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Icons of Survival: Metahumanism as Planetary Defense

*In which I argue that superhero comics, the most maligned of nerd genres, theorize the **transformation** of ethics and politics necessary to the project of **planetary defense**. The figure of the “metahuman,” the human with superpowers and purpose, embodies the **transfigured nerd** whose defects—**intellect**, **swarm**-behavior, **abnormality**, **flux**, and love of **machines**—become virtues of **survival** in the twenty-first century. The conflict among capitalism, fascism, and communism, which drove the Cold War and its immediate aftermath, also drove the Golden and Silver Ages of Comics. In the era of planetary emergency, these forces reconfigure themselves as different versions of world-destruction. The metahuman also signifies going “beyond” these economic and political systems into orders that preserve democracy without destroying the biosphere. Therefore, the styles of metahuman figuration represent an appeal to tradition and a technique of **transformation**. I call these strategies the iconic style and metamorphic style. The iconic style, more typical of DC Comics, makes the hero an icon of virtue, and metahuman powers manifest as visible signs: the “S” of Superman, the tiara and golden lasso of Wonder Woman. The metamorphic style, more typical of Marvel Comics, represents the process of change itself, turning the vice of **flux** into the power of transformation. As characters change in their capacity to **defend the world**, so does their appearance. These styles transfigure the nerd as **avatar** of virtue and incarnation of flux using all three aesthetics of the **queer**, the **uncanny**, and the **monstrous**. Though fan culture sometimes dualizes these representational strategies, they form the visual vocabulary for a metahumanism of planetary defense. Understood as a **nerdist** technology, the superhero becomes a seed of **environmental culture**.*

In the fourth decade of life, when I ought to be beyond such things, I pick up an issue of *Planetary*, a comic book written by Warren Ellis and drawn by John Cassaday. *Planetary* is published by the WildStorm imprint of DC Comics, giving it the latitude to do something unusual. It tells the story of superpowered investigators who roam the world uncovering the mysteries passed off as the stuff of junk culture: Japanese monster islands, the ghost of Marilyn Monroe, the traces left by the planet's true rulers disguised as "super-villains" in stories told for children. Like *Buffy* and *Firefly*, *Planetary* is historiographic metafiction, a story that explains the history of the story it appears, at first, to be. I am reading Chapter 10, "Magic and Loss," named after Lou Reed's confrontation with death. In his introduction to the story-arc *Planetary: The Fourth Man*, Joss Whedon comments: "No one who loves comics can get through issue #10, 'Magic and Loss,' without a true thrill of childlike dread" (Whedon, Introduction n.p.). I know what he means. Issue #10 finds Elijah Snow and his team in the lair of an Illuminatus who corresponds to Reed Richards of the Fantastic Four. In his encounter with this figure, Snow was nearly killed for getting too close to the truth about the true shape of history, the signal beyond the puppet theater. The Illuminatus leaves Snow to stew while his team investigates the artifacts in the abandoned facility, a version of the Baxter Building in the New York of Marvel Comics. The team has recovered three mysterious artifacts: a red cape or blanket; a pair of golden arm bands; and a blue, metallic lantern. One investigator says to another, "Where the hell do you suppose the Four got this stuff from? And why bother keeping it?" The issue answers that question. The blanket that would have become Superman's cape arrived in a ship that crashed in Kansas, carrying the infant from Krypton. In this timeline, a secret operative intercepts it and burns the child to death. The arm bands belong to Princess Diana of Paradise Island, murdered as she stepped into Man's World to become Wonder Woman. For a moment, I stop breathing, aware of the void in my heart where these stories had been before breath returns. This is how real myths work: they become part of our spiritual architecture, the magnetosphere of the soul that shields it from solar flares, making patterns in the sky visible from certain latitudes of the imagination.

The lantern evokes a particular kind of pain. In flashback, Ellis and Cassaday show us a great hall on another world, a scene of ritual investiture.

A creature that resembles electrified wire wrapped in crimson sepals, the speaker of the group, laments the death of Krypton, telling the assembly that this is the kind of world their league was formed to save. The color of the lantern has changed to indicate a different brane in the multiverse, but this is a meeting of the Green Lanterns, a corps of planetary guardians who defend each sector of the universe using the energy of courage. The leader recounts their history, displaying an image of a lone man with a blue lantern suspended from a staff. "The first of us was born upon a world choked by pollution and damaged weather. The continent he worked upon was shrouded in fog, mist, thick gas. He was known as space's first policeman. To light his way he wore a lamp whose element glowed perfect blue. His was the light of reason. The light we should have shown upon that world. But living worlds are many and we are yet too few." For this reason a new hero is commissioned: the blue lantern fuses with his body, its light shining from his heart. He is sent to Earth as its cosmic guardian, but the killers of Kal-El and Princess Diana intercept him, too. We see him in the present, dead on a dissection table, the lantern cut out of his chest to be engineered into weaponry for the archons of our world. The loss of the Lantern hits especially close to home. Ellis has rewritten the space-cops to evoke the Green politics in the lantern, the common heart of planetary defense, forged on a world destroyed by toxic waste and climate disaster. The first Lantern wandered like the Diogenes the Cynic, searching his world for a just man. Had Superman, Wonder Woman, and Green Lantern survived, they would have formed the Justice League, a band of heroes the beleaguered folk of *Planetary* cannot imagine. Cassady and Warren invite us to experience that dilemma from the inside. What if there were no myths of resistance to the Powers That Be? How would it feel to be denied the narratives of virtue that make planetary defense possible? How could one cultivate such virtues in a world where the virtuous are killed before they have a chance to change us?

Kamala Khan, the hero of Marvel's new series *Ms. Marvel*, has the opposite problem. A longtime fan of Carol Danvers, the Avenger formerly known as Ms. Marvel, Kamala suffers from the classic nerd problem: she can't get there from here. Here is Jersey City, New Jersey, which sits across the Hudson from Manhattan. Like Danvers herself, Manhattan seems farther away because it is so close; her life is shaped differently than an Avenger's. Kamala's parents

moved from Pakistan to New Jersey to provide their daughter a top-notch education, and like generations of immigrant parents, they expect Kamala to get straight as in her magnet high school, never be late for dinner, and marry a Muslim doctor after avoiding boys at all costs. Unbeknownst to them, the Khan family carries dormant Inhuman genes. The Inhumans are a race of superpowered humanoids hidden from humanity by the Kree, aliens who experimented on humans to breed a slave race of living weapons. The Inhumans were the result of this failed experiment. Abandoned by the Kree, they live in hidden refugia across the world, including Attilan, the city that recently landed in the bay between Jersey City and Manhattan. When a political disaster causes the release of the Terrigen Mist from Attilan, this teratogen covers the world, activating dormant Inhuman genes in unsuspecting fangirls. Like Peter Parker and his radioactive spider-bite, Kamala's encounter with the Mist bestows superpowers: strength, resilience, healing, and a slightly ridiculous ability to change shape. Suddenly able to become her idol, Kamala stalks the shadows of Jersey City, a brown girl pretending to be a blonde Avenger. Like the antiheroes of *Planetary*, Kamala does not understand how a person like her can occupy the persona of the hero. She possesses the power to defend the world, but does not know how to use it. Her first attempts result in a eugenic farce in which an Inhuman tries to emulate the successful weapon that Captain Marvel finally became. The same genetic pattern that gave Kamala powers also made it hard to find the right person to become. Kamala mistakes Captain Marvel's features for her virtues, but discovers that the look of the hero is not the practice of heroism. Like the first Blue Lantern, Kamala must fashion a persona from the materials at hand: she sews a costume that resembles her hero's, but more modest, covering her body in a loose tunic and pants that are far more practical than Ms. Marvel's old costume, designed for the male gaze. Kamala takes an aspect of her diasporic culture often represented as anti-feminist in the West and turns it into something better than the sexist original. G. Willow Wilson, the creator of *Ms. Marvel*, took it as her mission to tell the story of a Muslim girl from her own perspective, but Kamala's dilemma faces all who would be planetary defenders. Given powers we do not fully comprehend and stories that are incomplete, how can one cultivate the practice of world-defense? To use a common word for heroes with powers: how can one lead a good life as a

metahuman, a person who changes shape, levels up, and mutates to bear the weight of planetary crisis?

