REFLECTIONS

SECRET SKIN

An essay in unitard theory.

BY MICHAEL CHABON

When I was a boy, I had a religious-school teacher named Mr. Specter, whose job was to confront us with the peril we presented to ourselves. Jewish Ethics was the name of the class. We must have been eight or nine.

Mr. Specter used a workbook to guide the discussion; every Sunday, we began by reading a kind of modern parable or cautionary tale, and then contended with a series of imponderable questions. One day, for example, we discussed the temptations of shoplifting: another class was devoted to all the harm to oneself and to others that could be caused by the telling of lies. Mr. Specter was a gently acerbic young man with a black beard and black Rontgen-ray eyes. He seemed to take our moral failings for granted and, perhaps as a result, favored lively argument over reproach or condemnation. I enjoyed our discussions, while remaining perfectly aloof at my core from the issues they raised. I was, at the time, an awful liar, and quite a few times had stolen chewing gum and baseball cards from the neighborhood Wawa. None of that seemed to have anything to do with Mr. Specter or the cases we studied in Jewish Ethics. All nine-year-olds are sophists and hypocrites; I found it no more difficult than any other kid to withhold my own conduct from consideration in passing measured judgment on the human race.

The one time I felt my soul to be in danger was the Sunday Mr. Specter raised the ethical problem of escapism, particularly as it was experienced in the form of comic books. That day, we started off with a fine story about a boy who loved Superman so much that he tied a red towel around his neck, climbed up to the roof of his house, and, with a cry of “Up, up, and away,” leaped to his death. There was known to have been such a boy, Mr. Specter informed us—at least one verifiable boy, so enraptured and so betrayed by the false dream of Superman that it killed him.

The explicit lesson of the story was that what was found between the covers of a comic book was fantasy, and “fantasy” meant pretty lies, the consumption of which failed to prepare you for what lay outside those covers. Fantasy rendered you unfit to face “reality” and its hard pavement. Fantasy betrayed you, and thus, by implication, your wishes, your dreams and longings, everything you carried around inside your head that only you and Superman and Elliot S. Maggin (exclamation point and all, the principal Superman writer circa 1971) could understand—all these would betray you, too. There were ancillary arguments to be made as well, about the culpability of those who produced such fare, sold it to minors, or permitted their children to bring it into the house.

These arguments were mostly lost on me, a boy who consumed a dozen comic books a week, all of them cheerfully provided to him by his (apparently iniquitous) father. Sure, I might not be prepared for reality—point granted—but, on the other hand, if I ever found myself in the Bottle City of Kandor, under the bell jar in the Fortress of Solitude, I would know not to confuse Superman's
Kryptonian double (Van-Zee) with Clark Kent’s (Vlo-Don). Rather, what struck me, with the force of a blow, was recognition, a profound moral recognition of the implicit, indeed the secret, premise of the behavior of the boy on the roof. For that fool of a boy had not been doomed by the deceitful power of comic books, which after all were only bundles of paper, staples, and ink, and couldn’t hurt anybody. That boy had been killed by the irresistible syllogism of Superman’s cape.

One knew, of course, that it was not the red cape any more than it was the boots, the tights, the trunks, or the trademark “S” that gave Superman the ability to fly. That ability derived from the effects of the rays of our yellow sun on Superman’s alien anatomy, which had evolved under the red sun of Krypton. And yet you had only to tie a towel around your shoulders to feel the strange vibratory pulse of flight stirring in the red sun of your heart.

I, too, had climbed to a dangerous height, with my face to the breeze, and felt magically alone of my kind. I had imagined the streak of my passage like a red-and-blue smear on the windows pane of vision. I had been Batman, too, and the Mighty Thor. I had stood cloaked in the existential agonies of the Vision, son of a robot and grandson of a lord of the ants. A few years after that Sunday in Mr. Specter’s class, at the pinnacle of my career as a hero of the imagination, I briefly transformed myself (more about this later) into a superpowered warrior-knight known as Aztec. And all that

I needed to effect the change was to fasten a terry-cloth beach towel around my neck.

It was not about escape, I wanted to tell Mr. Specter, thus unwittingly plagiarizing in advance the well-known formula of a (fictional) pioneer and theorist of superhero comics, Stan Lee. It was about transformation.

The American comic book predated the superhero, but just barely, and with so little distinction that in the cultural mind the medium has always seemed indistinguishable from its first stroke of brilliance. There were costumed crime-fighters before Superman (the Phantom, Zorro), but only as there were pop quartets before the Beatles. Superman invented and exhausted his genre in a single bound. All the tropes, all the diches and conventions, all the possibilities, all the longings and wishes and neuroses that have driven and fed and burdened the superhero comic during the past seventy years were implied by and contained within that little red rocket ship hurtling toward Earth. That moment—Krypton exploding, Action Comics No. 1—is generally seen to be Minute Zero of the superhero idea.

