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“Flesh-to-Flesh Contact”:  
Marvel Comics’ Rogue and the  
Queer Feminist Imagination

**Abstract** The X-Men’s Rogue’s ability to absorb the powers and personality of others through “flesh-to-flesh contact” presents an affective figure for the queer potential of the X-Men’s metaphor of mutancy as difference. Close readings of Rogue’s first appearance, *Avengers Annual* #10, and the end of her first major character arc, *Uncanny X-Men* #185, reveal that this affective figure for queerness is variable and derived from X-Men writer Chris Claremont’s ongoing engagement with feminist politics and theory.

**Keywords** queer theory, X-Men, comics, superheroes, affect

When ah touch you . . . ah’ll absorb your power an’ memories as well. Any flesh-to-flesh contact—no matter how slight—will suffice for the transfer.

—Rogue, *Avengers Annual* #10 (1981)

**A**n original creation of legendary comic book scribe Chris Claremont and penciller Michael Golden, Marvel Comics’ heroine Rogue is arguably one of the most recognizable characters in comic book history.<sup>1</sup> Although best known as a member of the X-Men, a superhero team of mutants, Rogue was originally introduced as a villain in *Avengers Annual* #10 (Claremont and Golden 1981). In this now-classic issue, Rogue’s close-cropped white-streaked hair and Southern drawl distinguished her visually and verbally as much as she was conceptually distinguished by her mutant power to absorb the powers, memories, and personalities—“the very identity” (Claremont and Romita 1985a)—of those she touches (Claremont and

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Smith 1983b). Since she was unable to control her absorptive capabilities, if Rogue stayed in “flesh-to-flesh contact” with another person too long, she ran the risk of permanently absorbing their powers and personality. When her character was introduced, Rogue struggled with the lasting effects of the accidental permanent absorption of the abilities and persona of the heroine Ms. Marvel. Although Rogue possessed the superheroine’s alien-derived superhuman strength, durability, and flight, she suffered from debilitating psychological dysphoria, as she was subject to Ms. Marvel’s thoughts and emotions, which she often mistook for her own. To mitigate the possibility of inadvertently absorbing the consciousnesses of others, Rogue wore a green jumpsuit that covered her body from head to toe. As of the time of this writing, Rogue’s gloves and hood are still part of the character’s iconic design.

Isolated from physical affection lest she be brought into ego-destroying intimacy with others, in the 1980s and 1990s *Uncanny X-Men* comics, Rogue cuts something of a tragic sentimental figure. As a brash, beautiful Southern belle who yearns on multiple occasions to feel the touch of a lover, friend, or mother, she dramatizes the psychological isolation and emotional intensity of marginalized difference in superhero form.<sup>2</sup> This essay, however, questions the common understanding of Rogue’s absorptive touch as monolithically tragic and performs something of a reparative reading of Rogue and her power of absorption, interpreting them as central to an understanding of the superhero figure’s unique effectiveness in analyzing difference. Rogue’s powers of alien strength, durability, and flight absorbed from Ms. Marvel resonate with the original superhero, 1938’s Superman, whom Umberto Eco (1998) famously read as an iconic, unchanging representation of social (“civic”) and gender normativity. However, Rogue’s mutant power of absorption and transformation, which makes her physical and psychological makeup a dynamic and fluid amalgam of traits from disparate identities (in terms of gender, age, powers, etc.), is representative of Ramzi Fawaz’s (2016) conceptualization of postwar superheroes—derived from the X-Men themselves—as “new mutants.” Postwar superheroes, Fawaz explains, are possessed of “monstrous powers and bodies,” which, instead of representing unchanging normative ideals, exhibit “a form of . . . material and psychic becoming characterized by constant transition and change” that defies the narrow dictates of heteronormativity and gender conformity.

Thus, Fawaz positions postwar superheroes as “distinctly ‘queer’ figure[s] . . . [whose] mutated bodies . . . cultivated an affective orientation toward otherness and difference that made so-called deviant modes of bodily expression, erotic attachment, and affiliation both desirable and ethical” (22).

