales of the 1970s; he decodes the demon possession stories of the 1980s as evidence of "the co-optation of feminist and gay liberation social values by consumer capitalism" (205); and he interprets the death of Captain America in 2007 as signaling the failed dream "of a democratic public life where dissent could galvanize social transformation" (271). These chapters make queer theory productive for superhero studies, displaying Fawaz's intimate knowledge of the comic books he discusses and provocatively reenvisioning commonplace interpretations of the genre.

Yet *The New Mutants* largely sidesteps the substantial body of superhero scholarship on issues that lie at the center of his book, like (homo)sexuality, gender, and the body. Fawaz cites about a dozen sources on superheroes, a tiny fraction of the available research, and ignores work that could complicate his claims. He thus marginalizes at least one of the major scholarly discourses in which the book intervenes. Other discourses, including queer studies, are represented more adequately, but it is surprising that no work on queer (or gay/lesbian) comics is referenced. Such omissions are especially problematic whenever Fawaz's analysis lacks the factual basis to support his often far-reaching assertions. Although he reads the comics as allegories of the working conditions at Marvel and DC, he does not pay much attention to the changing industry practices behind those circumstances. Public statements (outside of letter columns and other para-texts) on these issues by industry figures like Stan Lee and Jack Kirby remain mostly unexamined too. A more thorough recognition of these sources would have vexed Fawaz's largely laudatory treatment of people like Lee, who appear as staunch promoters of US liberalism, and it would have complicated his remarks about the processes of comics production. One would have also expected a deeper engagement with existing political analyses of the superhero, some of which have read the figure as a reactionary force securing the status quo rather than feeding the radical imagination. Recognizing such scholarship might have forced Fawaz to balance his argument against other viable interpretations.

The argument of *The New Mutants* rests on a relatively slim corpus. Most of the case studies come from the Marvel universe. Exceptions include Superman, the Justice League of America, and Green Arrow/Green Lantern, but there is nothing on Image

Comics, whose appearance in the early 1990s does not figure in Fawaz's account. Moreover, he focuses on the format of the comic book. This results in a lopsided sense of the superhero as a print figure instead of a transmedia phenomenon spanning radio, television, cinema, and video games. Despite these limitations, Fawaz repeatedly makes sweeping claims, asserting, for example, that the Fantastic Four became "iconic figures in the remaking of American liberalism" (72) or that *The New Mutants* run of the X-Men (starting in 1984) developed a "practice of entrustment [that] helped reinvent the superhero in the late twentieth century from a champion of social justice to a fantasy of political freedom" (264). He connects the political thrust of these comics to contemporary social and political movements—Civil Rights, women's and gay liberation, international human rights, the New Left, etc.—but this connection is often asserted rather than proven, and little sustained analysis of these movements is offered. Nonetheless, concepts like "queer world-making" (*sensu* Michael Warner and Lauren Berlant) and "comic book cosmopolitics" (14, 15) illustrate Fawaz's impressive ability to mobilize queer theory to reimagine the superhero.

Fawaz is critical of comics that move beyond popular fantasy to confront social ills directly by seeking a more diverse representation of racial, gendered, and sexual minorities and by advocating specific solutions to economic problems. This critique culminates in a celebration of fantasy as politically more viable than concrete political content and in reducing efforts to increase minority representation to a mere "instrument of social justice" (235). According to this logic, a narrative of interspecies alliances that implies notions of universal solidarity is more productive politically than a story about the struggle of African American communities against racial discrimination. Similarly, a story that queers characters metaphorically by highlighting their social and gender nonconformity is more compelling than one that depicts the wedding between two gay superheroes. A less partial analysis might have concluded that both types of stories perform important, albeit different, types of cultural work. After all, readers of popular fantasies may consume them without recognizing any implied political subtext. They might miss or choose to ignore the redirection of "the homophobic and sexist logic of anticommunist political rhetoric" or the reframing of the Fantastic Four as "a playground of queer pleasures" (83), or the "recasting of the superhero as a paragon of nonnormative gender and sexual identity" that Fawaz allocates in *The Fantastic Four* comics of the 1960s (92).

The New Mutants ultimately works as a popular fantasy itself: as an attempt to find a good America—ethical, inclusive, selfless, noble, egalitarian, democratic—in the face of past and current political crises. Fawaz's trust in the progressive potential of the superhero may thus be an admittedly brilliant exercise of wishful thinking that plays down the fact that superheroes, as popular serial characters and inherently malleable, ambiguous, and polysemous figures, lend themselves to all kinds of political uses, including antidemocratic, authoritarian, and right-wing ones. To celebrate the superhero's progressive potential at the expense of its reactionary, and often excessively violent, tendencies (which the book acknowledges but does not explore)

implies a truncated notion of popular culture that underestimates the figure's ideological flexibility. It would be unfair to expect Fawaz to have predicted the results of the last Presidential election. But for a book that repeatedly mentions the superhero's populism, *The New Mutants* has surprisingly little to say about the genre's frequently undemocratic and occasionally fascist yearnings.