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Title: Waiting for Autistic Superman: The Problematic Past and Possible Future of Autistic Superheroes.

Abstract: Over the past 30 years, representations of autistic characters in superhero comics have been very rare and mostly wrong, even as autistic presence has increased dramatically in film, television, popular fiction, and other media. This paper constructs a provisional taxonomy of autistic representation in superhero comics, suggesting they appear in *named*, *coded*, *claimed*, and *allegorical* iterations. This essay focuses on illustrative examples of autistic superheroes from each category of representation. More specifically, I examine the first named autistic superhero to appear, Dehman Doosha, as well as the most famous named autistic superhero, Reed Richard/Mr. Fantastic. I also discuss two additional superheroes who appear alongside Reed and Dehman—the coded autistic character Michael Crawley, and the allegorical autistic character the Thing. I consider these characters from the theoretical perspective of disability studies, arguing that these comics have pathologized autism, promoted the institutionalization of neurodiverse individuals, or allegorized neurodevelopmental differences in ways that fail to advance Thunberg’s notion of autism as a “superpower.” Most critically, I argue that superhero comics are influential cultural narratives that shape social perceptions about autism. Accordingly, I conclude by imagining a possible future for autistic superheroes, calling for neurodivergent and neurotypical artists alike to develop narratives that counter previous, pathologizing depictions of autism by showing the lived experiences of authentic autistic characters.

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In an August 2019 tweet, Greta Thunberg likened her Asperger syndrome to a “superpower,” invoking a term that first appeared, not surprisingly, during the Golden Age of American Comics. The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that the word was first used to mean “a fictional superhuman power, esp. possessed by a superhero” in the comic *Supersnipe* in 1945. The usage occurs when the comic’s protagonist, Supersnipe, warns two prison escapees that he’ll “use all of my [his] superpowers” to prevent their breakout (Marcoux, 1945, p.37). In reality, the character Supersnipe is a Walter Mitty figure, an imaginative boy conjuring fantasies derived from the comic books he loves. The final panel of the prisoner episode reveals that our hero is actually struggling against two real-world bullies who are trying to snap him out of his daydream. *Supersnipe* as a whole, then, is decidedly self-aware, even metafictional,

a comic book about comic books decades before *Watchmen*. Moreover, the first use of the word *superpower*—its origin story, if you like—draws attention to the fictionality of this idea and its rootedness in the superhero genre.

When Thunberg uses *superpower* to describe her autism, she is voicing a key tenet of the neurodiversity movement—namely, that neurological differences should be viewed as assets, not liabilities. Peter Smagorinsky (2016) has called his own autism his “Asperger’s Advantage,” for example, arguing that it has equipped him well for a career in academia (p. 53). As Thunberg herself wrote in the tweet, “I have Aspergers and that means I’m sometimes a bit different than the norm. And—given the right circumstances—being different is a superpower.” In this sense, Thunberg is right to view her own dedication and focus as extraordinary gifts that are part and parcel of her autism. Her tweet does prompt a deeper investigation, however, into the complicated relationship between superhero comics and neurological difference. Given Thunberg’s claim, it is crucial to ask how superhero comics, both historical and contemporary, have represented autism. Doing so means examining whether these comics reflect the advancement of medical knowledge, the accompanying increase in public awareness about the disability, and the emergence of autistic culture that have occurred in recent decades.

Such an examination is important because, as Stuart Murray (2008) reminds us, cultural narratives about autism have the power to “reorient ideas about what autism might mean” (p.5). Murray notes the recent increase of “autistic presence” in a range of popular media, including film, television, and young adult and contemporary fiction. In the US, recent examples of representation include *Atypical*, a Netflix television series in its third season; *The Accountant*, a 2016 film starring Ben Affleck; and *Lake Success*, a 2018 novel by Gary Shteyngart. Not all of these fictional representations will have the outsized effect of the *Rain Man* (1988) or *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* by Mark Haddon (2003), two examples of autism “events” in Murray’s terminology (p.13), but collectively, they shape public understanding of autism. Consequently, superhero comics that feature autistic characters demand critical attention.

My own analysis of autistic superheroes, who appear only rarely in comics, extends the work of Murray (2008), Loftis (2015), and Yergeau (2018), scholars who have examined the representation of autism in the popular media, classic and contemporary literature, scientific journals, and public discourse. To their work I add recent scholarship focused on the representation of other disabilities in literature (Quayson, 2007), in the comics medium (Foss, Grey, & Whalen, 2016), and particularly in the superhero genre (Alaniz, 2015). To my knowledge, the present essay is the first extended analysis of autistic characters in superhero comics, no doubt because autistic superheroes, at least explicitly identified ones, have been almost entirely missing from the pages of mainstream comics. As I discuss the presence and absence of autistic superheroes, their visibility and invisibility, I construct a provisional taxonomy of autistic representation in superhero comics, suggesting they appear in *named*, *coded*, *claimed*, and *allegorical* iterations. This essay focuses on illustrative examples of autistic superheroes from each category of representation. More specifically, I examine the first named autistic superhero to appear, Dehman Doosha, as well as the most famous named autistic superhero, Reed Richard/Mr. Fantastic. I also discuss two additional superheroes who appear alongside Reed and Dehman—the coded autistic character Michael Crawley, and the allegorical autistic character the Thing. As we will see, there is a generative tension between overtly identified and implicit representations of autism in superhero comics, one that ultimately produces a deeper, more nuanced understanding of Thunberg’s claim of autism as a superpower.

The Demon Within: Named Autistic Presence in Marvel’s New Universe

The first explicitly named autistic character to appear in a superhero comic is Dehman Doosha (a.k.a. Johnny Do), a paranormal teenager who appears in *Psi Force*, one of the eight Marvel titles created for the short-lived New Universe (1986-1989). In most narratives containing named autistic characters, medical terminology is employed to explain the condition, and autism itself is central to characterization and plot development. Barry Levinson’s film *Rain Man* (1988) is the first significant example of a named representation. Within the first 20 minutes of the film, we learn from a facility psychiatrist at Wallbrook, the private institution where Raymond lives, that Raymond is an “autistic savant.” The drama of the

remainder of the film, of course, results from Raymond's autistic behaviors in hotels, restaurants, airports, and small towns. The vast majority of narratives with named characters like Raymond are written by neurotypical authors, though many have personal experiences with autistic family members or friends.

Psi Force and Dehman Doosha were part of Marvel's New Universe lineup, which was launched on its twenty-fifth anniversary with the intent of offering fans a world completely removed from other Marvel storyline and characters. In theory, these new titles were to be more realistic, offering a glimpse into "the universe outside your window," in the words of then-editor Jim Shooter (as cited in Dallas & Sacks, 2013, p.153). *Psi Force* tells the story of five teenagers who gain paranormal abilities after a mysterious "White Event," an earth-wide psychic shockwave. The teens—Wayne Tucker, Michael Crawley, Tyrone Jessup, Kathy Ling, and Anastasi Inyushin—each gain unique mental abilities. Collectively, the teenagers can summon a powerful psionic entity called the Psi Hawk, who appears in the form of Emmett Proudhawk, the deceased Native American founder of Psi Force. Their newly acquired powers make them highly coveted by military intelligence and other government organizations, and the plot of the 32 issues of the comic revolves around them fleeing or fighting these sinister agencies. Dehman Doosha is introduced near the end of the series, in issue 23, which was published in September of 1988, just three months prior to the theater release of *Rain Man*. Before this film brought public attention to autism, autistic characters were exceedingly rare, not just in film, but in any fictional narrative, including television and literature (Silberman, 2015). That *Psi Force*, a mainstream comic, included an autistic superhero in 1988, is quite remarkable in and of itself, given this scarcity of autistic representation. Why then might Fabian Nicieza, the chief writer of the later *Psi Force* issues, create an autistic superhero?