About the reasons for the arrival of Superman at that zero moment there is less agreement. In the theories of origin put forward by fans, critics, and other origin-obsessives, the idea of Superman has been accounted the offspring or re-capitulation, in no particular order, of Friedrich Nietzsche; of Philip Wylie (in his novel “Gladiator”); of the strengths, frailties, and neuroses of his creators, Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, of Cleveland, Ohio; of the aching wishfulness of the Great Depression; of the (Jewish) immigrant experience; of the mastermind stratagems of popular texts in their sinister quest for reader domination; of repressed Oedipal fantasies and homoerotic wishes; of fascism; of capitalism; of the production modes of mass culture (and not in a good way); of celebrated strongmen and propo-
cultural trends but a story, the intersection of a wish and the tip of a pencil.

Now the time has come to propose, or confront, a fundamental truth: like the being who wears it, the superhero costume is, by definition, an impossible object. It cannot exist.

One may easily find suggestive evidence for this assertion at any large comic-book convention by studying the spectacle of the brave and bold convention attendees, those members of the general comics-fan public who show up in costume and go shapaturing around the ballrooms and exhibition halls dressed as Wolverine, say, or the Joker’s main squeeze, Harley Quinn. Without exception, even the most splendid of these get-ups is at best a disappointment. Every seam, every cobweb strand of duct-tape gum, every laddered fish-net stocking or visible ridge of underwear elastic—every stray mark, pulled thread, speck of dust—acts to spoil what is instantly revealed to have been, all along, an illusion.

The appearance of realism in a superhero costume made from real materials is generally recognized to be difficult to pull off, and many such costumes do not even bother to simulate the presumable effect on the eye and the spirit of the beholder were Black Bolt to stride, trailing a positronic lace of Kirby crackle, into a ballroom of the Overland Park Marriott. This disappointing air of saggy trouser seats, bunched underarms, and wobbly shoulder vanes may be the result of imaginative indolence, the sort that would permit a grown man to tell himself he will find gratification in walking the exhibition floor wearing a pair of Dockers, a Jägermeister hoodie, and a rubber Venom mask complete with punched-out eyeholes and flopping rubber backwurst of a tongue.

But realism is not, in fact, merely difficult; it is hopeless. A plausibly heroic physique is of no avail in this regard, nor is even the most fervent willingness to believe in oneself as the man or woman in the cape. Even those costumed conventioners who go all out, working year-round to amass, scrounge, or counterfeit cleverly the materials required to put together, with glue gun, soldering iron, makeup, and needle and thread, a faithful and accurate Black Canary or Ant-Man costume, find themselves prey to forces, implacable as gravity, of tawdrieness, gimmickry, and unwitting self-ridicule. And in the end they look no more like Black Canary or Ant-Man than does the poor zibub in the Venom mask with a three-day pass hanging around his neck on a lanyard.

This sad outcome even in the wake of thousands of dollars spent and months of hard work given to sewing and to packing foam rubber into helmets has an obvious, an unavoidable, explanation: a superhero’s costume is constructed not of fabric, foam rubber, or adamantium but of halftone dots, Pantone color values, inked containment lines, and all the cartoonist’s slight of hand. The superhero costume as drawn disavows the customary relationship in the fashion world between
sketch and garment. It makes no suggestions. It has no agenda. Above all, it is not waiting to find fulfillment as cloth draped on a body. A constructed superhero costume is a replica with no original, a model built on a scale of x1. However accurate and detailed, such a work has the tiniest airlessness of a model-train layout but none of the gravitas that such little railyards and townscape derive from making faithful reference to homely things. The graphic purity of the superhero costume means that the more effort and money you lavish on fine textiles, metal grommets, and leather trim the deeper your costume will be sucked into the silliness singularity that swallowed, for example, Joel Schumacher’s Batman and Robin and their four nipples.

In fact, the most reliable proof of the preposterousness of superhero attire whenever it is translated, as if by a Kugelmass device, from the pages of comics to the so-called real world can be found in film and television adaptations of superhero characters. George Reeves’s stodgy pajamas-like affair in the old “Superman” TV series and Adam West’s mod doll clothes in “Batman” have lately given way to purportedly more “realistic” versions, in rubber, leather, and plastic, pseudo-utilitarian coveralls that draw inspiration in equal measure from spacesuits, catsuits, and scuba suits, and from (one presumes) regard for the dignity of actors who have seen the old George Reeves and Adam West shows, and would not be caught dead in those glorified Underoos. In its attempts to slip the confines of the panelled page, the superhero costume betrays its nonexistence, like one of those deep-sea creatures which evolved to thrive in the crushing darkness of the seabed, so that when you haul them up to the dazzling surface they burst.