The examples of *Planetary* and *Ms. Marvel* prompt an examination of the metahuman body as a figure of the planetary defender. *Metahuman* arose in the discourse of superhero comics: it designates a person who was born with superpowers or acquired them due to accident or intervention. It gestures ironically to its ancestor, the *übermensch*: metahumans may be formed by eugenic experimentation, but they are not its agents. They represent a populist revision of Nietzsche's idea of the person who transcends the limits of humanity. They go *meta*, "beyond" the human, but they struggle with the meaning of the beyond. As Zarathustra says: "Man is something that hath to be surpassed; and therefore thou shalt love thy virtues—for thou wilt succumb by them" (Nietzsche 33). The struggle to make meaning of the metahuman condition I call *metahumanism*, a term I mean to represent the condition of humanity in the age of planetary crisis.

Leveling up

Superhero stories have always addressed the crises of modernity: war, famine, the struggle for civil rights, environmental catastrophe. Metahumans are not all heroes; not all use their powers to serve. *Super* is only one meaning of the beyond. The importance of metahuman discourse can be illustrated by the moment in "Welcome to the Hellmouth" when Xander Harris identifies Buffy Summers as a "superhero." The writers of *Buffy* expect its audience to understand that she possesses powers; the metahuman is an idea already available in popular culture. By calling her a superhero, however, Xander expresses confidence in her intention to defend the defenseless. Metahumanism, as an ethos of agency at a planetary scale, implies the duty to protect other citizens, the nation, and the world. As Ramzi Fawaz says, American superhero comics contain "imaginative fictional universes infused with a democratic political orientation," an ethos he calls "comic book cosmopolitics" (Fawaz 15). Metahumans become a way to reimagine planetary political agency. In its vocabulary of *powers*, metahumanism reveals its investment in a worldview of crisis driven by transhuman forces. This is one way to understand the

ambiguous secularization of the Whedonverse: against the fallen Powers that threaten the world, metahuman powers arise. Implicit in metahumanist discourse is the core insight of the term *Anthropocene*, the epoch characterized by the human capacity to change the world on a planetary scale. Yes, humans have become a planetary force, but how shall we behave in light of these new powers? Comic books have asked that question far longer than critical theory. This fact has been difficult to recognize because comics employ an unpopular visual rhetoric associated with children's stories. In the internal hierarchy of nerd culture, comics fans represent the most dysfunctional, juvenile, and unattractive of the unpopulars themselves. The stereotype of "comic book guy" signifies the ultimate loser: friendless, sexually frustrated, and misanthropic, he gets lost in virtual worlds, fails to form alliances, and turns a classic nerd refuge—the comics shop—into a wasteland of snark and sexual harassment. Most importantly, Comic Book Guy is unkempt, unfit, and overweight, the embodiment of the nerd as degenerate. He dreams of a heroic avatar, but lives out an evolutionary dead end. As human garbage, he identifies with the comic book, a genre stigmatized in Cold War culture with the "seduction of the innocent," the perversion of upright American youth. He embodies the failure of self-cultivation and the despair at defending the world with metahuman agency.

This stereotype helps us to understand why the body of the superhero is so important. The stigma of physical inferiority in a eugenic order teaches nerds to hate themselves. In Tolkien's terms, the body of the superhero creates a refuge from that stigma, a dream of agency in a world that can still be saved. As a medium that combines text and graphics, the comic book allows nerds to hear and see the other world in which the body is not shamed and the reader is not helpless. There are at least two major styles of representation of the metahuman body: the iconic and the metamorphic. Each is associated with a major house of comic book production: the iconic with DC Comics, and the metamorphic with Marvel Comics. The iconic style of DC Comics draws the metahuman body as a figure of virtue, an ideal type of its powers. Superman, Wonder Woman, and Green Lantern embody this style. Like religious icons, they employ idealized physical forms rendered in bright colors. Their bodies are drawn in the classic Vitruvian proportions of the Renaissance, emphasizing visual balance and harmony. Through the premodern symbol of microcosmic and macrocosmic

similitude, this kind of hero embodies individual, architectural, and cosmic beauty (Rosand 36; Wayman 172). As revivals of classical heroic ideals, they are modeled after athletes and warriors; as drawn figures, they typify the Renaissance belief that Nature is “fundamentally beautiful,” and that art is her peer (Dalton 4). They emphasize the humanism in metahumanism, the attainment of supreme virtues that manifest in their costumes. The novelist Michael Chabon calls this style of costume the “secret skin” (Chabon 64). Superheroes are drawn as nudes covered with a surface that manifests their inner character—like skin, a mediator between inside and outside. The iconic style makes possible the identification of a superhero even in fragmented form, a synecdoche that *Planetary* evoked in its pile of relics. When comics readers see a red cape, they read “Superman”; golden arm bands mean “Wonder Woman”; the lantern marks a Lantern. The iconic superheroes are fused with the signs of their powers: the trope of the secret skin marks a cyborgian approach to the metahuman, even if the hero has nothing to do with machines. As an extension of the body, the costume cannot be separated from the hero without doing damage. A comics reader need only see the arm bands without the Amazon to know that Wonder Woman is dead. For the same reason, the iconic hero’s costume tends to change slowly. The costume represents the virtue, so when the costume changes, it signals a change in ethos disturbing to fans. When Zach Snyder darkened the palette of Superman and Wonder Woman for his film, *Dawn of Justice*, fans accused him of turning both heroes into Batman, whose dark costume signifies his Gothic ethos.

By contrast, the metamorphic hero of Marvel Comics embodies the process of discovering, practicing, and embracing one’s powers. Because the character’s relationship to power evolves, the costume also evolves, representing the hero’s “fluxability, a material and psychic *becoming*” (Fawaz 11). Change of costume does not imply a betrayal of virtue. The secret skin of DC heroes gives way to a visual evolution that involves the body as a whole, not just the surface. Ms. Marvel provides an example of this style of embodiment. Her hero is Carol Danvers, who began as “Ms. Marvel” and became “Captain Marvel” after supplanting the first Captain Marvel, who was male. Her costume paralleled his, creating what fandom calls the “Smurfette” problem, the female character that mimics the male original. By becoming Captain Marvel, Danvers overcame Smurfette with a sign of rank, not gender, and changed her first

red and blue costume with a golden star to a grey costume unaffiliated with her predecessor. When Kamala gains the power to shift shape, she repeats the Smurfette problem at the level of race: she is a hero of color imitating a Nordic-white archetype. As noted, she immediately adapts her costume to make it less skin-tight and more flexible, disrupting the standard of female superhero as object of the male gaze. Soon after, she stops turning her hair blonde. As a hero who can alter her bodily proportions, she often makes herself flatter, longer, and more distended than a standard human body, breaking the Vitruvian model of Renaissance Neoclassicism. No sooner does she adopt the costume than it changes. She exemplifies the Marvel aesthetic of metamorphosis by changing her costume to represent a change in her relationship to her powers. Though Marvel and DC are often binarized in fan discourse, both approaches to the metahuman body are important to the representation of the world-defender. The iconic style represents the kind of virtue the hero possesses, while the metamorphic style represents the evolution of the hero's relationship to heroism. Together, these aesthetics suggest which abilities readers might cultivate (courage, compassion, empathy) and how one must cultivate these abilities in a process of world-defense.