One answer might lie in the history of Marvel Comics, whose iconic Silver Age characters were physically or psychologically flawed (Alaniz, 2015). The disabilities of these characters—Iron Man, Daredevil, Charles Xavier—were in fact by design, an essential part of the Stan Lee formula during the early 1960s, a deliberate gambit to add emotional depth, realism, and drama to the superhero genre, and a purposeful contrast to the mostly perfect superheroes of the Golden Age. Alaniz (2015) argues that many

Marvel Silver Age characters with disabilities are given compensatory superpowers that allow them to succeed. Matt Murdock (Daredevil) is blinded in a childhood accident, for instance, but the accident also gives him heightened senses that more than make up for his impaired vision. The drama of Silver Age comics, according to Alaniz, was generated when superheroes like Daredevil tried to contend with their dual identities, their imperfect, disabled human side in perpetual conflict with their extraordinary, superhuman side. In including an autistic character, then, Nicieza was continuing the Marvel tradition of the disabled anti-hero, a fitting tribute to Stan Lee and his vision on Marvel's twenty-fifth anniversary.

Still, why settle on autism? Did Nicieza have personal experience with autism, as was true for both Barry Morrow and Dustin Hoffman, the writer and star of *Rain Man* (Silberman 2015)? Does Dehman Doosha owe his existence to someone Nicieza knew, perhaps an autistic friend or even relative? In a Twitter conversation with me, Nicieza explained that this was *not* the case:

I have to be honest, I don't know what led me back then to create Johnny [Dehman]. I know since it was my first book, I was doing anything I could to differentiate myself from the other writers. I had wanted to make Tyrone in the book gay, but I also knew we weren't able to do that back then. I think the autism was just to have a character that would generate drama and conflict within the group while also being something unique to comics. I had no experience with autism in my family . . . I am far more aware of it now than I was back then. (personal communication, January 8, 2020)

Nicieza's explanation is both honest and telling. Brand new to comics writing and under pressure to keep a flagging, underfunded title alive (Dallas & Sacks, 2013), Nicieza sought to distinguish himself from his peers. His response also clearly invokes the language of difference: he recollects that a gay African-American superhero (Tyrone) was too different for Marvel and its readers, but an autistic character was just different enough to generate attention and, in the service of the story, to create dramatic tension. It is worth mentioning that in the late 1980s, Marvel and its competitors were still operating under the auspices of the Comics Code Authority, and this regulatory body, though much weakened since its founding in the 1950s, nevertheless forbade mainstream comics from including gay or lesbian themes

and characters. Thus differences in sexual orientation or gender identity were disallowed, but differences in neurology, including autistic differences, were permitted.

The first appearance of Dehman Doosha establishes his autistic differences immediately and unmistakably. The single panel shown in Figure 1 contains a world of signifiers. To begin, Dehman looks every bit the institutionalized madman. He is confined in a solitary padded cell, wearing a straitjacket and a mask that evokes the metal “insanity mask” of Victorian-era asylums. Dehman is being held at the Siberian Project for Paranormal Research, whose mission is to create Soviet super-soldiers. This first glimpse of Dehman occurs when a visiting KGB officer named Sergei is inspecting the institution. As Sergei looks on, a scientist named Anya views Dehman through a surveillance camera, further distancing him and positioning him as an object of medical study. Murray notes that this “voyeuristic dimension, the idea that the person with autism is open to study” is common to cultural narratives surrounding autism (2008, p. 31). In a speech box below the panel, Anya puns on his name, which is pronounced like “demon” and translates, at least within the comic, to “the demon within.” His name seems to contain both Russian (демон, “demon,”) and Sanskrit (dosha, “bodily element”), adding to his exotic, dangerous otherness. Even in English, the name Dehman looks strikingly like “de-human.” In image and language, then, Dehman is demonized and dehumanized, a creature inspiring fascination but more critically, fear.

The fear that Dehman provokes is evident in the conditions of his incarceration and the ongoing efforts to control his behavior. Unlike his fellow paranormals housed at the institute, Dehman is held in solitary confinement, but not because his extraordinary psychic abilities allow him to start fires with his mind. The scientists fear Dehman because his autism—his extreme autistic difference—makes his paranormal superpowers unpredictable and unmanageable. Indeed, Anya tells Sergei that he is at fault for thinking that an “*autistic* [emphasis original] paranormal child” can be controlled (Nicieza, 1988, issue 23, p. 7). Controlling Dehman is a top priority, even as other paranormals with equally deadly superpowers are expected to train with institute scientists. One such character, Shivowtnoeh (Russian for “animal”) has transformed permanently into a wild beast with horns, claws, and fangs, but even she is somehow less threatening, more human than the autistic teenager. The struggle to control Dehman

reaches a crisis point when he badly burns a scientist during a training exercise. In response, the institution scientists and their Russian overseers consider killing Dehman, but decide instead to lobotomize him, planning to neutralize his uncontrollable disability, autism, while retaining his more valuable paranormal ability, pyrokinesis.

[Insert Figure 1]

The first autistic superhero thus exemplifies what Ato Quayson (2007) labels “disability as a moral deficit/evil” (p.61). In short, Dehman is a monster, and autism is the underlying cause. It is important to note that the *villains* of the story see Dehman this way. The Russian scientists and their KGB overseers are the main antagonists of the later *Psi Force* issues, the very sort of communist bad guy popular in American popular culture (*Red Dawn*, *Rocky IV*) during the late stages of the Cold War. Their inhumane treatment of Dehman, in fact, is meant to be contrasted to the compassion shown by the Americans. If the Russians demonize Dehman, then the story arc shows the Americans—at least those in *Psi Force*—making efforts to humanize him. This begins when Thomas Boyd, an American GI and *Psi Force* member also being held at the Siberian Project, shows sympathy for Dehman when he encounters him for the first time: “Autistic?” And they’re using guns and clubs on him?” (Nicieza, 1988, issue 25, p.11). Shortly thereafter, Boyd uses his own paranormal abilities to rescue Dehman during the lobotomy surgery. Then he forces the institution scientists to let him become Dehman’s caretaker:

I want to know why you’re treating paranormals like this—like lab animals. What you’re doing is wrong. It’s what we fought against in America and we’ll do it again here if we have to. Leave the kid with me then you leave us both alone. I’ll work with him. I’ll improve his condition. In return, neither one of us will bother tearing this filthy place down. (Nicieza, 1988, issue 25, pp.20-21)

The subject of this negotiation between an American and his Russian enemies, Dehman serves as a kind of moral litmus test for the characters around him (Quayson, 2007). Success or failure is determined by the treatment of the autistic character. In this role, Dehman is similar to many disabled characters, including Raymond Babbitt, who casts the selfishness and insensitivity of his brother, Charlie, into sharp relief against the innate kindness of Charlie’s girlfriend, Susanna.

But Dehman also serves to “metaphorize cultural states,” in Murray’s language (2008, p.75), here underscoring the larger ideological clash between America and Russia. Thomas Boyd’s promise to “improve [Dehman’s] condition” expresses an essentially American optimism, one rooted in the medical model that suggests autism requires fixing and can be fixed. Over the next few issues, Dehman becomes a kind of autistic home improvement project. To begin, Thomas renames him Johnny Do, a name at once anonymous and decidedly American. This is an act of linguistic exorcism—Dehman is cast out—and expatriation, as Thomas draws on the American legal tradition of naming unknown individuals “John Doe” or “Jane Doe.” The name “Johnny Do” may also be a purposeful echo of Johnny Storm, another fire-powered, all-American superhero. Thus renamed and reborn as an American superhero, Johnny Do trains with Psi Force, becomes a full-fledged team member, and plays a key role in defeating the arch-villain of the story, a mentally unstable Russian paranormal named Rodstvow.