In post–World War II superhero mythoi, this “affective orientation toward otherness and difference” was often given conceptual form as transformative physical contact. In these stories, touch created an access to difference that rendered the human body unrecognizable and wondrous. For instance, in 1956, the first superhero of comic books’ so-called silver age, DC Comics’ Barry Allen (the Flash), is struck by a lightning bolt that gives him the ability to move at lightning-fast speeds. Similarly, less than a decade later, Marvel Comics’ Peter Parker, bitten by a radioactive spider, manifests the proportionate strength, agility, and intuitive senses of that spider to become a superhuman-animal hybrid, Spider-Man. Elements of contact, touch, and bodily susceptibility are central to the origin mythos of the post–World War II superhero.

Rogue, in her own way, restages the quintessential silver age or postwar superhero origin each time she comes into physical contact with another character. In *Uncanny X-Men* #194, for instance, in a desperate effort to make one final stand against the X-Men’s robotic arch-nemesis, Nimrod, who has beaten and left unconscious all her fellow X-Men, Rogue gently grazes her fingertips against the skins of her teammates, the teleporting blue elf Nightcrawler and the metal-skinned strongman Colossus (Claremont and Romita 1985b). On contact, Rogue’s body and mind transform; her arms and legs burst out of her sleeves and pants with the added mass of Colossus’s steel skin, and her face grows a pelt of Nightcrawler’s blue fur (see fig. 1). The result of Rogue’s fleeting contact with her teammates is a Frankensteinian composite being, an “amalgam of multiple personas, not all of them human” (Claremont and Romita 1985a), in which she channels the differences of her teammates and yet remains unlike them. Rogue, as a vessel for difference that cannot be pinned down to a single normative identity, stymies Nimrod’s computer brain, which allows her to save her fellow X-Men. In scenes like this, Rogue coheres as a meta-fictional figure not just for the specific heroes she touches but for the superhero genre’s general conception of superhuman power as substantial with a nonnormative body, which is produced through



**Figure 1** Rogue absorbs the powers and abilities of her teammates and becomes an amalgam representing the X-Men as a whole. From Claremont and Romita (1985), *Uncanny X-Men* #194

transformative contact that renders differences mobile across a blurred boundary between subject and object.

Capitalizing on Rogue as a switch point between the superhero figure and queerness, this essay approaches Rogue's touch as a physical materialization and visual enactment of the new mutant superhero's queerness conceptualized in Fawaz's terms as an "affective orientation toward . . . difference." Defined in terms of difference as opposed to

identity, queerness, as Annamarie Jagose (1996, 98) writes, “does not assume for itself any specific materiality or positivity”; thus any move to define or identify queerness is, in fact, normalizing, exclusionary, and against the point. This nonidentitarian exigency of queerness as a field has made queerness at once boringly common (anyone and everyone is queer), uselessly utopian (can I be queer at all?), and infuriatingly abstract (what does *queer* mean again?). However, by embodying and exploring an orientation toward difference in specific, discrete, affective forms—in the case of this essay, a stolen kiss and an offered hand—Rogue’s power of absorption through flesh-to-flesh contact acts as a focal point for an examination of how queer embodiment and subjectivity constitute themselves in the form of the superhero and how the superhero comments on and interrogates queer modes of being. In short, I argue that Rogue’s touch renders queerness as an analyzable process of relationality and subject formation susceptible to close reading and political analysis.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, this essay’s close readings of Rogue’s touch reveal it as a trope for identification, the “assimilative or appropriative act [of] making the other the same as me, or me the same as the other . . . [causing] the I/ego to be transformed by the other” (Diamond 1992, 409–10), a psychoanalytic and political concept that connects theories of reading, the superhero genre, queerness, and feminism.