Green Lanterns

The Green Lantern embodies the planetary defender in two ways. The first way is the oldest, and its Lantern is named Alan Scott. Scott is the Lantern of the period comics historians call "The Golden Age" of American comics (1932–1956). Green Lantern followed in the wake of Superman, when comics companies struggled to find other origins for new heroes. The creator of Green Lantern, Martin Nodell, drew inspiration from the New York subway system. In the 1930s, railroad engineers would stand next to the tracks, holding up lanterns of various colors to direct the movement of the trains. Nodell saw an engineer holding up a green-light lantern and combined this image with the legend of Aladdin's lamp and his personal fascination with Chinese lanterns. Thus he created Alan Scott, a railroad engineer who finds a magical lantern that granted mystical powers to the bearer (Jordan 14). In costume, Scott looks like Superman, if Superman were a vigilante magician powered by green

magic: a billowing cape, green pants, a red shirt with the lantern emblem, and, of course, a mask around the eyes. This Green Lantern is singular: the energy of the lantern obeys him, and there is only one lantern. Scott goes on to join the Justice Society of America, a precursor to the Justice League in the contemporary DC Universe. To bring order to a tangled weave of multiple teams, origins, and worlds, DC chose a multiversal approach. In the current version of that multiverse, Alan Scott's Green Lantern comes from Earth 2, a world similar to our own in the spectrum of possible histories. In the most recent version of that world in the "New 52" continuity, the comic book *Earth 2* features a new Alan Scott, now the CEO of a multinational corporation. In the early issues of the series, Scott travels to China to propose to his boyfriend, Sam Zhao. He and Sam are travelling on a high-speed train that derails under mysterious circumstances, killing Sam. In *Earth 2* #3, Scott finds himself near death, when he is roused by the words of a fierce green fire, which heals his wounds and announces, "Alan Scott, you are the one." Nicola Scott models this scene of commissioning after Moses' encounter with the Burning Bush on Mount Sinai. The green fire tells Scott that it represents the power of the living earth, which has chosen him as its champion against an evil that will threaten the world. In this continuity, Superman is dead, and the fire tells Scott he must replace the "sun god" as planetary defender. Scott will be granted the power of the earth, and his body will be "its storehouse." The earth's "power will shine forth from you as would the light from a lamp." In this version, the body of the hero becomes the lantern itself—the lamp refers to the Golden Age inspiration of Aladdin. The green energy of earth can be shaped into any form by the power of Scott's imagination, and when that happens, Scott becomes "the earth's one true knight," the Green Lantern. The fire then asks Scott to choose an instrument to focus his power, something "close to your heart." He chooses the wedding ring that would have been Sam's, and after rescuing the survivors of the train wreck, Scott kneels over Sam's body and swears to use his power in his honor.

This version of the Green Lantern represents at once a traditional rendering of the character and a radical revision. The train, the body as lamp, the kind of power granted, and the figure of Alan Scott refer back to the Golden Age and the origin of the character. The revision lies in the overtly ecological nature of the power, the power's origin, and the connection of the ring to gay sexuality and

marriage. For the first time in the history of the character, the source of Alan Scott's power is not an Orientalized magical object, but the spirit of the earth figured as a terrestrial flame of the God of Exodus. (Later in the series, the Green is drawn as a female tree, but here the fire remains nonanthropomorphic.) This shift from mechanism to vitalism enacts a version of the nerd transformation from idiot machine to avatar, as Scott himself represents an ideal heroic masculinity that reverses the form of the nerd-degenerate. However, this representation is complicated by the queering of the Lantern himself. By channeling his power through his wedding ring, and swearing to serve in honor of his lost love, Green Lantern becomes one of the only superheroes whose power arises from erotic love and the bond of marriage. Combined with the idea of the Green Knight—a reference to medieval Arthurian poetry—this figure of the planetary defender evokes the Sacred Band of Thebes, a legendary Greek army made entirely of male lovers. The Green Lantern of *Earth 2* broaches the realm of queer ecology and ecosexuality, a sexual identity that organizes desire beyond the human. If Alan Scott is not depicted as engaging in sexual acts with the planet, the energy of his heroism arises from his devotion to his dead lover. His costume and physiognomy reflect this blend of traditional masculine hero and queer disruption of comics. Scott is tall, blond, Anglo-American, broad-chested, and muscular, a figure of heroic male beauty drawn from the classical tradition of sculpture. He could model for Praxiteles, and resembles the male gods in the Elgin Marbles. He represents the eugenic figure admired by male nerds as an ideal alter-ego. However, he also performs a passionate affect, and this trait is modeled after the idealized knights of Arthurian legend. Kind, brave, and noble, he dedicates himself to the protection of Earth as lover. He is not the queer cowboy of *Brokeback Mountain*, trying to enact masculine reserve in public while having gay sex in the mountains. His powers would not work if he were: the lantern insignia on his chest bursts into flame when he uses his power, as we see when he lifts the wrecked train over his head to free the trapped passengers. This pose echoes an iconic *Action Comics* cover in which Superman becomes stronger than a locomotive. So *Earth 2*'s emerald knight is figured, visually, as a gay, ecosexual Superman who burns with the desire to preserve life.

This depiction of the new Alan Scott Green Lantern stands as a critique and extension of Green Lantern's grappling with issues of gender, race, and

sexuality. The Silver Age Green Lantern, Hal Jordan, is a U.S. Air Force pilot whose aggressive masculinity and hatred for male authority interfere with his heroism. In his earliest history through the 1960s, Hal has an Asian American sidekick nicknamed "Pieface," a racist term that refers to the "flatness" of East Asian faces. Alan's lover Sam, who begins as a lost love and returns later as an Avatar of Air, repudiates Pieface as an exoticized subordinate in the American tradition of racial castration. In the system of the Silver Age lanterns, the ring is powered by will, not love. Love, figured as kindness, compassion, and erotic connection, is the domain of the Star Sapphires, the celestial Amazons who broke away from the Guardians of the Universe, an all-male group from the planet Oa who founded the Green Lantern Corps. The Star Sapphires represent an early moment in the Silver Age when DC Comics attempted to recognize the power of feminism but contain it within traditional gender roles. Masculinity is will, femininity is love: each can accomplish things the other cannot, but they do not mix. The new Alan Scott, though, deconstructs this opposition between passion and will, love and courage, in a way that affects his fighting style. When his archetypal enemy, Solomon Grundy, the zombie-like Avatar of the Grey arises at the end of Issue #3, Scott responds by engaging in some traditional punching, which proves ineffective against an undead enemy. Grundy is a metaphysical adversary too: he represents the uncanny powers of decay-gone-awry, and his presence manifests as the death of a forest. Grundy's first act of destruction represents the power of ecocide, not the mortality of living creatures. His effects resemble slash-and-burn agriculture in which rain forests are torched to clear land, leaving charred remains and a degraded biome. As Green Lantern, Scott feels this destruction in his body, and is drawn to it in order to end it. His heroism involves empathy for other creatures, which mandates suffering at the unnatural end of their lives. For a gay superhero, this generates a transvaluation of values: the Green Lantern stands for planetary love; the ecocidal villain is "unnatural," undead, and uncanny. In Alan Scott, "queer" is refigured as an aesthetic of ecological heroism, built on the power of desire and devotion. The Green of the lantern severs queerness from the unnatural, the uncanny, and the grotesque, including the grotesquerie of racism and gender binarism. Like the Avatar of the Green, whom he represents, and the Green Knight, who bested Sir Gawain, Alan Scott figures a queer metahumanism in which the transcendence of traditional masculinity grants