Rodstvow has his own symbolic role to play: alternately known as “The People’s Hero,” his monstrous appearance and ongoing mental and physical deterioration stand in for communism, making him a disabled character who represents both ideological otherness and moral evil (Quayson, 2007). In the end, fittingly, it is Johnny Do who deals the death blow to Rodstvow, seemingly signaling the triumph of American values. However, Psi Force only wins by deliberately placing Thomas Boyd in danger, thereby triggering Johnny’s fatal attack. If, as Alaniz (2015) suggests, superheroes are a “shorthand for American values and their global perception” (p. 4), then Johnny seems to represent those values incompletely, perhaps reflecting the moral rectitude, reinvention, ingenuity, and teamwork of America, but noticeably lacking agency, autonomy, and self-reliance.

The last few issues of *Psi Force* also show Johnny Do learning to speak, thanks to the persistent efforts of Thomas Boyd. Early in the story, Dehman’s speech bubbles are filled with letter sequences that represent the patterned, repeated vocalizations of non-verbal autistics. Johnny seems to prefer the “Ayayay!” sound, which he is shown articulating on multiple occasions. In the final issue, however, Johnny utters a single sentence, telling Thomas “I love you!” (Niecieza, 1989, issue 32, p. 24) (Figure 2). This certainly *feels* like a good resolution for both characters. Thomas Boyd has evolved from hunting

paranormals (issue 5) to caring for one, and Johnny has survived his trauma of his institutionalization and found a caring father figure in Thomas. In addition, Johnny has gained a protective extended family in Psi Force. Two founding members of Psi Force, Wayne and Kathy, get engaged in the final issue of the series, adding to the supergroup-as-family ethos that pervades many Marvel super-teams (Fingeroth, 2004), and again echoing the *Fantastic Four*.

[Insert Figure 2]

As emotionally satisfying as the conclusion may be, Johnny's first (and only) expression of love seems familiar to modern readers of disability narratives. We are accustomed to this kind of triumph in stories about individuals with disabilities, and perhaps especially gratified when autistic characters overcome their condition, even temporarily, through the acquisition of language, through expressions of empathy, or through other behaviors that reveal their humanity. Murray (2008) is again illuminating:

The 'overcoming' narrative is so dominant in the representation of disability that it almost seems there is no alternative. If those with disabilities *don't* struggle against the limitations their conditions impose and make us all the richer for it, then what exactly *is* the story? As seemingly the most enigmatic of conditions, autism fits the demands of such popular narratives perfectly. There is . . . such a space to travel between autistic otherness and full neurobehavioral normality . . . (p. xvi)

From his introduction in issue 23, where he enters the *Psi Force* story as the embodiment of dangerous autistic difference, to his declaration of love for Thomas in the ultimate issue, a verbalized expression of devotion that satisfies neuronormative familial and expectations, Dehman/Johnny exemplifies the "overcoming" narrative of Murray's description. That he gains speech and learns to be affectionate within the context of a supportive surrogate family also points to another common theme in cultural narratives about autism: the idea that neurotypical parental nurturing—or its absence, particularly from mothers—is crucial in bettering or worsening the condition of the autistic child (Murray, 2008).

On the whole, then, the first named autistic superhero is a pioneering but complicated figure who offers a rare but troubling glimpse of autistic presence in the superhero genre. In Dehman/Johnny, *Psi*

Force gives us a character who has incredible power, but who is demonized, metaphorized, and, finally, sentimentalized. To return to Greta Thunberg, it seems unlikely that she would find Dehman/Johnny to be a positive portrayal of autism or to encapsulate what she meant by her own autistic “superpower.”

Ironically, it may be another member of *Psi Force*, the coded but not named autistic character Michael Crawley, who provides a better example of an autistic superhero—one hidden in plain sight.

The Standard-Issue Brainy Kid: Coded Autistic Presence in *Psi Force*

A coded autistic or non-specified character (Irwin et al., 2015) displays traits and behaviors that suggest autism but ultimately leaves the diagnosis to the reader, regardless of authorial intent (Quayson, 2007) or whether the character predates the modern medical understanding of autism. If autism has always been around, it stands to reason that fictional autistic characters have been around too, existing under other names or descriptors. The title character of Melville’s short story “Bartleby the Scrivener” (1853), for example, is frequently cited as a coded autistic character. In the absence of a precise autism label, literature scholars generally use a medical framework to diagnose coded characters such as Bartleby, proceeding by citing textual instances of impaired social communication or narrow interests, for example (Fitzgerald, 2005; Brown 2010).

It is, however, equally important to discuss coded characters from a sociocultural point of view, going beyond the textual treasure hunt to theorize what the narrative says about the nature of neurological difference. In his analysis of “Bartleby the Scrivener,” for example, Murray argues that autistic presence is *the* defining theme of the story—the story, in other words, is all about how autistic presences are misread and misinterpreted (2008, p.57). A more current example of a coded autistic character may be Oskar, the child narrator of Jonathan Saffron Foer’s *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). As Loftis (2015) argues, Oskar’s social awkwardness, narrow interest in numbers, and sensory behaviors all point to autism. More problematically, Oskar, like Johnny Do, takes on metaphorical significance: his impaired social communication, Loftis observes, seem to represent our collective inability to find meaning after the 9/11 terror attacks, the personal “tragedy” of autism thus erroneously equated with the larger tragedy of 9/11 (p.109).

Like Bartleby and Oskar, Michael Crawley is a coded autistic character. An original member of Psi Force, Michael is a paranormal teenager who can blow up things with his mind. His character leaves the Psi Force team after only 12 issues, but he is worth examining, largely because as a non-specified character, he seems more resistant to the stereotypes that adhere more readily to named autistic characters. Identifying a coded autistic character involves interpretation and judgment, and as Quayson (2007) notes, it is “an elusive and fraught process” (p. 187) that risks advancing reductive models of autism. No doubt, there are many non-specified autistic characters in superhero comics that warrant careful examination. I focus here on Michael Crawley because he co-exists with Johnny Do in the same narrative universe, and the contrast in their depictions sheds light on my exploration of autism in superhero comics. Additionally, it seems delightfully subversive that the more genuinely autistic presence of Michael Crawley was there all along, even as the comic featured, albeit briefly, the problematic named autistic character of Dehman/Johnny. Michael Crawley’s narrative seems to undermine, in other words, the story that *Psi Force* wants to tell about autism.

Understanding Michael as autistic begins with his creator, Marvel’s Danny Fingeroth, who wrote many of the early *Psi Force* issues that featured Michael Crawley, as well as the special annual issue (1987) that chronicles his departure from Psi Force. In a Facebook exchange with me, Fingeroth described Michael as “a standard-issue brainy kid with a weird *special interest* [my emphasis] in bugs. Never labeled with a diagnosis” (personal communication, December 28, 2019). Of course, special interests have long been germane to the medical understanding of autism, and “restrictive, repetitive patterns of behaviors, interests, or activities” remains one of the two broad diagnostic criteria outlined in the *DSM-5* (2013). Special interests are especially prevalent in current cultural narratives about autism, where they are often linked with savantism. Michael’s “weird special interest” in entomology is evident in his very name, “Crawley,” as well as his derogatory nickname, “Creepy.”