### **Rogue Theory: Superheroic, Queer, and Feminist**

In Eco’s (1998, 873) formulation, the superhero acts as a “pedagogic instrument” of representation and identification; the presumably preadolescent male reader identifies with, can vicariously experience, and subsequently seeks to emulate the superhero’s representation of perfected masculinity. Rogue’s power of absorption models this reading experience. She, like the reader of the comic book, identifies and “assimilates” into herself the essence—the power—of other superheroes. But Rogue is not a preadolescent male, and her power of identification does not re-entrench her existing identity in terms of gender or race. Instead, Rogue enacts identification as a process that overflows rigid articulations of identity and deterministic conceptions of subjectivity. Rogue does not merely deviate from norms through the power of touch. Flesh-to-flesh contact allows her to cross-identify and

empathize with others in ways that go beyond normativity or nonnormativity. Rogue figures and repurposes Eco's theory of superheroinic identification to describe how subjectivity might produce itself in queer ways.

In *Uncanny X-Men* #236 (Claremont and Silvestri 1988), Claremont fully illustrates Rogue's consciousness as oriented toward *itself* as different because of her assimilative identification with those whom she touches. While incarcerated by mutant-hunting villains, Rogue "withdraws . . . to the lowest depths of her primal subconscious," a graphic representation of Rogue's consciousness as a space—a mindscape, if you will—she can inhabit and explore. In this mindscape, Rogue is beset by hordes of ghostlike versions of "all the people ah ever absorbed" and asks, "But that effect is only temporary—how can y'all be inside my head?!" A shade of her teammate Nightcrawler answers Rogue's question regarding the composition of her own psyche, saying, "Stolen powers and memories fade, liebchen . . . but there's a psychic residue" (see fig. 2). This scene spatially depicts Rogue's fractured heterogeneous psyche as streaked with otherness, her individuality containing a potential multiplicity of "residues" (Claremont and Silvestri 1988). As Elin Diamond (1992, 409–10) explains, this is because "identification," or in this case, Rogue's absorption, "always works both ways . . . [such that] the borders of identity, the wholeness and consistency of identity, are transgressed by every act of identification." In short, Diamond writes, "To identify is . . . to be radically destabilized" (405). This self-inconsistent, relational conception of subjectivity is one step away from queer theorist Judith Butler's conception of queer identity as continually unmade and remade. She writes, "Indeed, whatever self emerges . . . is always at a temporal remove from its former appearance; it is transformed through its encounter with alterity, not in order to return to itself, but to become a self it never was. Difference casts it forth into an irreversible future. To be a self is . . . not to enjoy the prerogative of self-identity" (2004, 148). In other words, touch shared between Rogue and those whom she absorbs produces a subjectivity that embraces differences, even unto itself, and defies stable homogeneous identity whether in terms of race, gender, or other categories. However, Rogue's reengagement of difference does not occur across identity formations, strictly speaking, in terms of an intersubjectivity that bridges the consciousness of two distinct subjects, each with their own racial, gender, and class



**Figure 2** Rogue enters her “mindscape,” where she encounters “residues” of those she has absorbed. From Claremont and Silvestri (1988), *Uncanny X-Men* #236

identities. Rather, Rogue’s power of transformation through physical contact evolves into what I refer to as a *mutually interpenetrating intrasubjectivity*, where Rogue experiences the differences of those she absorbs as a new hybridized subjectivity arising from the remixing of previously separate sets of traits, experiences, and consciousnesses. This intrasubjectivity bypasses prior designations of self and other to produce a unique experience not comprehensible in terms of existing matrices of identification such as gender, race, and class without occluding or dispensing with those identifications. Rogue acts as a superheroic figure who pushes the psychological and political force of identification along a queer vector that helps us consider subjectivity beyond identity politics.

Even as it figures identification and assimilation, Rogue’s power of touch, often applied in terms of specific affective or erotic emotional states (like a stolen kiss), is also a trope for sexual desire. The intermixing of desire and identification is itself a hallmark of queer subjectivity. Queer theorist Michael Warner analyzes Sigmund Freud’s separation of identification (what the subject seeks to be like) and desire (what the subject seeks to have sexually) as the root of psychoanalytic gender and sexual normativity. For Freud, the subject identifies with the same (boys identify with their father, girls their mother) and desires what is different (boys their mother, girls their father), to produce a normative gender identity and sexual orientation (see

Warner 1998). Rogue's power of touch, in psychoanalytic terms, merges the registers of desire and identification, producing a nonnormative psychoanalytic formation of subjectivity, gender, and sexuality. Thus, Rogue's power of touch figures a queer erotic imagination of redesigning the self through desire and pleasuring oneself through identification. In effect, physical contact destabilizes the desire for fixed identity by demonstrating and exemplifying the pleasures of identification that are multiple, varied, and productive of ever-changing, unforeclosable possibilities for self-reinvention.