the power to oppose the archons of ecocide. By channeling the power of Earth through his erstwhile wedding ring, Scott inaugurates a mode of heroism as queer ecosexuality. His vow operates outside the bounds of homonormative culture by affirming the erotic bond between man and planet in a union that does not mimic the bourgeois nuclear family. It takes Aldo Leopold's legendary "fierce green fire" to another register of "fierce".

The Green Lanterns of the Silver Age of Comics (1956–1970) renegotiate American masculinity in other terms. In this version of the mythos, there is a Green Lantern Corps headed by the Guardians of the Galaxy, superhuman aliens from the planet Oa who learned to channel the energy of will into physical force. Every sector of space is assigned a Green Lantern to patrol it. The metaphor at the heart of this model is the local cop on a neighborhood beat, and this metaphor asserts the masculinity of the lanterns as paramilitary officers. The costume of the Green Lanterns is both a public and a secret skin: the torso is green, the arms and legs black, the gloves are white and the boots are green. The stylized lantern insignia rests on the heart as seat of will or courage, the Lanterns' core virtue. As a cosmic institution, the corps presents a standardized face to the people of the universe: you can see a Lantern coming from a parsec away. Recruitment is represented as boot camp, with a drill sergeant yelling at rookies about their mistakes. This metaphor serves as an extension of Hal Jordan's identity as a U.S. Airman, and two other Lanterns of Earth fit this pattern: John Stewart, DC Comics' first African American superhero (1971), a Marine and architect; and Guy Gardner, a policeman from Baltimore. As masters of willpower, they were chosen by their rings for their potential to overcome fear in the pursuit of universal justice and order. However, the magical aspect of the Golden Age Lantern continues into the Silver Age: the rings are powered by will, but the power is shaped by imagination. The implicit metaphor at work is imagination: as it is for Tolkien, the faculty that allows the mind to form images of objects not present in reality. As artist-heroes powered by affect, the Silver Age Lanterns are among the only superheroes with an aesthetic virtue. Hal Jordan is literal-minded: when prompted in boot camp to form ring constructs, he forms fists and hammers (extensions of the body) or fighter jets and train engines (the classic trope reasserting itself). In the aesthetic realm, he is an inferior Lantern, and comes under regular criticism for this shortcoming. Though the core virtue of these Lanterns is will, the

metaphor of the train lantern suggests the core purpose of lighting the way to “finer worlds,” as *Planetary* put it. Superior will yoked to inferior imagination leads to the many ethical errors that Jordan makes throughout his career. The fourth Green Lantern of Earth, Kyle Rayner, compensates for this deficiency: he is a comic book artist, a pencil-sketcher by trade, a superior maker of images, not an athlete or a soldier. In his hands, the light of will constructs complicated objects with an autonomous beauty. He produces different results than Jordan, Stewart, or Gardner; like Alan Scott, his courage contains more passion and less control, and his sense of justice is informed by his sense of beauty. He is a Platonic Lantern, whose premodern virtues connect truth, justice, and beauty as versions of one another. He represents a commentary on the Silver Age ethos on the part of the writers and pencilers. He asks a question: What would it be like to go beyond the pose of the space cop and embrace artistry for its own sake as an instrument of planetary defense? Though he loves the other Lanterns, his methods conflict with theirs. He is an icon of another kind of virtue.

In *DC: The New Frontier* (2015), Darwyn Cooke sets out to explore these tensions in a retro-chic tale of the formation of the Justice League in the wake of World War II. Because it is the Justice League, Green Lantern must be Hal Jordan, but this Hal Jordan moves through his origin myth with iconic affect of a different kind. Jordan is still the reckless flyboy of the Silver Age who is summoned to the wreckage of an alien spacecraft to receive the gift of the ring from the dying Lantern of our sector, a red-skinned alien named Abin Sur. Dying from an encounter with the poisonous yellow light produced by a hidden villain, Abin Sur must pass on his ring and its “battery of power” to a worthy successor. The space cop narrative stands: Jordan is chosen for his “pristine courage.” This time, however, the story veers: Jordan objects, saying that he was labeled a coward during the war (Cooke et al. 286). Sur insists: courage can mean many things—“the courage of conviction,” “the courage to avoid partisan thinking and value the existence of all,” “the courage to act decisively when survival is at stake.” American masculinity of the Cold War receives a lesson in courage from the most feared of sources, the alien of a different race. Jordan reconsiders, and when he puts on the ring, in the final frame verso, something different happens. Turning to the next frame recto, readers encounter a dramatic splash page of Hal Jordan bathed in the

green light radiating from his ring. As its rays shine to the ground, Jordan's pilot uniform becomes the costume of a Green Lantern. Surrounded by a glowing cloud of green, his upraised hand radiates tongues of flame. In a corny interjection believable from the mouths of the Greatest Generation, he exclaims "God's Creation!" Cooke represents the power of the ring as the divine fire that powers Sub-creation in Tolkien's account of Secondary Worlds. The ring-bearer is an artist, and the green light of the heart is the *Fiat lux!* that made the world. The Hal Jordan-style space-jock dovetails with the Kyle Rayner artist in a Promethean icon of the hero as artist of justice. Jordan reacts by launching himself into the sky in a fit of joy, finally flying without the aid of an airplane. This model of the hero alters his relationship to the villain and to the Guardians of the Universe when the time comes to face the destruction of the Earth. The Justice League—Wonder Woman, Flash, Superman, Batman, and the Martian Manhunter—have done their part, but they have all fallen in the face of the Centre, a monstrous life form from deep geological time that has risen into modernity to destroy the human infestation on the planet. Green Lantern is the only one left, but the sheer size of the Centre—a flying mountain that spits flame and dragons—foils his first attempt to meet it. He reaches out for help in an unknown direction, and the Guardians answer. In other Hal Jordan narratives, the Guardians are inflexible patriarchs that the conscientious rebel must disobey. Here, they are teachers, who help focus his will and expand his heart. The entire splash page glows green as Jordan narrates: "I pour my heart into the ring and it works. We contain the explosion. Letting it exhaust itself within a perfect emerald sphere. We *will* it to happen" (391). The power of the first person plural allows Hal to save the world, but not by killing the enemy. The Centre had always intended to see the universe, so Green Lantern launches it into space. The world is saved through the virtues of will driven by hope, solidarity, and imagination. Though Jordan still thinks of himself as a cop, he is more a knight of artistry, a synthesis of the Gold and Silver Age paradigms of the male hero.

