Re-theorizing the Problem of Identity and the Onto-Existentialism of DC Comics' Superman

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Abstract

One of the central onto-existential tensions at play within the contemporary comic book superhero is the tension between identity and disguise. Contemporary comic book scholarship typically posits this phenomenon as being primarily a problem of dual identity. Like most comic book superheroes, superbeings, and costumed crime fighters who avail themselves of multiple identities as an essential part of their aesthetic and narratological repertoire, DC Comics character Superman is also conventionally aggregated in this analytical framework. While much scholarly attention has been directed toward the thematic and cultural tensions between two of the character's best-known and most recognizable identities, namely 'Clark Kent of Kansas' and 'Superman of Earth', the character in question is in fact an identarian multiplicity consisting of three 'identity-machines': 'Clark', 'Superman', and 'Kal-El of Krypton'. Referring to the schizoanalysis developed by the French theorists Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (orig. 1972), as well as relying on the kind of narratological approach developed in the 1960s, this paper seeks to re-theorize the onto-existential tension between the character's triplicate identities which the current scholarly interpretation of the character's relationship with various concepts of identity overlooks.

Keywords: *Superman, identity, comic books, Deleuze and Guattari, schizoanalysis*

The Problem of Identity: Fingeroth and Dual Identities

Evidenced by the work of contemporary comic book scholars, creators, and commentators, there is a tradition of analysis that typically understands the problem of identity at play in Superman, and most comic book superheroes by extension, as primarily a problem of duality. These works include Richard Reynolds's *Super Heroes: A Modern Mythology (Studies in Popular Culture)* (1994); Peter Coogan's *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (2006); Grant Morrison's *Supergods: Our World in the Age of the Superhero* (2011); Terry Ray Clark's *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture: Theories, Themes, Products and Practices* (2012).[1] A text that is part of this tradition, namely Danny Fingeroth's *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society* (2004), outlines the ostensibly inextricable relationship between the problem of identity in superhero comic books and duality. According to Fingeroth, the dual identity in comic book literature ultimately serves a

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[1] Richard Reynolds, *Superheroes: A Modern Mythology* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1994); Peter Coogan, *Superhero: The Secret Origin of a Genre* (Richmond: Reynolds and Hearn, 2010); Grant Morrison, *Supergods: Our World in the Age of the Superhero* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011); Terry Ray Clark and Dan W. Clanton, *Understanding Religion and Popular Culture: Theories, Themes, Products and Practices* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2012).

psycho-emotional function as a wish (desire)-fulfilling fantasy of transcendence and overcoming. The secret identity appeals to a fantasy of power in view of the fantasizer's feelings of onto-existential powerlessness; a fantasy that implicitly suggests that the transparent or known identity is the weaker or less appealing of the two identities that make up one's duality of self. In contrast, the other, being repressed and/or hidden, represents a symbol or fantasy of one's secret power. It is this secret identity that one holds in reserve within one's self that paradoxically suggests that one has the potential to overcome oneself and one's limitations. The secret identity is a reservoir of the ambition, need, desire or will for/to self-overcoming or self-othering (becoming other to yourself by paradoxically becoming yourself). So too is the fear of losing said power, and thus keeping it hidden also becomes a method of *preserving* and *owning* it. With the antipodal arrangement of the existential reality of Clark Kent and Superman, the fantasy is clear: the transformation or revelation of the one into or from the other represents a fantasy of power and the freedom which becoming powerful would allow. The fantasy, in Superman's case, is to discard the fiction, costume, and performance of humanity and take flight. The onto-existential tension latent within this desire suggests that 1) there is something beneath what or who one appears to be, and 2) that there is a reason – be it danger, power, or otherness – that one has to hide one's self within oneself. While Fingeroth asserts implicitly that there is a congruence between the so-called 'real you' and the persona one projects, for Superman the character is neither 'Clark Kent of Kansas', 'Kal-El of Krypton', nor 'Superman of Earth' in any total way. Instead, Superman both is and is not all of them at once. Interestingly, however, the character's power, body, and otherness are always-already disrupting these indices of identity. If, within the remit of the phenomenon of reader-identification, Superman is a reflection of the reader, then, like Superman, the implicit suggestion of this identarian flux is that we are always already multiplicities, selves, identities, whereby one is always already disrupting and substituting the other in view of the myriad socio-political and cultural roles we play in life. Fingeroth notes that

> The dual identity is perhaps Superman's greatest wish fulfillment aspect, more so than flying or bending steel in his bare hands. He is able to cherry pick the best both [Terrestrial and Kryptonian] societies [have] to offer. His powers, which he actually only attained because he came to Earth – on Krypton he and his people had none – mark him as the exceptional immigrant. Whatever objectionable qualities Kryptonians may have, they are none of his problem. He left them as a baby. He's not a bug-eyed monster-type alien – he's an alien who looks like the rest of Earth humans (and a handsome one at that). He can fit in when he wishes and distances himself when he wishes. He can use what he's learned as Kent to enhance his life as Superman and vice versa.[2]

While psychology suggests that full realization of self requires the integration of all disparate aspects of one's personhood, 'Superman becomes integrated by splitting himself' suggesting that 'our dilemma is its own solution! Unity equals duality.'[3] In contrast, I am suspicious of the *unification* Fingeroth is alluding to and the paucity of his engagement with the paradoxical onto-existentialism of multiplicity within the character. I argue that any sense of onto-existential unification in terms of identity within the character is not a process of unifying two distinct halves, but a paradoxical

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[2] Danny Fingeroth, *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us About Ourselves and Our Society* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 56.
[3] Fingeroth, 56.

process by which three distinct thirds are simultaneously joined and separated from one another. Understandably, speaking about a threefold identity and a messianic figure like Superman evokes parallels with the triune nature of God in the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, I will eschew the familiar theological interpretations of this relationship. Referring to the schizoanalysis developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (orig. 1972), this paper will reassess the problem of identity in DC Comics' Superman by offering a new theory of the character's 'tridentity'.[4]