The queer collapse of desire and identification figured in Rogue's absorptive touch is also a primary component of the lesbian erotics of black lesbian theorist Audre Lorde. In an article with a subtitle that could refer to Rogue herself, "The Power of Touch," Sarah Chinn argues that, for Lorde, lesbian sexuality is a mode of the erotic that, in contrast to the patriarchal register of sight, privileges touch. According to Chinn, touch acts as a mode of sharing sensation that allows for a unique sexual intersubjectivity. The "source of connection," Chinn (2003, 184) writes, "is the skin," because touch, as opposed to vision, produces sensation in both the actor and the recipient simultaneously. To touch is also to be touched. As a reflexive and shared sensation, Chinn argues, touch constitutes an intersubjectivity that blurs the strict separation of self and other. Thus, touch allows participants access to one another's differences and facilitates their becoming more similar. In Lorde's lesbian erotic, as in Warner's queer subjectivity, to desire is also to identify. Similarly, when Rogue makes flesh-to-flesh contact with other people, they are acted on, they fall asleep as their consciousness drains into Rogue's, and Rogue gains access to their differences and exhibits their unique personae and superpowers as her own (the trope par excellence for difference in superhero comics). But at the same time Rogue also becomes subject to them: their memories, their will, their subjectivity. For Rogue, like Lorde, contact is never merely skin-deep: touching the other can make the self like the other or the other a part of the self. Given the resonance Lorde's conception of lesbian erotics shares with Rogue's power of absorptive touch, this essay seeks to capitalize on Rogue's touch as a figure for a queer orientation toward difference that is inseparable from its mobilization as a trope for lesbian desire and feminist political identification.



### Rogue Politics: The Power of Divergent Feminisms

As my critical reference to Lorde might suggest, I also argue that the queer potential of Rogue's power of touch arises out of Marvel Comics' and writer Claremont's tumultuous but theoretically productive engagement with feminist movements not only of the 1980s, the era of Rogue's creation and development, but also the late 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>4</sup> In the late 1960s feminism began a period of fierce internal division and ideological multiplication.<sup>5</sup> The liberal feminism of Betty Friedan had come under fire by radical feminists, who themselves broke into countless splinter groups along the lines of sexual, race, and class difference (radical feminists, lesbian feminists, lesbian separatists, black lesbian feminists, women of color feminists, and so on). The political strife that fueled the proliferation of feminisms in the 1970s, however, did not hamper various feminisms' social and political growth in the national consciousness. In 1972, Gloria Steinem began publishing the feminist *Ms. Magazine*, and Kate Millett, the feminist author of the best-selling *Sexual Politics*, was a household name. By the 1970s, feminism, in many of its myriad expressions, was a major part of the national political conversation.<sup>6</sup> Despite the seriousness of ideological rifts among feminists, looking back, both feminist historians (like Ruth Rosen) and queer theorists (like Judith Butler) have identified this mutative, multitudinous, agonistic quality of American feminism as a source of social and political power, an unlikely factor in its successes.<sup>7</sup> Rogue's touch-activated absorption—a trope for queer and lesbian sexuality—is simultaneously a trope for feminist political identification, its production of a hybrid or amalgam form containing and synthesizing into superhuman power the agonistic synergy of divergent feminisms. Rogue's relationship to difference so representative of the figure of the superhero's anti-identitarian queerness, I argue, is largely a result of Claremont's attempts to embody the agonism of feminist identity politics, thus suggesting that Claremont's superhero comics constitute their own queer feminism.