Though the Lanterns of Earth practice an evolving masculinity, in the end they are all men, cut from the same heroic mold. Even Kyle Rayner, who has no professional reason to look like an athlete or a warrior, is rendered most often as if he is both. This demonstrates the sway of Renaissance humanist aesthetics on the representation of heroic virtue in comic books. *Green Lantern* comics

can do better than that. The radicalism of the Lanterns manifests in the cosmic context when Earth Lanterns interact with the corps, a model of interspecies cosmopolitanism with few peers in nerd culture. Through the rings, the Guardians select Lanterns from every sector of the universe, and each sector is defended by a Lantern indigenous to it. The comics must then portray every imaginable shape of sentient life—the electrified wire of the *Planetary* story is typical, not exceptional. Even in Earth Lanterns, there is racial diversity: Hal Jordan and Guy Gardner are white, but John Stewart, as noted, is black, and Kyle Rayner, despite his surname, is Latino. The most recent Earth Lantern, Simon Baz, is a Lebanese American from Dearborn, Michigan who replaced Kyle Rayner when his story took another turn. The current racial diversity of these Lanterns reflects the awareness of racial diversity in the audience. However, when the comics move the setting to Oa, the home of the Guardians, the standard establishing shot depicts Lanterns of every shape, size, race, gender, and species. There are many distinguished female Lanterns, including Arisia Rrab, a descendent of a long line of Milky Way Lanterns; Boodikka, a powerful Alpha Lantern, an Internal Affairs officer of the Corps; Katma Tui, a red-skinned native of Korugar, the planet of origin for Sinestro, Hal Jordan's great rival and ally; and the partners Iolande, a planetary princess, and Soranik Natu, a Korugaran physician. There are rodent Lanterns, such as B'dg and Ch'p of the planet H'lven; Leezle Pon, a sentient smallpox virus; and the most famous nonhuman Lantern, Mogo, the living planet (Jordan 559–564).

Mogo was created by the writer Alan Moore, the graphic novelist behind *Watchmen*, *V for Vendetta*, and *League of Extraordinary Gentleman*. As a planetary Lantern, Mogo inverts the science fiction trope of the world-mind that drives humans mad, found in Stanislaw Lem's *Solaris* and Ursula Le Guin's "Vaster Than Empires and More Slow." Mogo concerns itself with issues the other Lanterns need not consider, such as the effects of its gravity on any world it approaches: hence, the name of Moore's story, "Mogo Doesn't Socialize." Mogo is highly social in later stories, sometimes hosting the corps when Oa is destroyed, at other times venturing far from its orbit to assist other Lanterns. The difficulty humanoids suffer in trying to comprehend a planetary Lantern is sometimes played for laughs, as in the tale of Bolphunga the Unrelenting, when a space mercenary lands on Mogo looking for a bipedal opponent. (Bolphunga relents in the end.) At other times, Mogo's difference comes to the

fore: it offers burial to all the dead Lanterns in the *Blackest Night* sequence, and when the rings of the undead Black Lantern Corps must be kept secure, Mogo sends dozens of them into its planetary core. *Green Lantern* breaks the hold of Vitruvian aesthetics by depicting planetary defenders in as many forms, scales, and environments as artists can imagine. Heroism incarnates in all sentient species. Because comics are drawn, it is much simpler to depict the profusion of species among the citizens of the universe than it has been for film and television series such as *Star Trek* and *Buffy*. *Green Lantern* does not suffer the problem of the live-action alien, whose otherness is represented by modest modifications to a human face. The possibilities of the cosmopolitan imagination are represented by a Green cosmopolis that cannot be reduced to any version of Earth.

The profusion of virtuous shape leads to an expansion in affective power source. In the storylines for the *Blackest Night* event and the subsequent *Brichest Day* storyline, writer Geoff Johns multiplies and systematizes the emotional spectrum that powers the rings and the corps. There are many kinds of Lanterns: the Red Lanterns are powered by anger; the Orange Lantern's power of greed means there can be only one; the Yellow Lanterns evoke fear; the Greens, will; the Blues, hope; the Indigos, compassion; and the Violets, or Star Sapphires, Love. Just as the Black Lanterns represent the powers of the undead, so there is a White Lantern Entity, a White Lantern, and later, a White Lantern corps dedicated to the preservation of life. The spectrum of power demolishes gender binarism: when Green Lanterns were men empowered by will and Star Sapphires were women empowered by love, stories of the Lanterns were limited to feminist Amazons at best, and normative complementarity at worst. In the Johns version, anyone can be called to be a Lantern if they possess the right virtue, and monochrome Lanterns can learn to master other colors by developing their virtues. John Stewart, one of the most masculine of the Earth Lanterns, discovers that he is also a powerful Star Sapphire, whose love manifests as friendship and loyalty. Kyle Rayner becomes the first White Lantern by mastering all the emotions and their virtues. Furthermore, the colors of the emotional spectrum interact with one another in nonlinear ways. Blue Lanterns of hope, whose tag line, "All will be well," descends from the medieval mystic, Julian of Norwich, have little power on their own: they can fly and make basic light constructs. However, their presence supercharges the

Green Lanterns, representing the supportive relationship between hope and will. The Blue Lanterns can also break the hold of rage over the Red Lanterns. The fear of Yellow still impedes the operation of Green will, and the presence of “Agent Orange,” the singular Lantern of greed, corrupts all the other emotions. By contextualizing Green practice in terms of the other colors, Johns’s system underscores the different politics formed by affective communities. Not everyone has a corps: the Greens are orderly because will drives them. The Reds, as one might expect, are rancorous even among themselves, while the Blues are small in number, yet cooperative among themselves, because hope is a more difficult virtue than will. The Star Sapphires, led by the military Zamaron (an anagram of “Amazons”), discover that they resemble their ancient Guardian adversaries more than they might prefer. The Indigo rings of compassion are also the only rings that are forced upon bearers against their will. The Indigos are all sociopaths whose rings teach them the empathy they lack in life, and the practice of their virtue consists in a slow rehabilitation from the inability to feel the pain of others. Because of the multiplication of color-powers, the underlying logic of Aristotelian virtue ethics becomes even clearer: one may possess a form of moral excellence, but only the pedagogy of practice creates the life of flourishing. Faced with the common enemy of the undead, the different Lantern politics learn to cooperate, creating a corporate body with all the virtues in service of the alliance. The practice of planetary defense scales up to defense of all life in the universe when the Lanterns function as organs in a metahuman body of virtue.