At this early point, it is necessary for me to provide working definitions of some of the key terms I will be using throughout the essay. A helpful way of thinking about Superman, the character's history and its reality, is to not think of them as unitary or even bound to either a single medium, space or time. Rather, Superman's reality is dispersed across three diegetic levels. Here, I borrow from Gérard Genette's multilevel system of analysing narrative fiction and its attendant terminology in *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (orig. 1972). Genette describes three narratological levels by saying that

> any event a narrative recounts is at a diegetic level immediately higher than the level at which the narrating act producing this narrative is placed. [The creation of the narrative] is a literary act carried out at the first level, which we will call extradiegetic; the events told in [the narrative] are inside [the] narrative, so we will describe them as diegetic, or intradiegetic; a narrative in the second degree, we will call metadiegetic.[5]

Additionally, he states that

> [t]he prefix meta- obviously connotes here, as in 'metalanguage,' the transition to the second degree: the metanarrative is a narrative within the narrative, the metadiegesis is the universe of this second narrative, as the diegesis […] designates the universe of the first narrative […] Naturally, the eventual third degree will be a meta-metanarrative, with its meta- metadiegesis, etc.[6]

The term 'extradiegetic' refers to the world of the reader, the artist and the writer where within our reality and its confines, Superman and its publication history are the result of ink and light on a page or screen that can be read semiologically. The diegetic worlds are the worlds of the characters, their thoughts and their actions. These diegetic worlds can, in turn, be reproduced and combined on another level or levels, which I refer to as the metadiegetic. The metadiegetic can be best described as a story-within-a-story. For Superman, the DC Comics Multiverse itself, with its extensive array of worlds, universes, pocket dimensions and realms, is an example of metadiegesis. As noted in *The Multiversity Guidebook* Vol. 1, No. 1 (January, 2015) written by Grant Morrison, illustrated by various artists including Ivan Reis, Nicola Scott, Gary Frank and Dan Jurgens, DC's current orrery of worlds and spheres include, but are not limited to, the following: Earths 0-51, Wonderworld (which exists beyond the Speed Force Wall), KWYZZ (The so-called Radio Universe), Dream, Nightmare, Heaven, Hell, Skyland, Underworld, New Genesis, and Apokolips (which all exist beyond the Speed Force Wall in the Sphere of the Gods). Beyond these exists the Monitor Sphere,

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[4] My use of this term bears no relation to Nicolas Maximillian Rolke's 2013 film *Tridentity: Tridentität.*

[5] Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. Jane E. Lewin, Foreword by Jonathan Culler (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1983).

[6] Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, 228.

containing Nil. Furthermore, like the infinite degree of onto-existential and phenomenological variation that contemporary multiverse theorems propose, the DC Multiverse and its Elseworlds imprint offers different takes on the basic narratological and aesthetic content of any given character. Examples include: post-Crisis Pocket Universe Superboy, post-Crisis The Qwardian, Antimatter Universe and Earth-3 Ultraman, post-Crisis Earth-4 Superman named Captain Allen Adam, Earth-10's Nazi controlled Superman named Overman and the Communist Superman appearing in Mark Millar, Dave Johnson, and Kilian Plunkett's *Superman: Red Son* (2003).

I will also use the term 'it' when speaking about Superman. The convention of referring to the character using the pronoun 'he' already performs various kinds of reductive violence that I argue cannot be overlooked. It superimposes anthropocentric codes, qualities, and categories of being onto a being that is genetically and philosophically other to them. Referring to Superman as 'he' is an equivocal inaccuracy. Grant Morrison and Rags Morales highlight this onto-existential problem in 'Superman in Chains' (December 2011). While incarcerated and tortured under the command of General Sam Lane and Lex Luthor, Luthor insists on referring to Superman as 'it'. Upon viewing the experiments Luthor and Lane are conducting on Superman's body, which involve subjecting it to 30,000 volts at 10 amps in an electric chair in a chamber filled with Sarin gas, Dr. Irons states that 'torturing a man on U.S. soil, or anywhere else, is UNACCEPTABLE!'[7] Luthor, reminding Dr. Irons that 'he' is more accurately 'it', responds calmly, stating that 'those laws apply to HUMAN BEINGS, surely. [How can we] TORTURE a so-called man with STEEL-HARD skin and hair that can't be cut?'[8] In short, I agree with Luthor that the third-person neuter pronoun 'it' is the most accurate term with which to discuss any onto-existential aspects of Superman. The fact that Superman is an alien stands as a first principle here. It is an extra-terrestrial creature that expresses many seemingly identical superficial traits to human beings that, however convincing, must not make us overlook the fact of Superman's essential difference from any- and everything human. I have privileged the use of the pronoun 'it' in order to allow the character a greater degree of onto-existential licence, 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.

Deleuze and Guattari, Multiplicity, and Identity: Toward a Theory of Tridentity

Deleuze and Guattari's work in Anti-Oedipus is best conceived of as a toolkit or a collection of various machinic concepts that can be assembled and re-assembled with other machines or concepts to create a vast and interesting array of hermeneutic or critical assemblages. In substituting desire for identity, I found that a machinic reading of identity provided a helpful and incisive theory-machine, one that allowed me not only to articulate what I feel to be the overlooked onto-existential tensions between identity, power, and otherness at play at the core of the character, but also the seemingly inexhaustible applicability of Deleuze and Guattari's work more generally. In this essay,

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[7] Grant Morrison and Rags Morales, *Action Comics* Vol. 1 (New York: DC Comics, 2012), n. p.
[8] Morrison and Morales, *Action Comics* Vol. 1.