I substantiate this claim by performing close readings of particularly representative and pivotal instances of two of Rogue's most common affective forms of touch: the stolen kiss, from Rogue's first appearance as a villain in *Avengers Annual* #10, and the offered hand, from the culmination of her first major character arc as a hero in *Uncanny X-Men* #185. My readings begin by drawing connections between Rogue's use

of touch and particular ideological conflicts within feminist politics: liberal feminism's conflict with lesbian and radical feminism; antiporn feminism's "sex wars" with lesbian BDSM feminism and pro-sex feminism; and intersectional feminism's split from radical feminism. In Rogue's story arc, these ideological splits produce affects of sexual violence, betrayal, and identification as well as trust and empathy. The significance of Rogue's touch, and therefore her queerness, is molded by these affective contexts. The way these affects inhabit, inspire, and shape touch into specific forms relates to racial and gender difference in unexpected queer ways. I theorize and analyze how these different affective forms process and metabolize feminist conflicts to produce queer subjectivities. By reading the historical, narrative, and ideological contexts of Rogue's absorption of others through physical contact, I show how each application of Rogue's touch produces a specific queer orientation toward difference that merits its own close analysis in terms of desire, identity, and, most importantly, ethics.

### The Stolen Kiss

Rogue's introduction into the Marvel Universe is a flash point in Marvel Comics' evolving relationship to feminism, a direct consequence and critique of the failure of Marvel's first major feminist-themed superheroine, Ms. Marvel.<sup>8</sup> In the early 1970s, as feminist politics gained ascendancy in the United States' national consciousness, Marvel Comics published a slew of female-focused superhero titles, the most significant of which, 1976's *Ms. Marvel*, wove its texture of motifs and themes heavily, if ham-fistedly, from the personalities and politics of second-wave feminism. Ms. Marvel's alter ego, Carol Danvers, the editor-in-chief of *Woman Magazine*, evoked an easy parallelism with famed feminist and editor Steinem and was wont to speak in the political and theoretical idiom of radical feminism ("So much for RAISED CONSCIOUSNESS!") (Claremont and Mooney 1978). For all this feminist signaling, it is arguable whether *Ms. Marvel* faithfully represented any feminist political agenda or theory with any coherence. The title's content peaked under Claremont's authorship, but the comic was canceled in 1979. When Ms. Marvel resurfaced in Marvel's flagship title, *The Avengers*, written by Jim Shooter, her feminist charge was neutralized and then reversed by a series of misogynistic narrative devices; she was mind-controlled, raped, and then written to fall in love with

her supervillain rapist, Marcus. When Marcus says he intends to whisk Ms. Marvel off to live with him in another dimension, her fellow Avengers—Marvel icons such as Captain America, Thor, and Iron Man—blithely congratulate her on her “happiness” and provide Marcus and Ms. Marvel with interdimensional transportation for their otherworldly honeymoon. As feminist comic book critic Carol A. Strickland (n.d.) puts it, Marvel Comics’ first great feminist superheroine’s storyline devolved into a “male fantasy [where] a desirable woman/mother figure is raped and then chooses to be the lover of her rapist/son [because] women love to be raped.”

*Avengers Annual* #10, and Rogue’s introduction therein, is Claremont’s feminist critique of what Strickland (n.d.) calls “The Rape of Ms. Marvel.” In the issue, Rogue brutally attacks the Avengers in a plot to free the incarcerated members of her fellow supervillains, the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants (Claremont and Golden 1981). However, Rogue’s role in the brotherhood’s plan, neutralizing the Avengers and claiming their powers for use in the brotherhood’s jailbreak, can easily be read as “The Revenge of Ms. Marvel.” Indeed, Rogue’s first utterance—boasting that she has permanently absorbed the identity of Ms. Marvel and thus “possess[es] all Ms. Marvel’s mem’ries [and] most importantly . . . her power!”—immediately positions her as a counterintuitive extension of the heroine she has defeated. In absorbing and “possessing,” literally introjecting Ms. Marvel’s “power” and “mem’ries,” Rogue becomes like Ms. Marvel. Thus, Rogue’s touch literalizes an identification in the context of feminist political critique.