It may seem that a Lantern alliance might be so powerful that too much can be accomplished. Metahumanism might be undermined by more virtue than mortals can exercise. This problem could be exacerbated by the traditional Lantern teaching that the power batteries of each group draw on the emotional energy of all living things in the universe, making the power available both renewable and limitless. The storyline after *Brightest Day* challenges this assumption. “Lights Out” features an antihero named Relic, a scientist who survived the end of the universe before our own, which collapsed because the energy of the emotional spectrum ran out. His mission in our time is to protect our universe from the grave threat of what might be called “peak light”: the danger of collapse caused by the use of a finite resource as if it were infinite. As an allegory for the fossil fuel industry in the era of climate change, the Relic

narrative challenges the story of planetary defense that motivates the Green Lanterns. The energy they use to defend worlds imperils the existence of the universe itself. As Relic uses advanced anti-Lantern technology from his own universe to decimate the various corps, the Lanterns react in a manner that resembles the climate change debate. The chief Blue Lantern, Saint Walker, loses all hope and ceases to be a Lantern. The Greens disbelieve the word of an enemy, and splinter internally: some use less power, others use their rings only as a last resort, while still others continue business as usual. The war against Relic escalates, as the attempt to defeat him uses ever more spectrum energy, threatening apocalyptic collapse. It is only Kyle Rayner, acting as the White Lantern, who resolves the problem by restoring the energy stores of the universe using the White Lantern's virtue, life. Kyle understands that the solution is temporary, and that Lanterns must change their energy use if the universe is to continue. "Lights Out" takes the metahumanism of the Lanterns into a new realm: they must move beyond the narrative of individual virtue to enact a new ethos of self-limitation while still addressing their original objectives. Restraint is not a virtue practiced by any of the Lantern communities. Like the citizens of developed economies in the era of climate catastrophe, they must move beyond traditional energy economies that power virtue at the expense of the universe itself. What does it mean for an ethos based on emotional expression to face the contradiction at the heart of their civilization? The cultivation of compassion, the light of courage, the power of love—even the Orange Lantern, in his solitary paranoia—must turn to the task of preserving the possibility of life itself. They must become icons of a virtue they do not yet possess, which means an embrace of metamorphosis, of change in time, that seems inimical to the eternal truths of virtue.

Becoming the change

In the Marvel Comics, the heroes of metamorphosis are mutants. In the biological sciences, the term *mutant* denotes an individual whose genetic code has changed relative to its parental genome. The change occurs at the level of the base pairs of the DNA molecule because of an error in duplication or the introduction of an outside agent of change, such as radiation or a mutagenic

chemical. The trope of mutation signifies a change caused by stochastic processes at the level of the cell or by environmental disruption, especially through forms of industrial pollution. Unlike the heroes of iconic virtue, who are chosen or called to their vocation, a mutant is born that way. Metahuman mutation in Marvel Comics has been narrated in many different ways, and assigned many origins, but the archetypal team of mutants, the X-Men, began as “children of the atom,” created by the fallout of the atomic age. The trope of mutant powers cleaves to the nerd narrative: most mutant powers appear in adolescence, triggered by a crisis in the life of the mutant. In the initial manifestation, mutant powers appear disruptive and uncontrollable, not a virtue at all, but a danger. Therefore, mutants need to learn to use their powers responsibly—this is one origin of Chris Hardwick’s idea of the nerdist. Because it is a truth universally acknowledged that a new mutant must be in want of a teacher, the X-Men attend a school, Professor Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters in the Hudson Valley of New York State. Professor X teaches his students to defend other people from the dangers of the modern world. Using this charge as the kernel of X-culture, his students evolve a common narrative from their mutual experience of exclusion, stigma, and heroic resistance. The *Uncanny X-Men*, their flagship comic, featured the motto “Feared and hated by a world they have sworn to protect” as a summary of the mutant agon with the dominant culture.

The figure of difference-as-power compensates for the initial exclusion that mutants experience on the basis of their genetic and phenotypic differences. Mutants are the ultimate nerd avatars, turning social stigma into the power to defend themselves and the world. Because mutants carry the sign of their difference in their bodies, the mutant condition lends itself to allegories of race, ethnicity, sexuality, religion, neurodiversity, and physical ability. Mutants are the all-purpose “other,” and they develop counter-institutions that move beyond the school into political life: the island of Utopia in San Francisco Bay as mutant refuge; the city of Madripoor as a mutant cosmopolis; and the nation of Genosha as a separatist state. Because mutant identity is ultimately political, Professor X’s discourse of salvation through integration must compete with eugenic ideologies that consider mutants to be a degenerate threat to humanity or the successors of humanity, a separate species called *homo superior*. The visual metamorphoses of the X-Men reflect these three

metahuman trajectories: willful identification with nonmutants in an expanded understanding of “humanity”; pursuit of metahuman culture alongside humanity as a peer-species; and violent overthrow of humanity as inferior progenitor. I will examine three cases in point: Ororo Munro, code-named “Storm”; Kurt Wagner, code-named “Nightcrawler”; and Katherine “Kitty” Pryde, code-named “Shadowcat.”

Ororo Munro faced the question of metahuman nature earlier than any of her peers. As the daughter of African American photojournalist David Munro and Kenyan princess N'Dare, Ororo inherits the narrative of enslavement and liberation and the Black Athena narrative of Egypt as the cradle of civilization. Her mother was a priestess of a line descending from an Egyptian servant of Ma'at, the Goddess of cosmic order, so Ororo's mutant powers of weather control and biospheric empathy appear as an extension of her maternal lineage. The potential conflict between ordinary-American and royal-Kenyan identities is interrupted when her parents die in a plane crash, leaving Ororo to a childhood on the streets of Cairo as a trained thief and pickpocket. After a near-fatal journey through the Serengeti Plain, her weather powers manifest, and she becomes known to local people as a wind goddess. While she fulfills this role, Professor X recruits her as one of the “New X-Men,” created by writer Chris Claremont and artist Dave Cockrum in 1976. She is the first black woman to join the X-Men, and her presence represents Marvel's attempts to integrate the Civil Rights Movement, Black Power, and the Black Arts into their universe. She is “a character with few, if any, genuine antecedents in American superhero comic books” (Fawaz 150). As Ta-Nehisi Coates points out:

In the 1980s, Marvel had a black woman—not just a black woman, a woman who was born in Harlem, a woman who was African-American and whose mother was Kenyan—leading their most popular title. And then when she lost her powers, she was still kicking ass. Like she still had enough to whip Cyclops's ass. That was something they were doing. I can't really think of anywhere else I would've went at that time to see something like that. (Riesman n.p.)

In this respect she is the peer of Luke Cage/Power Man, Misty Knight, and T'Challa, the Black Panther, prince of the science-nation of Wakanda in east Africa. Ororo's story combines elements of Dickensian melodrama,

Afrofuturism, Egyptian hermeticism, and the Darwinian premise of mutant power itself. This background creates a character of extraordinary range, capable of lock-picking at one moment and lightning strikes the next. Her role in the X-Men as a team occupies the full spectrum of positions in an elective family and institutional structures. She is Jean Grey's best friend; an older sister to Kitty Pryde and Peter Rasputin/Colossus; a confidant and strategic peer to Logan/Wolverine; the leader of the X-Men who wins the possession by right of combat with Scott Summers/Cyclops, the leader of the original team; and a professor and Headmistress of the school. The sheer variety in her background and life experiences lead her to a profound understanding of the stakes of metahumanism. Because she has been a goddess before, she takes a cynical approach to the discourse of "homo superior" preached by Magneto, a Jewish mutant who survived the death camps of World War II. Sometimes an enemy and at other times an ally, Magneto disagrees with the rhetoric of coexistence offered by his friend Charles Xavier. Ororo remains unconvinced by Magneto's separatism because of its self-aggrandizing nature: Magneto always becomes the *de facto* leader of any mutant polity he founds. Suspicious of patriarchal tendencies couched in a rhetoric of liberation, Storm resists the domination of villains such as Doctor Doom, Emma Frost, and Dracula. As a lifelong claustrophobic, she has a physical and ideological revulsion at confinement. Later in life, when she marries T'Challa and becomes Queen of Wakanda, there is an air of inevitability to her royal ascent. At the same time, she copes when her powers are taken away, relying on superior tactical, combat, and stealth abilities. Her most enduring metahuman capacity is not an identity of any kind, but a practice of cultivation—of gardens, companions, institutions, and planetary defense. As a mutant, she is a master of changing selves and circumstances.