I have made recourse to Anti-Oedipus because the text offers an incisive method through which to analyse the relationship between identity, onto-existentialism, power, and otherness in comic book superheroes in a novel way. It is the authors' activation of the concept of machinic assemblages that I find to be most useful when it comes to re-theorizing Superman's onto-existential complex or assemblage of the 'identity-machines' Clark, Kal, and Superman I call 'tridentity'. In this way, Deleuze and Guattari are helpful when rethinking the conventional reading of the concept of the comic book superhero as having a stability or unification in duality. The schizoanalysis developed in Anti-Oedipus also provides a vocabulary with which to re-theorize how the character's identity-machines function in themselves as well as when interlinked with one another. In evoking Deleuze and Guattari, my intention is to demonstrate that a machinic approach to the multiplicity of identity-machines that make up the character in question provides a more holistic understanding of how both power and otherness flow through and are mediated, interrupted, reproduced, and recirculated within Superman.

My use of the term 'identity-machines' to describe the assemblage of Superman's tridentity in machinic terms is an extrapolation of Deleuze and Guattari's machinic reassessment of desire. Deleuze and Guattari describe desire in mechanical terms, as a machine-like force that is in itself an unstoppable and endless flow. As such, desire has no organizing principle, no origin, or generative centre or even a self that produces desire. Deleuze and Guattari's concept of desire is radical in the sense that they view it as a force that is independent from any law. The intention behind such a reading is to deterritorialize the various types of thinking and systems that seek to fuse desire with law or identity.[9] Viewed in this way, desire has a deeply transgressive power in that it cannot be absolutely subjected to psycho-social human forces, yet is instrumental in constituting such seemingly fundamental concepts like the self. As Julian Wolfreys notes, '[t]he subject does not produce desire but the flow of desire plays a role in the constitution of the subject.'[10] The aforementioned machanic description of desire is instrumental in understanding Deleuze and Guattari's use of terms and phrases such as 'flow' or 'body-without-organs'. Desire is viewed as a machine that is itself linked to a series of interconnected machines in a machine-like arrangement (*AO*, 296). They define a machine as a '*system of interruptions* or *breaks*' without which no machine can function and, in turn, produces a producing or product identity they describe as 'an enormous undifferentiated object' or an unproductive body without organs (*AO*, 36; 151; 7-8; italics mine). In this sense, the entire process of production is recorded on this body without organs. Furthermore, the authors view any machine as linked to a continual material flow which they describe as a decoded flow of desire that constitutes the free energy of the desiring-machines (*AO*, 15). The continuous interplay between machines and their agents beneath the various determinations that associate desire with

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[9] In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari offer the following discussion of the concept of territorialization, and the interplay between its poles namely, deterritorialization and reterritorialization: 'the social axiomatic of modern societies is caught between two poles, and is constantly oscillating from one pole to the other. Born of decoding and deterritorialization, on the ruins of the despotic machine, these societies are caught between the Urstaat that they would like to resuscitate as an overcoding and reterritorializing unity, and the unfettered flows that carry them toward an absolute threshold.' Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane, Preface by Michel Foucault (London: The Athlone Press, 1984), 260; hereafter *AO* with page references in the text.

[10] Julian Wolfreys, *Critical Keywords in Literary and Cultural Theory* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 51.

a person or an object in a representational framework are mediated by deterritorialization. As such, subjective abstract desire cannot be underpinned by that which it acts upon, flows through, or constitutes: 'social production is purely and simply desiring-production itself under determinate conditions.' (*AO*, 300) According to this understanding of desire, the entire Anthropocene is a socio-historical process both constituted and produced by desire or, as they say, '[t]here is only desire and the social, and nothing else.' (*AO*, 300)

How can I refer to the complex of identities that make up the character in question as a tridentity of identity-machines in anything more than a metaphorical sense? Such a postulate refers back to Deleuze and Guattari's definition of a machine as 'a system of interruptions or breaks [whereby] every machine [...] is related to a continual material flow that it cuts into. It functions like a ham-slicing machine, removing portions from the associative flow.' (*AO*, 36) When applied to the tridentity of Superman, each of the character's identity-machines cuts into, so to speak, the onto-existential reality of the character's body *as well as* the power and otherness that constitute it. Deleuze and Guattari describe the relationship between flows and interruptions with specific examples: 'amniotic fluid spilling out of the sac and kidney stones; flowing hair, a flow of spittle, a flow of sperm, shit, or urine that are produced by partial objects and constantly cut off by other partial objects, which in turn produce other flows, interrupted by other partial objects.' (AO, 4-5) Similarly, I understand the tridentity of Superman as a flow of self-interrupting flows of partial identity-machines. Each of the three identities the character makes recourse to 'presupposes the continuity of a flow; every flow, the fragmentation of the object' (*AO*, 5). In terms of the character's tridentity, each of its identity-machines results in a connection with another identity-machine within the unstable flow of a disintegrated self, 'so that one machine interrupts the current of the other or "sees" its own current interrupted' (*AO*, 5).

Superman and Tridentity

The nature of the relationship between the character's identity-machines is a microcosm of Superman's near-infinite identities that arise across the DC Multiverse. As such, any reading of Superman that endeavours to discuss the character's onto-existentialism fully must acknowledge that the means of engaging with it are unstable from the outset. In being simultaneously Clark, Kal, and Superman, it is existentially always already elsewhere. For the denizens of the many metadiegetic earths of the DC Comics Multiverse, to grasp it, to see it, touch it are problems that are always already in play; not only because of the character's immense physical power and speed, which question the human ability, aided or unaided, to actually perceive it (to definitively see Superman in motion with the naked eye, for example), but because of the character's complex of identities, one is never speaking about a single, *distinct* identity. No single aspect of the character's identities is primary. They are all ephemeral effects of the character's power, uncanny body, and its Otherness. As such, I propose that Superman is best understood as a *multiplicity*. The multiplicity of Clark, Kal, and Superman offers an illusory coherence that runs *through* the character's power, body, and otherness in that the multiplicity of Superman's tridentity is constantly disrupted by these three underlying onto-existential aspects of its being. This means that Clark, Superman, and Kal are in a state of *continuous mutual differentiation*. In this way, they are arbitrary, to a degree, in two main ways. Firstly, if one were to remove them, then the character's power,

otherness, and uncanny body would persist, acting as the Superman's residual onto-existential content. Superman regularly connects its uncanny body, otherness, and power to this seemingly closed-circuit latticework of interchangeable personas, swapping them, substituting, and replacing them with one another. In this play of personalities, power, the uncanny body, and otherness remain irreducible, intransitive, essential. Secondly, if the character's power, uncanny body, and otherness do not require Clark, Kal, or Superman to constitute or substantiate them, then they are independent and/or excrescent of/to them. As a result, Superman's tridentity engenders its own collapse back into power and otherness because of the presiding immanence of the power and otherness of the character's body. In this way, the instability of Superman's tridentity, more so than the complete circuit of duality, 'couples continuous flows and partial objects [of self] that are by nature fragmentary and fragmented. [Tridentity] causes the current [of self] to flow, itself flows in turn, and breaks the flows.' (*AO*, 4)