One might go farther and argue not only that the superhero costume has (and needs) no referent in the world of textiles and latex but also that, even within its own proper comic-book context, it can be said not to exist, not to want to exist—can be said to advertise, even to revel in, its own notional status. This illusionary quality of the drawn costume can readily be seen if we attempt to delimit the elements of the superhero wardrobe, to inventory its minimum or requisite components.

We can start by throwing away our masks. Superman, arguably the first and the greatest of all costumed heroes, has never bothered with one, nor have Captain Marvel, Luke Cage, Wonder Woman, Valéryia, and Supergirl. All those individuals, like many of their peers (Hulkman, Giant-Man), also go around barehanded, which suggests that we can safely dispense with our gauntlets (whether finned, rolled, or worn with a jaunty slash at the cuff). Capes have been an object of scorn among discerning superheroes at least since 1974, when Captain America, having abandoned his old career in protest over Watergate, briefly took on the nom de guerre Nomad, dressed himself in a piratical ensemble of midnight blue and gold, and brought his first exploit as a stateless hero to an in-

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“I’ll keep thinking inside the box as long as they let me smoke in the box.”

A glorious end by tripping over his own flowing cloak.

So let’s lose the cape. As for the boots—we are not married to the boots. After all, Iron Fist sports a pair of long-fu slippers, the Spirit wears brown brogues, Zatanna works her magic in stiletto heels, and Beast, Ka-Zar, and Mantis wear no shoes at all. Perhaps, though, we had better hold on to our unitards, crafted of some nameless but readily available fabric that, like a thin matte layer, at once coats and divulges the splendor of our musculature. Assemble the collective, all-time memberships of the Justice League of America, the Justice Society of America, the Avengers, the Defenders, the Invaders, the X-Men, and the Legion of Super-Heroes (and let us not forget the Legion of Substitute Heroes), and you will probably find that almost all of them, from Nighthawk to the Chlorophyll Kid, arrive wearing some version of the classic leotard-tights ensemble. And yet—not everyone. Not Wonder Woman, in her star-spangled hot pants and eagle bustier; nor the Incredible Hulk or Martian Manhunter or the Sub-Mariner.

Consideration of the last named leads us to cast a critical eye, finally, on our little swim trunks, typically worn with a belt, pioneered by Kit Walker (for the Ghost Who Walks), the Phantom of the old newspaper strip, and popularized by the super-trendsetter of Metropolis. The Sub-Mariner wears nothing but a Eurotrashy green Speedo, suggesting that, at least by the decency standards of the old Comics Code, this minimal garment marks the zero degree of supereroic attire. And yet, of course, the Flash, Green Lantern, and many others make do without trunks over their tights; the forgiving of trunks in favor of a continuous flow of fabric from legs to torso is frequently employed to lend a suggestion of speed, sleekness, a kind of uncluttered modernism. And the Hulk never goes around in anything but those tattered purple trousers.

So we are left with, literally, nothing at all: the human form, undorned, smooth, muscled, and ready, let’s say, to sail the starry ocean of the cosmos on the deck of a gleaming surfboard. A naked spaceman, sheathed in a silvery pseudoskin that affords all the protection one needs from radiation and cosmic dust while meeting Code standards by neatly neutering one, the shining void between the legs serving to signify that one is not (as one often appears to be when seen from behind) nased as an interstellar jaquard.

There is a central paradox of superhero attire: from panther black to lantern green, from the faintly Hapsburg pom, of the fifties-era Legion of Super-Heroes costumes to the “Mad Max” space grunge of Lobo, from sexy fishnet to vibratium—for all the mad recombinant play of color, style, and materials that the superhero costume makes with its limited number of standard components, it ultimately takes its deepest meaning and serves its primary function in the depiction of the naked human form, unfettered, perfect, and free. The superheroic wardrobe resembles a wildly permuted alphabet of ideograms conceived only to express the eloquent power of silence.

A public amnesia, an avowed lack of history, is the standard pretense of the costumed superhero. From the point of view of the man or woman or child in the street, gazing up at the sky and skyscrapers, the appearance of a new hero over Metropolis or New York or Astro City is always a matter of perfect astonishment. There have been no portents or warnings, and afterward one never learns anything new or gains any explanations.