This mastery of metamorphosis is reflected in her physical appearance. A tall, dark-skinned woman with white hair and blue eyes, Storm's phenotype already defies American racial expectations. In its most common form, her costume is also hybridic: a tight-fitting black bodysuit with the flowing cape of a hero and a headdress that suggests her hieratic ancestry. Storm wears her hair long with this costume, a combination that produces an intimidating aesthetic when she uses her weather powers. When she wields wind and lightning together, Storm can appear grand, with hair and cape spread out in the air and electricity arcing across her body. This is the goddess pose that led to her

moment as a local deity. However, in moments when she loses her powers or faces tragedy, she gives herself a mohawk and dons a street-punk costume that lends itself to hand-to-hand combat. In this persona, she defeated Scott Summers and became leader of the X-Men for the first time. When the noble demigoddess threatens to reduce her to earth-motherhood, the punk pose asserts her oldest identity as the orphan who survives on the streets by her own wits. These sartorial identities bear a different relationship to her role as planetary guardian than the iconic costume of the Green Lanterns. Her powers of weather control are not symbolized by any version of her costume: there is no lightning-bolt equivalent to the Lantern insignia on Hal Jordan's chest. Unlike the power ring, Storm's mutant abilities are a fact of biology, not vocation. If she chose one day to retire from planetary defense, she would still be able to control the weather. In her style of metamorphosis, the task of reaching beyond the human looks like one task among others in a life of flourishing. This is not true of all mutants, especially those whose mutation makes them unable to "pass" as human. Ironically, given her race, Storm is able to pass as baseline human in public. Her friend and fellow X-Man, Kurt Wagner, has no such privilege. Kurt Wagner, whose code name, "Nightcrawler," evokes his Gothic appearance, announces his mutation with every step. A German with a history as a circus freak and acrobat, Kurt's skin and hair are dark blue, his eyes a jaundiced yellow, and his ears are pointed. He has a prehensile tail that ends in a spike, and his hands and feet have only two digits each. He appears to human eyes as a threatening blue devil, and he spent his early life running from humans trying to murder him because of his demonic visage. His mutant power has nothing to do with his appearance: he is a teleporter, able to transport himself and others without traversing the physical distance to his destination. Nightcrawler wears a red and black leotard with pointed shoulders, a vestige of his days as an acrobat, but neither his physiognomy nor his costume represents his ethos. They are thoroughly uniconic.

Nightcrawler's surface bears an ironic relationship to his personality, methods, and function in the X-alliance. He is among the most gentle of the X-Men, and his first function in the New X-Men is to befriend Wolverine. The Wolverine he befriends bears little resemblance to the film version played by Hugh Jackman. This Wolverine is a recovering psychotic killer, whose memory of his past identity has been removed by the same forces that gave

him his signature adamantium claws. Haunted by his profound capacity for slaughter, Wolverine spends many years as the chief antihero of the X-Men, always on the edge of rebellion, never comfortable with the leadership of Xavier or Scott Summers, suspicious of any club that would have him as a member. Nightcrawler, whose appearance would have signaled “villain” in the Golden Age of American comics, serves as his best friend and father-confessor. One of the overtly religious members of the team, Kurt mentors Logan through coming to terms with his past as super-weapon used by the Canadian government to accomplish the dirtiest work. Though alarmed by his friend’s capacity for violence, Nightcrawler employs his own demonization as an argument that no one should be defined by their past or appearance. Metahumanism in the style of Kurt Wagner emphasizes the limitations of reading iconically, as if the costume defines the hero. Going beyond the human is not a matter of superior breeding or political precedence, but a process of undoing the dialectic of self and other, of bridging the distance between the pious demon and his murderous friend. Nightcrawler plays against type as the comic relief of his group of self-serious teammates, modeling himself after Errol Flynn as a Hollywood swashbuckler, and offering himself as Kitty Pryde’s “fuzzy-elf” who stands watch over her adolescence like a pet monster. Despite his jocularity, Nightcrawler exemplifies the kind of mutant who needs the refuge of Xavier’s School to shield him from human violence. In the comics, Kurt occasionally employs a portable device to make himself appear to be human, but eventually rejects it as too grave a lie about himself. In the second X-Men film, *X2* (2003), Alan Cumming captures Nightcrawler’s pain in affirming himself despite the cost of alienation. Brainwashed by the villain, William Stryker, to attempt an assassination of the American president, Nightcrawler takes refuge in the shadows of a cathedral, where Jean Grey and Storm must find him and convince him to join the team. Ororo’s relative normality makes her untrustworthy at first, and Kurt struggles to find a place in a mutant group whose members can pass as human. It is only when Stryker turns Professor X into a telepathic weapon against all mutants that the problem of appearance versus essence fails. Stryker hates all mutants, including his own son, emphasizing anti-mutant violence as hatred within a larger family of humanity. Nightcrawler saves mutantkind all over the planet with the team, and its dedication to all mutants is affirmed by the shot of Wolverine carrying

in his arms a young boy with the darting tongue of a lizard. In Nightcrawler's narrative, solidarity trumps appearance, and in this sense it is more nerdy and monstrous than queer.

The metahuman question of identity affirmation meets the eco-cosmopolitan question of how to save a planet in *The Black Vortex* (2015), a crossover event between the X-Men and the Guardians of the Galaxy. Kitty Pryde, who entered Xavier's School at age thirteen, is now a professor at that school engaged in a long-distance relationship with Peter Quill, Star-Lord, the leader of the Guardians of the Galaxy, a team of space pirates. The X-Men and the Guardians have encountered an ancient artifact called the Black Vortex, which reveals one's ultimate self and promises to transform one into it. In terms of nerd tropology, the Vortex is an avatar engine that shows your self after apotheosis, the cosmic being you would be without the limitations of genetics, environment, and mortality. As a magic mirror, the Vortex reflects the glory of your divine self and the costume appropriate to it. One need only gaze into the image and say "I submit to the Black Vortex" and the transformation will occur. Having just witnessed the destruction of Hala, the home planet of the Kree Empire, the X-Men and Guardians are tempted to use the Vortex to acquire enough power to save Spartax, the planet of Peter's father's people, now under attack by the Brood, a parasitic insect race modeled after the Xenomorphs in *Alien*. These creatures are Kitty Pryde's oldest enemies, the reason she hates space. Kitty demurs. Vala, an elder of the universe who is twelve billion years old, warns the group that the Vortex grants power by changing the heart, and the changed heart destroys worlds. She admits that she killed the last of her own people in a battle that began when all of them submitted to the Vortex. This is a test of metahumanism as planetary defense: Is it true that power is the key to saving the world? If one meta-mutates, speeding up evolutionary processes that take billions of years, will worlds survive because of it? Kitty watches her friends choose. Hank McCoy, the Beast, receives total understanding of the physics of the multiverse. Warren Worthington, Angel, submits because he has met his future self, and wishes to change his destiny as a tool of planetary destruction. Peter Quill peers into the Vortex and finds the ultimate emperor, his evil father's wicked son whose obsession with power drives Kitty away. "Sup, bro?" cosmic Peter asks himself, and Star-Lord winces in disgust. As in the film *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014), Peter is a hero of renunciation, the

rejection of patriarchal power that is his by right of blood. As the human member of an alliance that includes a cyborg raccoon, a green assassin, an alien mercenary, and an ambulatory tree, Peter rejects his right to become a cosmic predator. Peter's power is to know what kind of power will suffice, but his decision guarantees that Kitty will choose the Vortex, because Spartax is in trouble, and someone must defeat the Brood.