In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari state that machines are necessarily paradoxical in their (dis)connectivity: 'one machine is always coupled with another. The productive synthesis, the production of production, is inherently connective in nature [...]. This is because there is always a flow-producing machine, and another machine connected to it that interrupts or draws off part of this flow.' (*AO*, 4) When this idea is applied to Superman, one can describe Superman's multiplicity as a mode of being that is simultaneously in construction and collapse. The character's existence is deeply paradoxical because it both is and is not Clark, Kal, or Superman in any absolute sense. Being Clark, Kal, and Superman means being an existential *open circuit* whereby each one of the character's lives and the metadiegetic realities of said lives is perpetually incomplete. These different identity-machines 'function at all levels of [the character's onto-existential experience of its various diegetic realities] and enter into any and every sort of connection; each one speaks its own language, and establishes syntheses with others that are quite direct along transverse vectors, whereas the vectors between the basic elements that constitute them are quite indirect.' (*AO*, 38) The character is *simultaneously* an orphan, a sole survivor trying to gesture homeward to a home that no longer exists, an alien, a hero and protector of worlds, a husband/friend/lover to Lois Lane/Jimmy Olsen, a rival to Lex Luthor, an employee to Perry White, and so on. If Superman's metadiegetic existence, being fractured by the complex of onto-existential extremes mediated by its tridentity, is always in a perpetual state of construction and collapse, the character is never either of these things in any complete, total, or perhaps even fulfilling way. In the last instance, Superman is a character whose existence is marked by paradoxical movements of continuous variation, of disrupted or ruptured stratification, a matrix of continuous change founded on power, an uncanny body, and otherness. In this way, Superman is a model of post-identarian subjectivity in that the character's being is not organized by a central self precisely because its power, body, and otherness continuously disrupt and divide the phenomena of Clark, Kal, and Superman. They are all performances that leave no permanent trace on the power, body, and otherness that constitute them. As such, Superman is an admixture of the organic (the residual aspects of its being namely power, the uncanniness of its body, and otherness) and the inorganic (the performances of Clark, Kal, and Superman superimposed upon them) aspects of its being. In turn, the performances of Clark and Superman both mitigate and release the power and otherness of the body through which they are expressed. In terms of the character's relationship to diegetic representations of human beings within the DC Comics Multiverse, the character is a non-parallel and

symbiotic entity that is constantly becoming something else, unceasingly embodying other ways of being. While Clark, Kal, and Superman might speak to connectivity or synthesis between Kryptonian and human being, I argue that they fail to do so in a linear way. What results is a de-centred milieu that is Superman predicated on a sense of paradoxical openness and closure.

Superman, being both extra-terrestrial and terrestrial in various ways and to varying degrees, turns the diegetic earths upon which it finds itself into assemblages, ones with radically de-centred, non-anthropocentric or even geocentric histories and futures. What it means to be on such an earth becomes something *else* in the wake of Superman-on-that-earth. Being on an earth becomes an assemblage of the terrestrial and the extra-terrestrial whereby each type or mode of being borrows from the other. On the one hand, the human beings of the DC metadiegesis constantly use or rely on Superman's power to redress problems that they lack the power to resolve themselves. On the other hand, Superman constantly uses these same earths as foster homes, as borrowed territories, identities, and solaces from solitude. The character typically does not conquer or destroy them, or use its power to consciously and definitively *change* them, in spite of the fact that even merely being in the territory of these earths irrevocably changes them *in principium*. Ideally, the power, body, and otherness that comprise Superman's multiplicity would have co-generative influences over the territory of an earth and the modes of being on that earth: the terraformed being in being on a Terra reforms its territory.

I argue that Superman, Clark Kent, and Kal-El are consistently mutating strata of the character's being. Each one of these identity-machines is 'a machine of a machine. The machine produces an interruption of the flow insofar as it is connected to another machine that supposedly produces this flow. And doubtless this second machine in turn is really an interruption or break.' (*AO*, 36) They are accumulations (in the sense of creating a persona that interacts with human beings on metadiegetic earths and accrues experiences as Clark); coagulations (in the sense of the joining of its understanding of human being, its fears and needs accrued by Clark with the power, body, and otherness of its Kryptonian heritage in Superman); sedimentations (in the sense of the residual aspects of its being namely, power, the body, and otherness which are symbolized by its alien heritage in its Kryptonian name, Kal-El); and foldings (in the sense of the continuous process of negotiating these aspects of its metadiegetic being), all together and apart. These strata have a unity not in identity, but rather in the power, body, and otherness of the superbeing, a sustained yet mutating coherence. What results from these continual breaks-flows is what Deleuze and Guattari call a residual break or residuum

> which produces a *subject* alongside the machine, functioning as a part adjacent to the [identity-machines that comprise it]. And if this subject has no specific or personal identity, [...] it is because it is not only a part that is peripheral to the machine, but also a part that is itself divided into parts that correspond to the detachments from the chain [of other identity-machines] and the removals from the flow [of identity machines] brought about by the [any of the other identity-machines themselves]. (*AO*, 40-41; italics mine)