Rogue’s absorption as an identification between dissimilar, even antagonistic women resonates with the political philosophy of late 1960s and early 1970s radical and lesbian feminisms. In “The Woman Identified Woman” (1970) lesbian feminist collective the Radicalesbians invoked the language of identification to define its own brand of feminism against the assimilationist liberal feminist values of earlier second-wave feminisms like that of Betty Friedan and her National Organization for Women. The Radicalesbians (1972, 172) described such feminists as “women . . . [who] try to escape [the hatred of themselves and other women] by identifying with the oppressor, living through him, gaining status and identity from his ego, his power, his accomplishments. And by not identifying with other ‘empty vessels’ like themselves.” Rogue, however, as a mutant terrorist very much akin to Valerie Solanas and members of her Society for Cutting Up Men (SCUM), refuses to be like “passive, rattle-headed Daddy’s girls,

ever eager for [male] approval” (Solanas 1968). Instead, by enhancing herself through identification with another woman Rogue considers not an “an empty vessel” but a source of “power” she is proud to “possess,” the militant female mutant mobilizes her power of absorption as a superheroic trope for political and psychological identification, thus producing herself as a “woman-identified woman.”

Rogue’s distinctive original character design visually ratifies her engagement with lesbian feminist values as articulated in “The Woman Identified Woman.” Her brown hair, streaked with white, is closely cropped, giving her a distinctly masculine appearance. And unlike most heroines and female supervillains, whose skin-tight and revealing costumes purposefully invite the heterosexual male gaze, Rogue’s head-to-toe green jumpsuit, detailed with folds and creases to mark a loose fit, de-emphasizes her breasts and hips, closing her body off from that gaze.<sup>9</sup> Rogue is coded as masculine, even butch, flirting with stereotypes of lesbianism. After her introduction Claremont ingeniously both refuted and confirmed this stereotype. Although Rogue is consistently characterized as heterosexual in her object choice, as the daughter of Mystique and her lesbian partner-in-crime and lover, Destiny, Rogue is, in her own way, lesbian identified. Rogue’s mannish and lesbian coding, in the context of the early 1970s radical and lesbian feminist movements from which Claremont seems to be drawing, has strong feminist political connotations.<sup>10</sup> The Radicalesbians (1972, 172) famously defined a lesbian as “the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion” and lesbianism as the full emotional and political identification with other women, the apotheosis of feminism. Therefore, Rogue’s masculinized form and lesbian identification verify her unspoken feminist political identification with Ms. Marvel, evident insofar as Rogue, like the lesbian of “The Woman Identified Woman” acts on the Avengers as the “rage of” Ms. Marvel “condensed to the point of explosion.”

If Rogue’s visual codes and family ties draw her into association with lesbian feminism, Ms. Marvel’s identification with male values and institutions—namely, the Avengers—in the critical context of the “The Woman Identified Woman,” evokes a liberal feminist will to assimilate to the power of male dominance. At the end of the *Avengers Annual* #10, however, once woken from her coma, Ms. Marvel confronts the Avengers regarding their complicity in her rape and repudiates her patriarchal identification, telling her former teammates, “My mistake was trusting you!” Claremont’s feminist counternarrative not

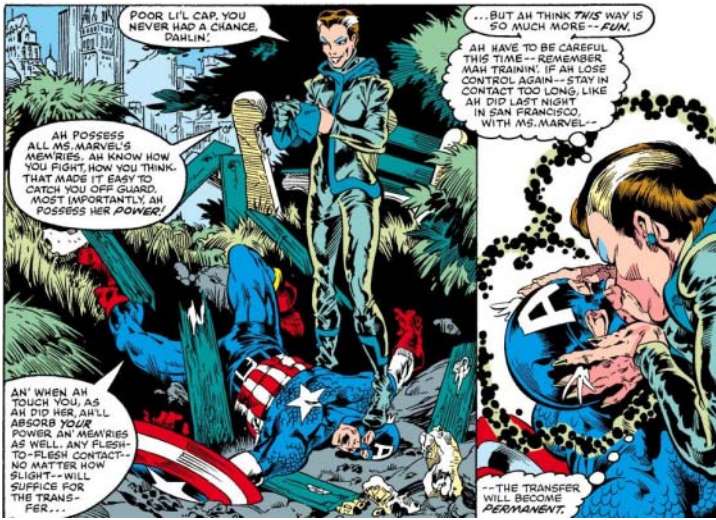
only highlights a conflict between feminism and male supremacy, but it also depicts how differing feminist figures define their feminisms through varied—even opposed—emotional, social, and political identifications. In effect, Claremont raises the question some feminists imply is feminism’s central concern: with whom should women identify? (Jagose 2009, 161). This makes Rogue’s permanent absorption of Ms. Marvel a feminist identification but also an orientation of women toward other, different women and their different feminisms.