Neurocognitive research (Baron-Cohen et al., 2009) has also demonstrated that autistic individuals have a tendency to “hyper-systematize,” or construct comprehensive systems of

categorization. Tellingly, the same study of hyper-systemization uses an explanatory example drawn from entomology:

The question ‘what is a beetle?’ is trivial for a neurotypical individual who simply answers in terms of a crude, imprecise and fuzzy category: ‘it is an insect’. It may, however, require a very long, exhaustive answer from someone with ASC [Autism Spectrum Condition]: beetles are members of the category of animal (kingdom), arthropods (phylum), insects (class), pterygota (subclass), neoptera (infraclass), endopterygota (superorder), coleoptera (order) . . .] (p. 1380).

In the opening panels of the annual issue (Figure 3, top row), we see Michael using this kind of specialized, systematic vocabulary about the insect exhibit at the science museum: “Look at this *Apis Mellitera* [sic]!” he raves to his Psi Force teammates, “Look . . . you can see the thorax and the mandibles! Oh, but the stinger is all wrong!” (Fingeroth, 1987, annual issue, p. 2) As a side note, Michael would also likely know the actual Latin name for the Western Honey Bee is *Apis Mellifera*. Michael’s appearance in these panels also underscores his special interest in insects. In the second panel of the top row, we view Michael from the inside of a display case, as he presses up against the glass while Tyrone and Stasi look on. Seemingly encased in glass himself, he looks momentarily to be an insect specimen, his oversized glasses, small stature, and extended fingers adding to the bug-like effect.

[Insert Figure 3]

In addition to his special interest, Michael is coded as autistic in other discernible ways. In the annual issue in particular, he exemplifies the “persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts” that constitute the second diagnostic criterion for autism (*DSM-5*, 2013). The first panel in the bottom row (non-sequential to previous) of Figure 3 shows Michael violating what linguists call pragmatics, or the unwritten rules that govern social communication: Michael realizes he has made the faulty presupposition that his teammates are equally fascinated by insects: “Oh geez! What an idiot I am,” he apologizes. “Not everybody’s, so, uh, interested in this kind of stuff” (Fingeroth, 1987, annual issue, p.2) The fourth and final panel (non-sequential) in Figure 3 continues the scene a few pages later, as the team works together in a garden. Here, Michael misunderstands his teammates’

communicative intent, mistaking their teasing for genuine hostility. When Michael suggests leaving after Wayne ribs him for knowing “everything there is to know about anything not important,” Tyrone steps in to explain, “Hey Mike, calm down! You’re reading us all wrong!” (p. 11). Tyrone’s language is suggestive: for Michael, reading people is far more challenging than reading information at the science museum.

Other signifiers in *Psi Force* also point to Michael’s autism. Separate incidents show him to be clumsy, naive, and emotionally dysregulated, his psychic explosive abilities triggered by moments of anger. Michael is also physically small—a “creepy little nerd” in the words of his teammate Wayne (Fingerroth, 1986, issue 2, p.27)—and while smallness is not correlated with autism, his diminutive size suggests he is more of a child than his peers in *Psi Force*, though they are actually the same age. As Murray observes (2008), children are disproportionately represented in cultural narratives about autism. Arguably, seeing Michael as a child makes it easier to see him as autistic. It is equally possible that his autistic otherness is communicated through his dwarfish stature in the same way that Ebony White’s physical smallness is wrapped into his representation as a racial outsider in Will Eisner’s *The Spirit*. All of these traits might earn Michael the name “nerd” or “brainy kid” in the late 1980s, but today, they suggest autism.

The critical consensus on *Psi Force* is that it was, like other New Universe titles, too derivative of existing Marvel comics (*X-Men*; *Fantastic Four*) and stocked with characters that no one liked or cared about. Four of its eight titles were canceled after only one year, and the remaining titles sold poorly, leading to the entire lineup being scrapped in 1989. And yet *Psi Force*, for all of this, can also be read as an early referendum on autistic difference and its place in society—a story about how and why autistic individuals are accepted or rejected by their neurotypical communities. This is most evident in the annual issue of *Psi Force*, in which Michael weighs leaving the group. His crisis is precipitated by the arrival of Thomas Boyd, a former enemy, who wants to join the team. Boyd’s presence, however, disrupts the chemistry of the original five members, and when all six summon Psi Hawk, it turns on them and nearly destroys them. In short, five is a superteam, but six is a crowd. In an act of Darwinian reckoning, Michael

judges himself to be capable of surviving on his own, and he goes into exile at the end of the annual issue. While he makes sporadic appearances with another New Marvel paranormal superteam and has a cameo in the final issue of *Psi Force*, for all practical purposes, Michael vanishes from the narrative. His disappearance is where the real meaning of the Psi Force story lies.

When Michael leaves Psi Force, he gives way to Thomas Boyd, who as we have seen, becomes the caretaker for the named autistic character Dehman/Johnny Do, who joins the team after another original member, Stasi Inyushin, is accidentally killed by the American military. In terms of the composition of the superteam, then, Michael Crawley is the precursor to Johnny, a coded autistic character giving way to a named one. The annual issue detailing Crawley's departure makes it clear that his autistic traits—geeking out at the science museum, talking too much about insects and other trivia, misreading his teammates—cause tension in the group, and that Michael has internalized the negative feelings towards him. Ironically, it is Michael's proximity to neurotypical behavior—he *almost* fits in—that ostracizes him, even among this unusual group of paranormal superheroes. Johnny Do, on the other hand, is more readily understood as *other* by the fictional members of Psi Force and by its real-world creators, both of whom position him as such. Unlike Michael, Johnny cannot pass as neurotypical, and he is not expected to follow neurotypical behavioral norms. He is thus many steps, not one step, removed from "the normate" (Garland Thomson, 1996, p.8).

This is the way autism existed in late 1980s popular culture—more freak show than geek show, more Johnny Do than Michael Crawley. If the short-lived *Psi Force* can serve as an object lesson about autistic representation, it suggests that early pop culture depictions of the disability framed it as something other, something monstrous, and that this framing was enabled by the lack of public knowledge about autism and the fear and fascination this ignorance bred. In *Psi Force*, this version of autism supplants a more subtle and potentially subversive coded autistic presence that, for all its stereotypical embodiments, nevertheless seems more in keeping with a contemporary understanding of autism and autistic culture. In three decades since *Psi Force*, the growth of autism research and a corresponding increase in public awareness has made fictional characters like Michael Crawley much, much easier to find. Crawley could

stand in for Oskar, the coded autistic narrator of the literary hit *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005) as easily as he could replace Sheldon Cooper, the coded autistic character on the popular television series *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-2019). As such characters have proliferated across genres and media, autistics themselves have become instrumental in identifying these representations, often drawing on their lived experiences and diagnoses to claim these characters. In the world of comics, one particular superhero, Mr. Fantastic of *Fantastic Four* (a.k.a. Reed Richards), has long drawn the scrutiny of autistic fans.

Mr. Fantastic, Mr. Autistic: Claiming and Naming Reed Richards

Reed Richards, or Mr. Fantastic, is a seminal character in the Marvel Universe, emblematic of the Silver Age collaboration between Jack Kirby and Stan Lee. His superteam, the Fantastic Four, has been a mainstay of Marvel for nearly 60 years, running almost uninterrupted for over 700 issues. In two fairly recent *Fantastic Four* series, Reed Richards has been overtly identified as autistic: first, in the Grant Morrison's *Marvel Knights: Fantastic Four 1234* in 2001-2002; and second, in Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa's *Season One* origin story in 2012. Before discussing these appearances, however, it is important to consider how Mr. Fantastic emerged as autistic, and this consideration begins with autistic fan communities and the practice of claiming characters.