In view of this, tridentity can be defined as 'the limit point of all the transverse or transfinite connections' whereby 'the partial object and the continuous flux, the interruption and the connection, fuse into one' (*AO*, 37). Therefore, tridentity, this paradoxical continuous break of self, constitutes the continuous grafting of production

of identity onto the character. From the always-already disruptiveness inherent in Superman's power come strata of being that are continually re-created and renewed. As Mark Waid eloquently notes in his essay 'The Real Truth about Superman: And the Rest of Us Too' (2005), the character

> has vague dreamlike memories of his lost home world, particularly every evening at dusk, when he feels an inexplicable sadness and longing in watching the setting sun turn red on the horizon. And every time, in his Clark identity, that he has to politely forego a pickup touch-football game for fear of crippling the opposing line, every time he hears the splash of an Antarctic penguin while trying to relax on a Hawaiian beach, every time he surrenders himself to a moment of unbridled joy and looks down to see that he's quite literally walking on air, he gets the message loud and clear: He's not from around here. He doesn't belong here. He was raised as one of us, but he's really not one of us. Superman is the sole survivor of his race. He is an alien being.[11]

Every time Superman changes into Clark Kent/Superman, every time Superman is reminded that it is the last survivor of a dead planet, an onto-existential renewal has occurred. In this transformative process, the mechanics of one identity machine 'stops dead for a moment [...] freezes in place – and then the whole process will begin all over again.' (*AO*, 7) However, the character's being is discharged through these strata all the time, suggesting that this process of renewal and re-creation is continuous. What is at stake here? The microscopic onto-existential flux of the character has macroscopic resonances whereby Superman's power, body, and otherness would have us reconsider the relations and forces acting upon and through the body, that is, human bodies, animal bodies, social bodies, bodies of ideas and their limits, and the linguistic bodies that its mere existence disrupts. While Superman sees a diegetic earth as a space of asylum, not as onto-existential bondage of human psycho-physical limitations, the disruptiveness of Superman's power, body, and otherness intimates the utopian/dystopian potential to radically and actively redetermine all socio-political and cultural values that have prevailed heretofore.

Superman's tridentity can be described as dividing into a *manifest* and *latent* content. This is expertly illustrated on page 7 of DC Comics Presents Vol.1, No. 85 'The Jungle Line' (September 1985), written by Alan Moore and illustrated by Rick Veitch. The story in this issue examines the theme of a dying Superman after the character is exposed to an infectious and deadly fungus from a meteor fallen to that earth. While attending a lecture and press conference by one Dr. Everett of the Institute for Extraterrestrial Studies, Clark is infected by the spores of the fungus known commonly on Old Krypton as Bloodmorel. Symptoms of infection from the fungus in Kryptonians are detailed in a text known as Rem-Ul's Almanac of Old Krypton (page 31, entry 5,308), which states that

> Native to the SCARLET JUNGLE, the BLOODMOREL is an unusual and dangerous fungus. Its preferred GROWTH MEDIUM is BLOOD. To this end, its microscopic SPORES permeate the skin and thrive within the BLOODSTREAM ITSELF... causing FEVER, BOUTS OF INCAPACITATION, HALLUCINATIONS, CHRONIC OVEREXERTION... and eventually, in 92% of ALL known cases... DEATH.[12]

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[11] Mark Waid, 'The Real Truth about Superman: And the Rest of Us, Too', in *Superheroes and Philosophy: Truth, Justice, and the Socratic Way*, ed. Tom Morris, Matt Morris, and William Irwin (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 2005), 10.

[12] Alan Moore and Rick Veitch, *DC Comics Presents* Vol. 1, No. 85 (New York: DC Comics, 1985), 5.

Two key aspects to note on the page are the word 'hallucinations' and Superman's outburst 'you're not real', both uttered in reference to the problem of the character's identity.13 Superman's hallucination reveals a latent truth about the character. Veitch explicitly emphasizes the unmarked, albeit uncanny, alien body of Kal-El, in which power and otherness are localized, contained, and (re)produced. This decision to make the image of the character's body take centre stage by both foregrounding and backgrounding it effectively conveys how the Bloodmorel intensifies the psycho-emotional stress of the onto-existential fracture occurring in Superman. In addition, Veitch's rendering of the 'fiction suits' Superman wears in the form of the Clark and Superman identities are particularly pertinent to my point regarding the fact that neither is more 'real' than the other. It is important to note also that Moore makes the reader *see* Superman acknowledge that *both* Clark and Superman can only be justified as *aesthetic phenomena*. They are creations, performances, uniforms. Veitch's aesthetic treatment of this theme privileges neither, making Clark, Superman, and Kal paradoxically visually distinct but existentially indistinct. In this sense, the identarian contradictions between Superman's identities can be reconciled only if the conflicting elements (Kal, Clark, and Superman) are defined as arbitrary, de-centred, and/or spectral in nature. As such, the mutually differentiating onto-existential complex of Superman's power, uncanny body, and otherness jointly constitute a *form*, not a content. As aforementioned, the manifest content of Clark, Kal, and Superman can change, is arbitrary, a second order. In contrast, the latent *form* of Superman's singular body, otherness, and power potentially could belong to a higher order, not of the 'hero', but even higher than human codifications altogether.

In view of the above analysis, it would seem that the problem of identity in Superman comes with a latent injunction to determine which of the character's identities is more primary or real than the other. In 'Rediscovering Nietzsche's Übermensch in Superman as a Heroic Ideal' (2013), Arno Bogaerts answers by suggesting that

> the real person [...] is the one who journeyed from Krypton to Earth, was raised on a Smallville farm, developed superpowers under a yellow sun, and later combined all his talents and facets of his personality into one harmonious whole. His two 'identities' are really nothing more than roles he plays in life, just like the roles each of us play.14

While I broadly agree with Bogaerts's summation, I contend that Superman's existence within the diegetic realities of the DC Comics Multiverse is the antithesis of harmonious or whole. Onto-existential disjointedness is so integral to the character that aside from its power, body, and Otherness, the only thing that can accurately be said to be essential about Superman is that the character's existence is essentially fractured and incomplete. The idea of Superman being fractured across multiple realities finds an elegant literal and symbolic visual representation on page 26 of Infinite Crisis Vol 1, No. 5 (April 2006), written by Geoff Johns and illustrated by Phil Jimenez et al. Here Jimenez depicts nine of the character's infinite metadiegetic iterations. Each one of these Supermen is situated alongside one another, each standing atop a chain of interlinked representations of the planet earth as a footer running across the bottom of the panel.