Rogue uses the powers and skills she has permanently purloined from Ms. Marvel to defeat Captain America easily, shattering a park bench with his body and leaving the superhero’s red-white-and-blue-garbed form battered and unconscious at her feet amid the wooden bench’s rubble. The first on-panel use of Rogue’s ability to absorb the powers and personae of others through flesh-to-flesh contact, defined by the revenge of Ms. Marvel, carries a nefarious nonconsensual sexual charge. “Poor li’l Cap,” Rogue says, menacingly pulling the green glove off her hand, an ominous gesture toward touch (“when ah touch you”) that promises to take from the unconscious superhero his essential essence (“ah’ll absorb your power an’ mem’ries as well [as Ms. Marvel’s]”). Rogue’s posture toward Captain America—the slow exposure of her dangerous skin, her stance over his unconscious body—creates a kind of sadistic intimacy, paralleled in the subtle connotations of her speech. Referring to Captain America as “poor” and “li’l” Rogue demonstrates an emasculating empathy and ersatz affection for the superhero she pummels. Referring to Captain America by the nickname (Cap) given to him by his teammates in the Avengers, however, is especially telling, demonstrating that Rogue has not only absorbed Ms. Marvel’s memories of how he fights and thinks in order to gain a tactical advantage over him but also the emotional resonances and memories that constitute Ms. Marvel and Captain America’s friendly personal relationship. Rogue’s sadism in touching and absorbing Captain America is inspired and shaped by Ms. Marvel’s betrayed trust in him, monstrously realized in the specific form of Rogue’s absorptive touch—flesh-to-flesh contact not limited to her ungloved hands.

Gloating over Captain America’s unconscious body as she brandishes her exposed and weaponized flesh, Rogue mentions that “any flesh-to-flesh contact—no matter how slight—will suffice for the transfer” of Captain America’s powers and memories into herself, but she chooses to place both her exposed palms on either sides of the

sleeping man's face, raise his body off the ground, bring his face to hers, and—in a single, striking close-up panel—press her lips to his, stealing an open-mouthed kiss because, as Rogue says, it “is so much more—FUN.” This “fun,” of course, is the enjoyment of sexual pleasure, an expression of desire applied to Captain America's nonconsenting body. Still lip-locked, Rogue bends over Captain America's limp, unconscious body, almost appearing to devour him with vampiric intensity, visually registered by a halo of eerie gangrenous green and black Kirby Krackles—a visual technique of linked and overlapping spheres associated with comics legend Jack Kirby to mark states of elevated energy (see fig. 3). Rogue's identification, the urge to be like Captain America, to assimilate his skill and power, is merged with her heterosexual desire for him, and the result is a siphoning of Captain America's essential energies that looks very much like sexual assault. As the instrument for Ms. Marvel's revenge, Rogue's power of touch is formed into the sexual violence of the stolen kiss, forcing Captain America to experience, at least figuratively, a violation akin to the one experienced by Ms. Marvel.