Returning briefly to the taxonomy of autistic presence in cultural narratives, we can recognize a third type of autistic presence: the claimed character, or one who has been interpreted, recognized, and even championed by the autistic community. The birth and growth of the Internet has enabled autistic culture and advocacy (Dekker, 1999), and discussions surrounding claimed characters often occur in online spaces such as Usenet, in the early days of the internet, and Reddit, Tumblr, or podcasts today. In these public conversations, autistic fans claim characters, such as Lisbeth Salander from *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* franchise and Luna Lovegood from the *Harry Potter* series, who exhibit autistic traits and behaviors but who have not been clearly labeled as autistic. There is psychological and social significance to the act of claiming, as autistic individuals deliberately see versions of themselves in mainstream cultural narratives. To date, autism scholarship has not paid much attention to claimed characters, but

these characters are worth examining, particularly when many *named* autistic characters are alien, cloying, or stereotypical, written into existence by neurotypicals. As I will argue below, the Marvel character Mr. Fantastic is one such character and worthy of closer analysis.

In the mid-to-late 1990s, the development of the internet and the creation of autism-specific discursive spaces allowed claiming to flourish among online autistic communities. In Usenet groups such as alt.support.autism and bit.listserv.autism, now archived by Google, autistic individuals (and some neurotypicals) exchanged information and opinions on a wide range of topics, including speculation about which historical figures, celebrities, and fictional characters might be on the autism spectrum. The following post, written in 1999 by an alt.support.autism user named Andrew Stewart, typifies this kind of discussion:

I recently read an interesting thread in another newsgroup that an eminent expert in the field believes that Andy Warhol may have been an undiagnosed autistic. Based on what I know of Warhol, this doesn't surprise me. I've read here too that both Einstein and Erik Satie are believed to have been autistic. Somebody also mentioned Wittgenstein as a possibility. Does anybody know if there were any other great thinkers or talents from the past who were either diagnosed as autistic, or are now believed to have autism? (March 17, 1999)

In the thread that follows, Robin Williams, Bill Gates, Peter Sellers, Albert Einstein, Leonardo Da Vinci, Thomas Edison, Alan Turing, the Unabomber, Albert Camus, and Hans Asperger himself are all raised as possibilities.

There are many such archived discussions, and they often include fictional characters who might be autistic. Frequently mentioned in these discussions are the *Star Trek* characters Spock, Data, Julian Bashir, Seven of Nine, and T'Pol; television sitcom characters such as the Solomons from *3rd Rock from the Sun*, the children's character Paddington Bear; and the film characters Forrest Gump, Edward Scissorhands, and Napoleon Dynamite, among others. Comic book characters are less often claimed as autistic, though Marvel's Peter Parker/Spiderman, the Silver Surfer, and Bruce Banner/Hulk are suggested by one user named tenenryu in a March 25, 1999 post. Had *Psi Force* been a commercial or

critical success, Michael Crawley may have been among these claimed autistic superheroes. To my knowledge, however, Reed Richards/Mr. Fantastic was *not* discussed as autistic in the Usenet archive, though some of the posts are irrecoverable, and other early internet forms of electronic communication, such as listservs and bulletin boards, are lost to history.

Nevertheless, it seems likely that autistic fans claimed Mr. Fantastic long before Marvel officially named him as such. To begin, the longevity, popularity, and status of *The Fantastic Four* means that readers have access to hundreds of readily available back issues, a veritable Reed Richards corpus. This alone has generated a wide range of fan sites, including some run by autistic curators who specialize in the history of the *Fantastic Four*. The most extensive of these is maintained by Chris Tolworthy, an autistic fan of the *Fantastic Four* whose site argues that the comic constitutes the Great American Novel—or more specifically, that first 322 issues (1961-1989) known as the “original continuity” warrant this title. For Tolworthy, these issues show the characters evolving in response to shifting social, economic, and cultural conditions in America. Reed’s autistic traits emerge as part of this evolution, as he moves from the heavily-muscled, extroverted, and even-keeled leader depicted in the early issues of the 1960s to an entirely more complex character in the following decades. By 1970, Tolworthy observes, Reed’s traits and behaviors indicate autism. Reed possesses a narrow scientific intelligence; he struggles with neurotypical emotional responses; he spends days isolated in his laboratory obsessing over research; he lacks social awareness, especially in his relationships with team members Ben, Johnny, and Sue; he prefers solitude to company; he frequently avoids eye contact; he is inappropriately verbose; he takes things literally; and he is upset by changes to his routine (Tolworthy, 2012).

While *Fantastic Four* has been written by many authors over its 50-year lifespan, it was the vision of its co-creator, Jack Kirby, that really allowed autistics to claim Reed Richards, according to Tolworthy. In a Facebook messenger exchange with me, Tolworthy explained,

Kirby did not have to say ‘this is an autistic character.’ Autism was barely on the radar back then, but it did not need to be for Kirby. Kirby wrote about the people around him, from direct

experience. He understood the BIGGER picture that difference is healthy and normal . . . Only our courage matters. That is how I see autism. That is what gave me strength. In a fair and good society we do not need doctors to diagnose us, because differences would not matter: only courage would matter. (personal communication, February 6, 2020)

Tolworth's argument—that Kirby noticed and wrote about neurological differences while avoiding explicit labels—complements Alaniz's claim that disability was at the core of Marvel's Silver Age superheroes (2012). Interestingly, another autistic fan, Connor Coulson (2018) suggests that Reed's autism became prominent in the decades following Kirby's run, beginning with the issues written by John Byrne in the 1980s. On his blog titled *Autistic Reed Richards*, Coulson notes that “As time went on, Reed became more of a— well let's face it—a nerd. He became more socially awkward and distant, and he was even drawn with a more ectomorphic body type . . . His ‘eccentricities’ would continue to become increasingly pronounced, to the point that fans often speculated whether he was autistic and some fan sites would straight-up declare it as fact” (2018, May 26).

Tolworthy and Coulson thus disagree about *when* Reed begins to appear autistic, but the affinity that they and other autistic fans have for Mr. Fantastic reveals larger truths about autistic claiming: it tends to occur within the context of autistic special interests; it requires autistic interpretation of key texts (autistic hermeneutics); it generates persuasive discourses, such as blogs and fan sites, that are intended for autistic and non-autistic audiences; and, most significantly, it offers agency and autonomy to autistic individuals and communities. In the case of Mr. Fantastic, autistic claiming both preempts and conflicts with later instances of explicit naming—when Reed is labeled having “Asperger Syndrome” or “a mild case of autism” in two extra-canonical *Fantastic Four* stories.

The first of these namings occurred in *Marvel Knights: Fantastic Four 1234* (2001-2002) by Grant Morrison and Jae Lee. Briefly, Marvel Knights was a prestige imprint of Marvel that launched in 1998 as a platform for experimental, adult-oriented, stand-alone stories. By the late 1990s, Marvel was in bankruptcy after a difficult decade, and the Marvel Knights lineup was intended to bring in new readers by reinventing familiar characters such as Daredevil or the Hulk. Grant Morrison, by then a critically

acclaimed comics writer, was recruited for a four-issue story about the Fantastic Four. Each of the four issues focuses on different member of the team, and the overarching plot tells how Dr. Doom uses a reality-manipulating machine called the Prime Mover to exploit the personal insecurities of Ben, Sue, and Johnny. To combat Doom, Reed withdraws completely into his laboratory without notifying the others—a withdrawal, the first issue makes clear, that is symptomatic of his autism.