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13 Moore and Veitch, 7.
14 Arno Bogaerts, 'Rediscovering Nietzsche's Übermensch in Superman as a Heroic Ideal', in *Superman and Philosophy: What Would the Man of Steel Do?*, ed. William Irwin and Mark D. White (Chichester: John Wiley and Sons, 2013), 90.

Each of the Supermen of the DC Multiverse is also depicted expressing the same pose. With their hands pressed tightly against their ears, their faces twisted in agony, Jimenez's depictions invite the reader to contemplate the onto-existential rending, extrusion, multiplication, and expanse that is fundamental to Superman's metadiegetic experience. In view of panels such as this and others, we can conclude that the performance of the meek and bumbling Clark Kent, which is as much a performance as the seemingly invincible 'Man of Steel', simply cannot be elements of a harmonious whole if 'neither can claim to be "more real" than the other.'[15] In this sense, as Clark, Kal, and Superman concordantly, Superman is always already the exact *opposite* of itself. Early Superman stories held Clark Kent as the disguise and Superman as the character's 'real' personality. However, following a continuity reboot after the 1985-86 cross-over event Crisis on Infinite Earths, John Byrne's *The Man of Steel* miniseries reversed the polarity of the Superman/Clark Kent dyad by portraying Clark Kent as more confident. In addition, contemporary retellings of Superman's origin, including *Superman: Birthright* (2003), *Superman: Secret Origin* (2009–2010) and *Action Comics* Vol. 2 (2011), combine story and personality traits from both interpretations. Despite these interpretive variances, the underlying truth of Clark, Kal, and Superman is the fact that all three are inextricably aesthetic phenomena.

Regardless of whether Clark Kent is the parody or /counterfeit of a human being or not, the point I stress is that the difference between Batman and Superman, for example, is that the former is a man playing at being a god, the latter is a god playing at being a man. While there is a creative attempt at overcoming the limits of one self in either character, there is also an undeniable measure of self-denial in both as well. I argue that it is not so much a question of which is the 'real' identity between Clark, Kal, or Superman. Ultimately, the character's selves subsist in a relative and limited form. If one considers all the things its power, body, and otherness allow it to think (understand), see (perceive), and do (create/destroy), then the character's routine performances of Superman and Clark Kent are extremely limited and relative expressions of its being. They are self-created identities, they are choices, and these choices have consequences that affect life on the metadiegetic earths on which the character appears.

The Onto-Existential Identity Mechanics of Clark, Kal, and Superman

How does one understand the way in which Superman's identity-machines interact with one another? 'Every machine', state Deleuze and Guattari, 'has a sort of code built into it, stored inside it. This code is inseparable not only from the way in which it is recorded and transmitted to each of the different regions of the body, but also from the way in which the relations of each of the regions with all the others are recorded.' (*AO*, 38) 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. The fact that the signs Superman, Clark Kent, and Kal-El are put in place of, over, under, or alongside one another in exchange for the thing itself, reflects how Superman's power and otherness defer all the above-mentioned signs in any categorical or definitive way. Within the diegetic earths of the DC Comics Multiverse, Superman only refers to and recognizes

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[15] Bogaerts, 'Rediscovering Nietzsche's Übermensch', 90.

the activity of a being of power when it uses that power in the service of humanity as a paragon, defender, and disseminator of a narrow moral and ethical ideology. It is given value because when people come under threat of harm, be it in the form of a natural disaster or from the activity of Superman's enemies – be they aliens themselves like Doomsday or human, like Lex Luthor – Superman is that part of the fractured and displaced entity that matters because it is the part that is needed. Superman is only meaningful when it stands in relation to any danger that threatens to destabilize or erode the moral and ethical foundations of civilization and their attendant apparatuses and structures. An example of this can be noted on page 18 of JLA 1.77 (March 2003) 'Stardust Memories', written by Rick Veitch and illustrated by Darryl Banks. In this post-Crisis story, a synthetic alien life form called Mnemon steals the Justice Leaguers' memories. This life-form is contained within a device at whose centre is a black hole no larger than a mote of dust, and the League member Atom, who had previously shrunk and entered the device to investigate it. Wonder Woman and Firestorm, having lost their memory of who Superman is, begin attacking it, mistaking it for a foe. Atom eventually manages to escape the device and Superman destroys it with its heat-vision. This leaves the black hole it contained exposed, leaving Superman to contain it by holding it in its fist before it can be disposed of in deep space with the help of Green Lantern. Having the character palm a black hole, regardless of size or duration for which it is 'held', places its power well beyond the most speculative theoretical terrestrial astrophysics. Black holes are regions of space-time from which the force of gravity prevents anything, including light, from escaping. Diegetically, they present two types of disruptiveness. Extradiegetically, black holes produce a phenomenon known as the gravitational lensing effect, by which a black hole produces distortions of space-time so that the light between a distant cluster of galaxies and a terrestrial observer, for example, would be warped as it travels toward said observer. Diegetically, Banks imitates this effect in the second panel on the page, by warping the entire structure of the panel itself and everything depicted in it – from the figures of Batman and Superman to the background scene, to the light within the panel itself. The disruptiveness of the black hole is, in turn, disrupted by Superman's power. The fact that the character is able to 'hold' the black hole is symbolic of the inestimable corrective abilities of its body. This is aesthetically portrayed as Superman's ability to formally correct or straighten the frame of the panel and, symbolically, the nature of the world it contains as well.