Even for a metamorphic hero, Kitty has been visually unstable to an unusual degree. She "phases" through matter, realigning her body at the quantum level to pass through solid objects and disrupt electrical activity in machines. (She is also a genius, the computer hacker of the team, but not because of a mutation.) Though her power produces dramatic effects—Joss Whedon's run in *Astonishing X-Men* ends when Kitty saves the Earth by phasing a planet-killing bullet through it—it is uninteresting to view, making her look like a ghost. The lackluster aesthetics result in a series of unsatisfying code names—Sprite, Ariel, Shadowcat—and dull costumes. As a result, even though she is a member of the faculty at the time of *The Black Vortex* narrative, she wears the yellow and blue spandex that identifies beginning students who are not allowed to be "X-Men" yet. If Storm represents metamorphosis as a series of impressive costumes, and Nightcrawler marks the resistance to the iconic as a mode for representing ethos, Kitty stands for metahumanism that resists the visual entirely. Her powers do not mount a floor show, a difficult problem in visual media like film and comic books. When she submits to the Vortex, we are not allowed to see the image of her cosmic self. That issue, *Legendary Star-Lord #11*, ends with a splash page in which Kitty's head has turned transparent, and the vastness of space shines through. In the conclusion, *Black Vortex Omega #1*, Kitty's transformation is revealed. She moves beyond a singular cosmic self, merging with all the versions of Kitty Pryde throughout the multiverse. Every Kitty Pryde that ever could have been becomes part of her experience. At this moment of transcendence, she disappears from view, and Vala proclaims that the cosmos has taken her. Peter disagrees, saying that she will return, because she is a paragon among mutants: "She's Kitty Pryde. My dream girl." Peter is right: the cosmic Kitty deliquesces back to Spartax, albeit in a giant, nebulous form. The Vortex has amplified her power to planetary level: she phases Spartax out of the amber prison the Brood made, crushing it and the Brood warriors, leaving them shattered in empty space. She has not

just saved Spartax as a whole; she has saved Ma Savage's orphanage and its orphans, a community funded by Peter's piracy. She loves Ma and the kids: they are the persons (not all of them human) who give "Spartax" meaning to her. This is Kitty's metahumanist triumph: at the moment of maximum reach, when she unites with the multiverse itself, she turns back to the local because she cannot forget her particular loves: friends, teammates, and space pirate. The Black Vortex is unable to corrupt her because she has moved beyond the desire for power to the material entanglements of local lives. She learns that every version of her life—the Kitty of mutant concentration camps and Chicago soda shops—depends on people who could not be left behind. There is no costume to represent this: her cosmic self gives way to the young woman with curly brown hair who can walk on the ground of the planet she saved with the people she loves. Her cosmic power and knowledge have not disappeared, but they do not make a scene. For a moment, Kitty Pryde moved beyond the logic of the comic book itself to a virtue that resists representation. As in Dante's *Paradiso*, high fantasy fails her, and she awakens in a world that can still be saved.

This investigation into the modes of comic metahumanism reveals two strategies for representing planetary defense: the icon of virtue, identified with the Green Lanterns of DC Comics, and the trope of mutation, identified with the X-Men of Marvel Comics. Though these modes are sometimes opposed, I argue that they illuminate one another as aspects of a larger metahumanist practice of planetary defense. In more traditional terms, iconicity and metamorphosis can be understood as part of the ethics of virtue and the ethics of care, which metahumanism unites as part of the crucial task of planetary defense. Though I can only provide a sketch of this union here, what follows is the beginning of an ethical theory of metahumanism as it grows with and from nerd ecology.

Virtue ethics is identified with Aristotelian philosophy, but it remains influential because of Aristotle's influence on medieval Scholasticism and contemporary Neo-Thomism. For Aristotle, the life of human flourishing can be attained by the cultivation of certain strengths of character called virtues, such as justice, temperance, wisdom, and so on. Virtue is an inborn quality of soul, but it can also be strengthened through the formation of habits. Unlike ethical systems that identify an essence that produces an effect—good people

act in ways that are good—virtue ethics holds that good people cultivate habits of doing good that result in the achievement of good in the world. Habits can be formed through the exercise of the will guided by reason, so personal moral excellence can be pursued as a conscious goal. This pursuit then shapes the life of flourishing or not flourishing: the fruits of virtue become visible in the life of the virtuous person as a shape of the spirit made material by action in the world. This is the model of the Lanterns. The task of planetary defense is empowered by the practice of certain virtues—the will to defend; the love of place, persons, and creatures; anger at destruction—that manifest an energy that accomplishes tasks in the world. Certain kinds of light shine from the heart into the world in order to defend it. But we do not always choose the kinds of excellence available to us, through heritage or circumstance. Sometimes we are thrown, as Martin Heidegger would say, into a world where certain kinds of care are demanded of us, even though we did not choose them. The contemporary tangle of biospheric crises of land, sea, and air that gather toward the Sixth Great Extinction, carrying us with them, qualify as this kind of event. Such an ethical environment may best be described by the feminist ethic of care. Joan Tronto identifies four elements of the act of caring: noticing the need to care; assuming responsibility for care; giving care; and receiving care. From these elements arise four aspects of the ethos of care: attentiveness, responsibility, competence, and responsiveness (Tronto 252). The practice of care involves paying attention to others and their needs; deciding to help fulfill those needs; being able to provide good care; and listening to those who receive care in each moment of caring. Applied to Kitty's situation in *The Black Vortex*, these aspects of care correspond to: realizing Spartax was in danger; deciding to save it, even at great personal cost; being able to save it; and responding to those who were saved. As Kitty herself notes, being an X-Man leads to finding a danger to others and taking responsibility for it, the first two aspects of care-giving. As a good teacher and hero, Kitty was already practiced in listening to those under her care. The problem lay in the third aspect, the ability to provide care. Kitty understood that she did not possess sufficient virtue to care for Spartax as she found it. Her team as a whole lacked the collective virtue to do so as well. In this analysis, the Black Vortex represents the process of acquiring necessary virtues to provide the care needed in each situation. This is where virtue ethics and care ethics can inform one another. Care grounds virtue in the needs of the

community. One does not acquire virtue to achieve personal flourishing alone; one acquires it to achieve planetary flourishing. In turn, virtue ethics tells us how to gain the powers needed to provide the care. After the Vortex, Kitty returns to Spartax because power is not an end in itself, but a means toward the preservation of the planet in danger. She is not corrupted by the Vortex because she combined virtue ethics and the ethics of care. So, metahumanism as a practice of planetary defense must cultivate the virtues represented as icons and the capacity to gain these virtues represented as metamorphosis. The practice of moving beyond humanity into a realm of new powers cannot be merely a compensation for the wounds of childhood, a revenge of the nerds in the key of Aristotle. It cannot even be nerdism, understood as an artful practice of nerding-out for its own sake. Metahumanism must be directed toward the common good of planetary defense in an age of environmental catastrophe. The light of the Lanterns must enter history and change accordingly. Only then will our favorite stories function as they should. The example of Kitty Pryde leads to a modest proposal for a metahumanist practice of planetary defense based on unpopular culture.