Reference to Reed's autism occurs early in the opening issue (Figure 4, main image). Reed has posted a "Deep in Thought: Keep Out" sign on the door, presumably a recurring habit. Johnny and Sue are irritated by his absence: "Reed's had the old 'Deep in Thought' sign up for over a day now, hasn't he?" Johnny sardonically remarks, "What's it like being married to the Einstein of the 21st century?" These coded references to autism—repeated social withdrawal, all-consuming interests, Einstein—are soon replaced by an explicit one. In Figure 4, Sue expresses her concerns about Reed to Alicia, an adjunct team member and love interest of the Thing: "Did you read that article about subtle autism I sent you? Asperger's Syndrome? 'High intelligence, high achievement, lack of empathy, single-minded pursuit of solitary interests . . . I sometimes worry about Reed.'" (Morrison, issue 1, 2001, p.10).

[Insert Figure 4]

By specifically identifying Asperger's Syndrome as a possible explanation for Reed's behavior, Morrison is reflecting the state of autism research in the late 1990s, when Asperger Syndrome was still included as a separate subtype of autism in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.

The syndrome had just entered the *DSM-4* in 1994, and it seems likely that Morrison read about Asperger's Syndrome in the popular media, where it was covered extensively. In December 2001, for example, the magazine *Wired* ran a story titled "The Geek Syndrome," in which Steve Silberman, the author of 2015's *Neurotribes*, describes Asperger's as "one of the disorders on the autistic spectrum—a milder form of the condition that afflicted Raymond Babbitt, the character played by Dustin Hoffman in *Rain Man*." That Morrison's Reed Richards shows a worrisome "lack of empathy," at least according to Sue, might also reveal that the writer was familiar with the research of the British neuropsychologist Simon Baron-Cohen, whose monograph *Mindblindness* (1997) distilled the theory of mind hypothesis for

a general audience. Theory of Mind essentially posits that autistic individuals are incapable of seeing things from others' perspectives, and this understanding of autism as a kind of empathy deficit was widely discussed in the mainstream media. In an early 2001 interview with *Wired*, for example, Baron-Cohen provided a description of an individual with Asperger Syndrome, a case study drawn from his research. This person, he noted, "was a computer scientist who could write programs without any effort at all, but again, just looking at a face, he couldn't tell what a person was feeling" (as cited in Morton, 2001).

The other descriptors of Asperger Syndrome we see in the panel—high intelligence, high achievement, single-minded pursuit of solitary interests—also point to savantism, or exceptional ability in a narrow field, a condition that is relatively rare among the autistic population, but which is nevertheless disproportionately represented in cultural narratives about autism. As Murray (2008) notes, ". . . when seen through the contemporary lens of popular representation, autism and savantism appear to have become almost synonymous, to the point where it could be asked whether it is possible to be a savant without also having autism" (p.65). Reed, a theoretical physicist, has long been depicted as a brilliant scientist, but in Morrison's hands, he turns into an autistic savant, his genius pathologized by and through his Asperger's Syndrome. A case in point: at the conclusion of *1234*, Reed finally emerges from his laboratory, having fashioned his own Prime Mover machine, restored reality, and defeated Dr. Doom in a game of "four-dimensional chess" in which Ben, Johnny, and Sue were pawns (Morrison, issue 4, p. 10). What most excites Reed about his recent experience, however, is an intellectual discovery he made while battling Doom, namely, the existence of "the quintasphere: an entirely new type of reality made of superconducting living material" (Morrison, 2002, issue 4, p.17). Reed's mind, Morrison tells us through the pseudo-scientific jargon of superhero comics, is capable of astonishing feats, his intellect even more malleable than his famously flexible body.

The *1234* version of Reed Richards—a savant Aspergian—may be as close as comics get to showing "autism as a superpower," as Thunberg describes in her tweet, given that Reed relies solely on his autistic mind, not his physical elasticity to defeat Doom. Ostensibly, Reed's formidable mental abilities are buoyed, not impaired, by his autism, his "Asperger's Advantage" (Smagorinsky, 2016)

allowing him to hyper-focus on the showdown with Doom while ignoring the socio-emotional demands of his neurotypical teammates for days on end.

And yet, a number of questions remain about Morrison's depiction of Reed, beginning with the plot of the story. *1234* begins *in medias res*, with the reality-bending machinations of Doom already underway. What we see in the opening pages, when Sue mentions Asperger's Syndrome, is in fact Doom's altered reality. He is already working to sow division among team members by playing on their fears. From this view, it is likely that Doom has planted the idea of Reed being autistic in Sue's psyche to drive them apart. Indeed, Sue's complaints about Reed seem based on negative ideas about Asperger's Syndrome: "It's like we're the happiest couple on earth and then some theory will just pop into Reed's head and he looks right through me and it's so cold . . . Why can't he just talk to me like a *normal person* [my emphasis]" (Morrison, 2002, issue 2, p. 13). Doom is gaslighting Sue into believing that Reed is abnormal—and abnormality, in this case, means autism, not the ability to fold one's body into a parachute.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to know what Morrison actually thought of autism in the early 2000s. Casting *1234* in the best possible light, it is the story of a supervillain preying on anxieties surrounding neurological differences but ultimately being defeated by a neurodivergent superhero. But it is equally possible that Morrison was less interested in telling a story about autism and more taken with a disability he saw trending in newspapers and on television. From this perspective, Morrison's *1234* becomes an opportunistic retconning of Marvel's oldest character. Chris Tolworthy, who claimed Reed as autistic even in the early years of the comic, supports the latter theory. "Someone pointed out that the comics also said that Reed was autistic," he told me via Facebook messenger. "I felt partly vindicated but partly annoyed—they had jumped on the autism bandwagon without understanding him. He was an autistic cliché" (personal communication, February 5, 2020). One contemporaneous interview with Grant Morrison seems to support this more cynical interpretation. In 2002, the writer told *Sequential Tart* that his early obsession with comics made him "practically *autistic* [my emphasis] at home . . . [my] evenings were grim . . . spent huddled in our flat above the Finefare, drawing my own homemade comic books and

writing fantasy novels with cock in hand” (Lien-Cooper, 2002). At least in this instance, Morrison equates autism with isolation, obsession, and self-stimulation, a portrait that he replicates through Reed in 1234.

If the first explicit naming of Reed Richards provoked some ire in the autistic community, then the second, which occurred in another extra-canonical series in 2012, caused a firestorm. The series, called *Season One*, was another attempt to revitalize *Fantastic Four* and other long-running Marvel comics by offering updated origin stories. Written by Roberto Aguirre-Sacasa, *Season One: Fantastic Four* contained all of the elements of the original story: Reed and the gang take the ill-fated space flight into the cosmic storm, crash land, and discover they have strange new powers. They form a superteam just in time to save New York (Central City in the original) from Mole Man and the Submariner. One critical difference, however, is the treatment of Reed Richards. As shown in the inset panel of Figure 4, Aguirre-Sacasa’s version discloses that he has “self-diagnosed a mild case of autism,” and that he is “currently inventing a cure” for it, though he is otherwise “of sound mind” (Aguirre-Sacasa, 2012, p. 4). Of course, many in the autistic community actively resist the medical model of autism that suggests it needs to be cured—and Reed, wearing a white coat, ensconced in his scientific lab—absolutely embodies this pathologizing perspective. On Reddit, this depiction of Reed caused anger among autistics. One user named dahud wrote in 2018:

[Autism] is certainly not a superpower, but it is an integral part of my personality and worldview. I rankle at the suggestion that certain fundamental parts of my nature are objectively wrong, and should be destroyed. I don't doubt that some autistic people would want to not be autistic, just like some people want to be more outgoing, or to have a better sense of humor. And that's their choice to make. But people talking about a cure for autism like it's the flu just really sets me off.