During crises such as these, Clark Kent and Kal-El are just as present (and, in fact, non-present) when Superman is performing its superhuman feats and marvels, but they are of lesser value, invisible, lost, or overrun by 'Superman' and its differentiating context of danger and the defence of truth and justice. Clark Kent is a forced equivalence between two radically different yet superficially similar forms of being. In this way, Clark Kent is a *prosthesis of origin*. By this phrase, I mean that it is a sign that refers to an aesthetic phenomenon that is created to exist in the place of the character's non-existent native humanity. In other words, Clark Kent stands in the place of the alienness of Superman's being. As a result, the other is substituted with a simulation of manhood in a way that seemingly disqualifies its otherness and rituals that accompany it, made largely unavailable due to the loss of their space of origin and practice, namely the planet Krypton. Clark Kent acts as a root or an anchor that binds Superman to the purview of the Anthropocene, delimiting the character's experiences as subject both of as well as to human being. Superman in essentially different from humanity; however, even as such a fluid configuration, the character has been made to adapt readily to

various human social pressures and historical situations as reflected in the diegetic realities of the DC Comics Multiverse. In addition, Clark Kent is a veil that functions simultaneously as a form of concealment and exposure that renders its fundamental alterity to all things human *invisible*, while simultaneously facilitating its *exposure* to and experience of everything human. Clark Kent also functions as a reader identification apparatus. Inherent in the idea of Clark Kent being an effective reader identification tool is the paradoxical simultaneity of limitation and supremacy. Clark Kent's canonical hollowness, spinelessness, lack of grace or strength call out to the reader who also lives in a culture that produces and sustains feelings of existential clumsiness, isolation, anomie, and fatigue. In this way, the character's fractured being interpellates the reader's feelings of fracture and disintegration, and ameliorates them in the iconic process of Clark's phone booth transformation into Superman, for example.

Symbolically, this transformation shows the 'fiction suit' that is Clark being peeled off and discarded to temporarily allow the essential, true, or real being of transcendent power to emerge. In this sense, the man, which to Superman is other, is overcome to reveal the alien which to humanity is other. This transformative process also suggests that a miraculous synthesis has occurred. The phone booth appears to be like a crucible in which the thesis Kal-El and the antithesis Clark Kent are synthesized in Superman, the supreme version of the combination between the human and the other. It would then seem that 'this subject consumes and consummates each of the states through which it passes, and is born of each of them anew, continuously emerging from them as a part made up of parts, each one of which completely fills up [a paradoxically disjointed unity of selves].' (*AO*, 41) The phone booth transformation also suggests that, like Clark/Superman, deep within the detritus of post-nuclear existence, something extraordinary with potential enough to burst through the quotidian and take to the sky, powerful and free, still exists in us all. Beyond the obvious seductiveness of this encouraging idea lay certain unavoidable problems.

While the transition from Clark to Superman suggests a radical liberation from the limitations of the quotidian and a prohibitive subjection to everything human, from its moral and ethical codes to the symbols it uses to speak/write them, Superman is just as much a subject to them as Clark Kent is. As a reporter for the Daily Planet, the object of Clark's habitual, day-to-day actions is to first observe, collect, and collate data about human bodies and their being. Second, it disseminates this data through the Ideological State Apparatuses that affect mass culture primarily in the form of online and print media. In this sense, Clark is the 'eye' and 'mouth' of the State, whose job it is to diffuse the grand narratives of the State among its subjects. In being Superman, the object of the character's habitual, day-to-day actions as a superhero is to enforce and reify a strict set of moral and ethical precepts that ensure the maintenance of the same socio-political systems, codes, and ideologies that exacerbate various forms of suffering for the human beings subject to them. In this sense, the phone booth transformation converts Clark from being the 'eye' and 'mouth' of the State into the 'fist' of the State as Superman, both *mutatis mutandis*. As such, the phone booth transformation and the freedom and power it intimates are not as free or powerful as may initially appear. Ultimately, it suggests that this freedom is always already subject to the power of human ideology.

Like the phone booth transformation, the elision of 'super' and 'man' promises that the suffix 'man' can be overcome with the tacit suggestion that the roots of humanity can be onto-existentially reterritorialized, torn out and replanted somewhere

new. Inherent in this elision is a promise and a lie. On the one hand, it is a promise that humanity can somehow transvalue itself by *becoming* superior to, beyond, or other to itself. On the other hand, however, it is a lie because that which stands as an example of such a transvaluation of being is outside of the type of being to be transvalued, making the veracity of the promise it symbolizes tenuous at best. After all, Superman cannot represent the end goal for humanity if it is not even human in the first place. As such, it is a lie that is perpetually confessed. Every time the character performs what appear to be miracles, the Superman's essential alterity to human onto-existential standards is spectacularly confessed. In this way, the elision of 'super' and 'man' does not pacify or appease the tensions experienced by a being of power caught within the limitations of a mode of being that it is beyond or other to. Ultimately, the character's contrived subjecthood and the ideology it accepts cannot silence its power: it is never enough to conceal the excrescence of its power, uncanny body, and other, nor the simultaneity of threat and salvation they present to DC Comics' diegetic representations of humanity.

For Superman, the price of being on any earth that reflects extradiegetic socio-political, cultural, and historical reality requires the sumptuary sacrifice of any desire the character may harbour to accumulate or radically express the otherness of its power and the power of its otherness. In this sense, Superman is the limiting fable through which a being of power lives on an earth. It is important to point out that the character's interpellation and internalization of human being through the maintenance of Clark Kent shows that Superman *chooses* to be *through* human being; to think, act, love, and *be* like a human being. It is this choice that makes the suffix 'man' applicable and meaningful because in order to be a man, even in part, even fictitiously, the character must invariably *suppress* or *deny* the fact that it is not a man. This self-denial expresses the important point that, despite the character's radical power and otherness, Superman chooses to exist as a contradiction of itself, which ultimately results in the suppression of both itself and those it wishes to 'save'. Despite all attempts to humanize Superman, no matter how long the period of development its power, body, and otherness are subjected to, no matter how long it is kept a mere mortal, it is always *becoming* Other.16 In addition, barring plot devices which enable Superman's loss of memory, this otherness is something that it cannot un-know. Dan Jurgens's Superman acknowledges this impasse in *Superman* No.12 (October 2012) when it declares that 'just knowing I'm different makes me feel different.'[17] As such, the ontological and existential quandary of Superman's diegetic existence invites the reader to consider what it is like to constantly repress and reserve oneself: to live a third of a life at a time in which the power of one's body and otherness must not only be obsessively kept secret, but whose potentials must be kept untried, careful, and smothered in pretence and servitude. Diegetically, Kal-El is the so-called 'Last Son of Krypton' more in name than lived experience as Superman's opportunity to grow up as the offspring of Jor-El and Lara Van-El was interrupted by the destruction of Krypton. Within the remit of the character's origin story – which remains relatively consistent despite the numerous iterations and revisions of various aesthetico-narratological aspects of the character –