The story of a superhero’s origin must be kept secret, occulted as rigorously from public knowledge as the alter ego, as if it were a source of shame. Superman conceals, archived in the Fortress of Solitude and accessible only to him, not only his own history—the facts and tokens of his birth and arrival on Earth, of his Smallville childhood, of his exploits and adventures—but the history of his Kryptonian family and, indeed, of his entire race. Batman similarly hides his story and its proofs in the trophy chambers of the Batcave.

In theory, the costume forms part of the strategy of concealment. But in fact the superhero’s costume often functions as a kind of magic screen onto which the repressed narrative may be projected. No matter how well he or she hides its traces, the secret narrative of transformation, of rebirth, is given up by the costume. Sometimes this secret is betrayed through the allusion of style or form: Robin’s gaudy uniform hints at the murder of his circus-acrobat parents, Iron Man’s at the flawed heart that requires a life-support device, which is the primary function of his armor.
More often, the secret narrative is hinted at with a kind of enigmatic, dreamlike obviousness right on the hero’s chest or belt buckle, in the form of the requisite insignia. Superman’s “S,” we have been told, only coincidentally stands for Superman: in fact, the emblem is the coat of arms of the ancient Kryptonian House of El, from which he descends. A stylized bat alludes to the animal whose chance flight through a window sealed Bruce Wayne’s fate; a lightning bolt encapsulates the secret history of Captain Marvel; an eight-legged glyph immortalizes the bug whose bite doomed Peter Parker to his glorious and woebegone career.

We say “secret identity,” and adopt a series of cloaking strategies to preserve it, but what we are actually trying to conceal is a narrative: not who we are but the story of how we got that way—and, by implication, of all that we lacked, and all that we were not, before the spider bit us. Yet our costume conceals nothing, reveals everything: it is our secret skin, exposed and exposing us for all the world to see. Superheroism is a kind of transvestitism; our superdrag serves at once to obscure the exterior self that no longer defines us while betraying, with half-unconscious panache, the truth of the story we carry in our hearts, the story of our transformation, of our story’s recommencement, of our rebirth into the world of adventure, of story itself.

I became Aztec in the summer of 1973, in Columbia, Maryland, a planned suburban utopia halfway between Smallville and Metropolis. It happened one summer day as I was walking to the swimming pool with a friend. I wore a pair of midnight-blue bathing trunks; my trunks were loud, with patches of pink, orange, gold, and brown overprinted with abstract patterns that we took for Aztec (though they were probably Polynesian). In those days, a pair of bathing trunks did not in the least resemble the baggy board shorts that boys and men wear swimming today. Ours were made of stretchy polyester doubleknit that came down the thigh just past the level of the crotch, and fashion fitted them with a sewn-on, false belt of elastic webbing that buckled at the front with a metal clasp. They looked, in other words, just like the trunks favored by costumed heroes ever since the last son of Krypton came vogueing down the super-catwalk, back in 1938. Around our throats we knotted our beach towels (his was blue, mine a fine 1973 shade of burnt orange), those enchanted cloaks whose power Mr. Spector had failed to understand or to recall from his own childhood. They fluttered out behind us, catching the breeze from our imaginations, as Darklord and Aztec walked along.

Darklord carried a sword, and wore a Barbara helmet, with a flowing crusader cloak and invulnerable chain mail of “lunar steel.” Aztec wore tights and a feathered cloak and wielded a magic staff tipped with obsidian. We had begun the journey that day, through the street-melting, shimmering green Maryland summer morning, as a pair of lonely boys with nothing in common but that loneliness, which we shared with Superman and Batman, who shared it with each other—a fundamental loneliness and a wild aptitude for transformation. But with every step we became Darklord and Aztec a little more surely, a little more irrevocably, transformed by the green-lantern rays of fancy, by the spider bite of inspiration, by the story we were telling each other and ourselves about two costumed superheroes, about the new selves that had been revealed by our secret skin.

Talking, retying the knots of our capes, flip-flops slipping against the soles of our feet, we transformed not only ourselves. In the space of that walk to the pool we also transformed the world, shaping it into a place in which such things were possible: the reincarnation of an Arthurian knight could find solace and partnership in the company of a latter-day Mesoamerican wizard. An entire world of superhuman adventure could be dreamed up by a couple of boys from Columbia, or Cleveland. And the self you knew you contained, the story you knew you had inside you, might find its way as an emblem onto the spot right over your heart. All we needed was to accept the standing invitation that superhero comics extended to us by means of a towel. It was an invitation to enter into the world of story, to join in the ongoing business of comic books, and, with the knotting of a magical beach towel, to begin to wear what we knew to be hidden inside us.

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Michael Chabon talks about superheroes.