In the same thread, another autistic Reddit user named Travis put it more forcefully:

As someone with autism, this author can go fuck himself. If Reed does have autism (frankly Cyclops reads as far more autistic to me) there is no way he would want to get rid of it. As much

as autism screws up my life I would never get rid of it. Thinking differently is not a weakness.
(2018)

Though the autistic community on Reddit was not unanimous in its response to the panel, the above rejoinders typify the existential argument made against those who would, like Reed, attempt to cure autism—namely, that autism is integral to identity. As Yergeau (2015) argues, cure rhetoric pervades narratives about autism, often stressing how autistic behaviors can be normalized through practice and repeated exposure to neurotypical social contexts. The above response by the autistic Travis, intended for Aguirre-Sacasa, is a rhetorical counterpunch: *go fuck yourself*. Yergeau describes such “autistic fuck yous” as rhetorical reactions to reductive representations—reactions that should be understood as indicators of “community resistance” or “individual response to systemic prejudice about neurological disability” and not as symptomatic of emotional dysregulation (p.91).

Season One: Fantastic Four never returns to Reed’s side project of curing his “mild autism,” which makes its initial mention all the more tokenistic. Interestingly, however, the retold origin story makes use of several physically and cognitively disabled characters: the visually impaired villain Mole Man, the amnesiac Submariner, and of course, the Thing, who as Alaniz suggests, is a character whose superpower and disability are one and the same (2015, p. 87). Because of his unusual status as a character whose very visible disability—monstrous appearance, unwieldy size—is inextricably entwined with his superpower—great strength, near invulnerability—the Thing may be interpreted as an allegorical character, the fourth type of autistic superhero in the taxonomy.

The Thing: Autism Allegorized

Allegorical autistic characters exist in fictional narratives that represent neurological differences symbolically rather than directly. The 2019 Pixar film *Float*, for instance, features an *allegorical* autistic character—in this case, a small boy born named Alex who is born with the ability to float. Initially, his father attempts to normalize Alex by keeping him on a leash or by loading heavy rocks into his backpack to keep him grounded. The father eventually recognizes, however, that Alex’s “disability” is an asset, and decides to allow Alex to float in public. The film does not explicitly mention autism—floating could

represent other physical or cognitive disabilities—but the director and creator of the film, Bobby Rubio, was inspired by his own autistic son, and thus the film as a whole is easily interpreted as an allegorical tale, one particularly relevant to this discussion since it symbolically equates autism with a superpower. .

Of course, the Thing does not represent autism in the one-to-one way that Alex does in *Float*. His representational power in fact goes beyond autism. The Thing can stand in for all individuals with highly visible disabilities (Alaniz, 2012). This group does include autistic people—those who, like the Thing, cannot pass as normal/neurotypical in most social settings. But I would also argue that the Thing is an allegorical autistic character because his story raises questions about disability, identity, and normalcy that are central to autistic existence. Unlike his teammates in the Fantastic Four, the Thing considers his altered body to be a disability, and longs to return to his pre-accident condition. His desire to be normal again is in fact germane to his character, well established in the first 102 issues by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, and most apparent in the issues in which the Thing changes back into Ben Grimm. In their decade-long run, the Thing reverts to Ben Grimm a total of 13 times. These slow-motion transformations, usually depicted in a three or four panel sequence, typically show Ben rejoicing in being “human” or “normal” again, instead of a “monster” (Lee, 1962, issue 2, p. 21). Likewise, the transformations back into the Thing, usually just a few panels later, often show a dejected Thing bemoaning his cruel fate.

If the Thing’s “Thingness” represents autism, then his repeated desire for normalcy is problematic, akin to Reed’s *Season One* wish to cure his autism or the Russian scientists’ plan to lobotomize Dehman Doosha. This is hardly seeing autism as inseparable from identity—or as dahud says above, as “an integral part of [his] personality and worldview” (2018). But the overarching story of the first 102 issues is much more affirming of autistic identity when taken as a whole, largely because the Thing learns to see his alleged disability as an asset and gains a great deal of agency. Again, his reversions are significant moments in this process. In early issues of the *Fantastic Four*, Thing-to-Ben reversions happen exclusively by chance (issues 2, 4, 8, 9), and moreover, Ben is never afforded the choice of turning back into the Thing. His metamorphoses just happen, and their suddenness is meant to evoke pathos for the least fortunate member of the Fantastic Four. In subsequent issues, Reed attempts to

cure the Thing, typically with a serum, potion, or new machine (issues 11, 16, 17, 32). In these instances, Ben succumbs to the newest treatment and lacks agency in the process, serving mostly as Reed's scientific subject.

[Insert Figure 5]

As the series matures, however, the Thing slowly gains self-determination. When the villainous Fearful Four inadvertently strip the Fantastic Four of their powers (issues 38-40), for example, Reed must fabricate an invention to restore their abilities. Ben initially resists becoming the Thing again: “But—mebbe I don’t wanna become the Thing again,” he protests, “I’m finally *normal* [emphasis original] like everyone else!” (Lee, 1965, issue 40, p.13). With Dr. Doom threatening the team, however, Reed tells Ben he has “no choice” but to turn back into the Thing (Figure 5, left panel). Still, it is the first instance in which Ben has even a small degree of control, and notably, he consciously chooses to be the Thing. Ben makes this choice even more dramatically later in the Lee/Kirby run, when Reed once again invents a cure (issues 78-79). In this iteration, Reed tells the Thing that his change to Ben will be long-term, but he also warns that it will only work once. Should Ben return to being the Thing, intentionally or accidentally, there will be no going back. Again a villain appears to menace the city, and this time, Ben chooses to return to the Thing permanently, making the decision on his own terms, away from the pressuring influence of Reed. The middle panel (non-sequential) of Figure 5 is the last time Lee and Kirby depict the Thing as Ben Grimm. It may look and feel like heroic martyrdom, but it is undeniable that the Thing has rejected “normalcy” in favor of living with and through his “disability,” and this resolution is freighted with symbolic meaning for autistics.

In choosing his disability, the Thing prefigures a similar decision made by Daredevil in a 1985 issue, in which the blind superhero is granted his sight by an omnipotent entity named the Beyonder. At the end of the story, Daredevil demands to be made blind again. Alaniz calls this issue “the most progressive image of disability” of its time, arguing that Daredevil “reclaims his personhood precisely by *not* [emphasis original] seeking to overcome a widely perceived lack, but by ‘staying true’ to his sense of self with all its ‘imperfections’ (2012, p. 49). *Season One: Fantastic Four*—for all of its insincerity about

autism and its harmful cure rhetoric—does contain a similar moment when Ben reclaims his disabled identity as the Thing. He has again been cured by Reed, who uses radiation to reverse the effects of the original accident, a nod to issue 2, in which the team accidentally re-encounters the same cosmic storm that gave them their superpowers (Lee, 1962, issue 2, p.23). In the *Season One* retelling (Figure 5, right image), a narrative box describes Ben’s explicit rejection of his non-disabled life:

In the short time he’s been human again, Ben Grimm has imagined—built—life after life, dozens of possibilities, all of them good, all of them worthy. The thing is . . . the literal and metaphoric thing is . . . (Aguirre-Sacasa, 2012, p.91)

Here, Ben takes over the narration with a forceful interjection, “Those ain’t my life” (p.91) He has taken over the narrative within the panel and in the *Fantastic Four* storyline, asserting that in the particular reboot of the origin story, he will own his disabled identity.