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[16] Here *becoming* refers to Deleuze's conception and understanding of individual and collective actions concerned with countenancing the sociopolitical, cultural, and onto-existential conditions of being. Ultimately, Deleuzian becoming is concerned with resisting or renegotiating determinants and definitions 'in order to "become," that is, to create something new.' Giles Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972-1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 171.

[17] Dan Jurgens, *Superman* Vol. 3, No.12. (New York: DC Comics, 2012), n. p.

Superman knows its forebears and their culture only virtually, that is, through indirect means. It appears to be that the character's sense of Otherness is felt on both sides, human and Kryptonian alike. For example, consider the following conversation between Superman and one of the character's recurring enemies, the Kryptonian criminal known as General Zod, newly released from the Phantom Zone but trapped in a cell in the menagerie of the Fortress of Solitude (a place where Superman keeps and tends a variety of rare and dangerous extra-terrestrial creatures), in *Superman/Wonder Woman* No. 4 (March 2014):

SUPERMAN:	'Hello Zod.'
ZOD:	'Do you speak Kryptonian?' (in Kryptonian)
SUPERMAN:	'I do' (in Kryptonian)
ZOD:	'You learned it from a Matrix, no? I can hear it in your accent. Or LACK of one. Flat, like a machine.'
SUPERMAN:	'...That's right.'[18]

What Zod is alluding to is the fact that Kal-El is a simulacrum, a sign without a referent, an incomplete sign. Kal-El refers to a family, a lineage, a house (the House of El), a people, an ecosystem, a history, a state, an ideological and symbolic economy, and a planet that no longer exist. After the destruction of Krypton, an event concurrent with its own birth in most of the character's origin stories, Superman has no extended access to the referent of this sign. The character's existence, as a Kryptonian marooned on many, if not all, of the DC Multiverse's earths, incessantly displaces or defers the completion of this sign. Kal-El can never either be fully human nor fully Kryptonian. The only access the character has to the referent of the sign Kal-El is perpetually absent, both in terms of time and space. As such, Kal-El will always refer to a ghost of a bygone world. When read in this way, Superman is a composite of incomplete and spectral signs that are all stretched over the vast and seemingly inexhaustible foundation of a powerful alien body that can never singularly or jointly encapsulate the disruptiveness of the power and otherness of said body. Though these signs work to take the place of the present entity, the character's power and otherness interminably break through and disrupt Superman, Clark Kent, and Kal-El. It is Superman's power and otherness that contravene the boundaries between its selves; it is the irreducibility of its disruptiveness that crosses them, that makes their artifice appear, as well as their violence, in relation to the consequences of the particular relations of State-determined repressive force that are concentrated and capitalized therein.

In *Supergods*, Grant Morrison describes Superman as 'Apollo, the sun god, the unbeatable supreme self, the personal greatness of which we all know we're capable [...] a hero of the day' to disenthrall us from despair, fear, and nihilism.[19] In contrast, I have taken a more ambivalent view. By combining close narratological and aesthetic analysis with a Deleuzian problematic, this paper has attempted to offer an analysis of the onto-existential complexes at play in the crux of the character that move beyond static humanistic frames of reference. While Superman is many things to many people, the character is often cast in the messianic light of beneficence and altruism Morrison

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[18] Charles Soule and Tony S. Daniel, *Superman/Wonder Woman* Vol. 1, No. 4 (New York: DC Comics, 2014), 5.

[19] Grant Morrison, *Supergods: Our World in the Age of the Superhero* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), 15-16.

alludes to above. This paper has attempted to show that while this may be the case within both the character's extradiegetic publication history and cultural reception and valuation, as well as metadiegetic narrative mythos, Superman is, theoretically and fundamentally, a mutating complex 'in its selves'.

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Re-teoretizând problema identității și onto-existențialismul companiei DC Comics' Superman

Rezumat

Una dintre tensiunile onto-existențiale care sunt în prim plan în supereroul din cartea comică contemporană este aceea dintre identitate și deghizare. În general, literatura de specialitate despre cartea comică contemporană postulează acest fenomen ca fiind o problemă a identității duale. Ca majoritatea supereroilor comici, sau superființelor și a luptătorilor costumați împotriva criminalilor care își folosesc identități multiple ca parte esențială a repertoriului lor

estetic și naratologic, personajul companiei DC Comics, Superman este de asemenea în mod convențional inclus în acest cadru analitic. În timp ce o mare atenție a fost acordată tensiunilor tematice și culturale dintre cele două cele mai cunoscute și recognoscibile identități ale personajului, respectiv 'Clark Kent of Kansas' și 'Superman of Earth', personajul în cauză este de fapt multiplicitatea identitară care constă în trei „mașini-identitate": 'Clark', 'Superman' și 'Kal-El of Krypton'. Referindu-se la teoria schizoanalizei teoreticienilor francezi Gilles Deleuze și Félix Guattari din *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism și schizofrenie* (orig. 1972), și bazându-se pe un tip de abordare naratologică dezvoltată în anii 60, acest articol încearcă să re-teoretizeze tensiunea onto-existențială dintre identitățile triple ale personajului de care critica de specialitate curentă care interpretează relația personajului cu diverse concepte ale identității nu ține seama.