Calling All Authentic Autistic Superheroes

This essay has surveyed the state of autistic superheroes in mainstream comics, focusing on named, coded, claimed, and allegorical autistic representation. While this examination is not comprehensive, its purview is broad enough to establish a larger pattern—one that shows, perhaps paradoxically, that autistic representation becomes more genuine and more meaningful as it moves away from explicit identification and toward implied, open-ended, even symbolic depictions of autism. Or this may not be paradoxical at all: explicit labels such as *Asperger syndrome* or *autistic* evoke stereotypes that limit, not expand, interpretive possibilities.

In the future, it may be that autistic representation will improve within superhero comics when more openly autistic writers and artists create and contribute to storylines and characters, yielding the final kind of autistic presence—the *authentic* character. While autistic authors have always existed, it is only recently that writers have purposefully and openly identified themselves as autistic. Two examples are Corinne Duyvis and Chris Bonello, the autistic authors of the young adult novels *On the Edge of Gone* (2016) and *Underdogs* (2019), respectively. Both novels are dystopian and feature explicitly named, authentic autistic protagonists—*On the Edge of Gone* is narrated by Denise, who identifies as a queer

autistic; *Underdogs* features an ensemble of neurodiverse adolescents, including three autistic teenagers. Autistic fiction writers like Duyvis and Bonello are still relatively uncommon. Still, the genre of young adult fiction has at least a handful of authentic autistic characters, and superhero comics may follow this trend in the future, providing Greta Thunberg with richer, more nuanced versions of fictional autistic superheroes. Until then, we should continue scrutinizing autistic representation in superhero comics, stated and unspoken, while we await an autistic Superman.

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FIGURES



Figure 1. Dehman Doosha, the first named autistic superhero, *Psi Force* 23 (September, 1988)

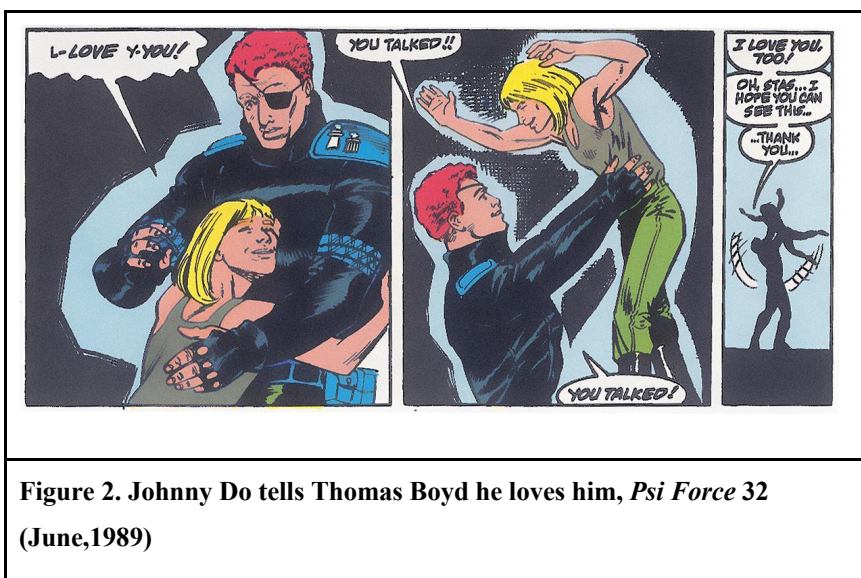


Figure 2. Johnny Do tells Thomas Boyd he loves him, *Psi Force 32* (June,1989)

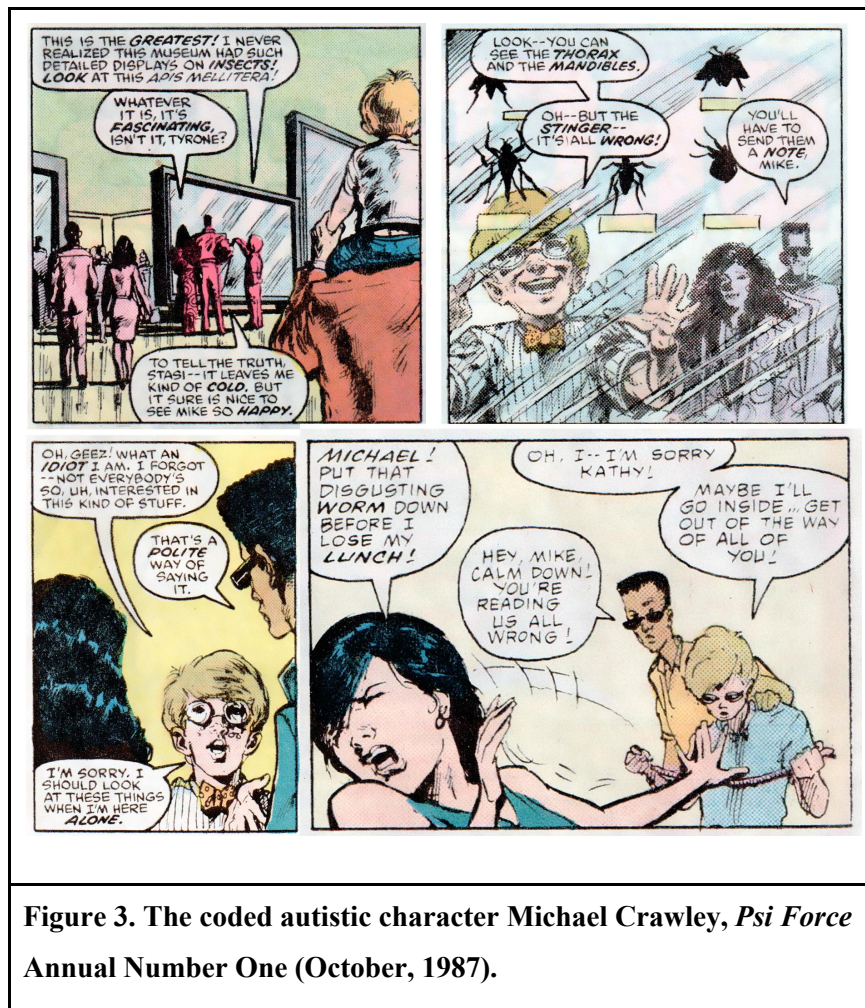


Figure 3. The coded autistic character Michael Crawley, *Psi Force* Annual Number One (October, 1987).



Figure 4. Reed Richards named as autistic in *Fantastic Four* 1234 (main image) and *Fantastic Four* Season One (inset).

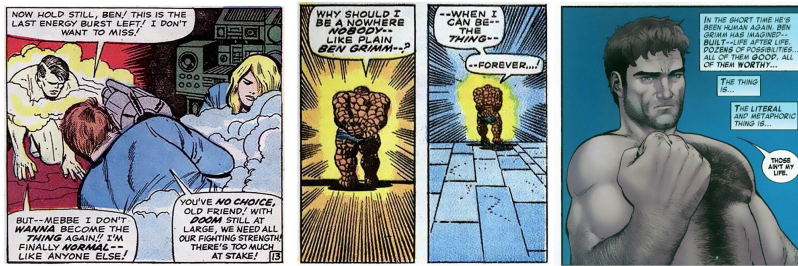


Figure 5. The Thing as allegory for autistic agency (issue 40, issue 79, and *Season One*).