It is perhaps troubling that Rogue's identification with Ms. Marvel is effectuated as a trope for sexual violence. However, Rogue's power of touch, which represents both lesbian sexuality and the politics of women's identification with women, shaped into an affective form of sexual violence, engages directly with the feminist “sex wars” of the late 1970s and early 1980s. In this feminist conflict, “antiporn” feminists like Laura Lederer and, later, power or dominance feminists like Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, who criticized pornography and sadomasochism as the systemic cultural eroticization of sexual violence against women, locked horns with sex-positive feminists like Gayle Rubin and lesbian BDSM feminists like Pat Califia who hailed porn and BDSM as legitimate manifestations of human sexual diversity worthy of responsible exploration.<sup>11</sup> Claremont, especially in *Uncanny X-Men*, probed the ethical dimensions of the feminist sex wars by making BDSM one of his primary themes and motifs in the storylines of some of his most popular characters like Phoenix, the White Queen, and Rachel Summers. In this way, Rogue's power, especially as it is articulated in her assault on Captain America, is a rape trope that represents—if not full-on glamourizes—sexual taking as a source of power, putting Claremont (and Rogue) in the theoretical vicinity of pro-sex and lesbian BDSM feminists.



**Figure 3** Rogue's sexualized and vampiric absorption of Captain America via a stolen kiss features a textbook example of Kirby Krackles. From Claremont and Golden (1981), *Avengers Annual* #10

Ultimately, though, with Rogue, Claremont seems to split the difference between antiporn feminists and sex-positive feminists.<sup>12</sup> To wit, in *Uncanny X-Men* #171, Ms. Marvel, or just Carol Danvers, since Rogue has permanently absorbed her powers and ended her career as a superheroine, reflects on her postabsorption recovery. She observes, "I remember pretty much all of who and what I was . . . [but] there are no emotions to go along with them [her memories]." Danvers's loss of her (superheroic) identity and emotional disassociation in the wake of Rogue's absorption mirrors posttraumatic stress experienced by rape survivors (Claremont and Smith 1983a). Rogue's absorption of Danvers's identity and "emotions," at least in a certain sense, doubles the rape of Ms. Marvel. However, in a move of erasure more in line with antiporn feminism, in Claremont's writing, Danvers never again mentions her rape by Marcus. Instead, for many years to come, Danvers reflects on the gravity of the violence done to her by Rogue. In effect, Rogue's absorption of Ms. Marvel's powers, narratively speaking, replaces Marcus's rape as the trauma that ends Ms. Marvel's career. Claremont's replacement of a literal rape by a male with a figurative rape by a female, though not unproblematic in and of

itself, is nevertheless an attempt to tackle the feminist conundrum surrounding narrativizing sexual violence. As MacKinnon (1987) famously argues, representations of rape normalize and eroticize sexual violence and male dominance, even when women take on the role of perpetrator, although others might argue that there is a feminist social value in artists addressing the harms of sexual violence and exposing the pervasiveness of rape culture. With *Rogue*, Claremont attempts to avoid the eroticization of male dominance while addressing the emotional complexities of rape survival. *Rogue's* doubling of the rape of Ms. Marvel, by replacing Marcus's rape, extinguishes the need to represent (again) and risk inadvertently aestheticizing male sexual violence against women, while at the same time preserving the feminist project of narrativizing and exploring Danvers's gradual but ultimately successful, even triumphant, recovery process.<sup>13</sup> As a result of *Rogue's* function as a feminist palimpsest for male sexual violence, discussions of Ms. Marvel's trauma do not elicit recapitulations of a male rapist's actions or entrench the social dynamics of rape culture; instead, they recall and continue the textured feminist conversation and critique of *Avengers Annual* #10, which reflects on women's relationships, women's politics, and the vicissitudes of women's identification. By figuring sexualized violence through the affective form of the stolen kiss, even as she occludes multiplied representation of a misogynistic rape narrative, *Rogue* holds in tension the differing, very much agonistic feminisms of lesbian feminism along the lines of "The Woman Identified Woman" and the liberal feminism it critiques, as well as the adverse theories of antiporn and pro-sex feminisms.

Claremont's positioning of *Rogue's* power of absorption as a figure for feminist politics concerning identity, desire, and representation of power simultaneously stands as a particular affective orientation toward difference that produces nonnormative states of subjectivity and embodiment contemporary readers would understand as "queer." The surface-level irony essential to understanding Claremont's characterization of *Rogue* in the 1980s is that *Rogue*, unable to control her absorption power, cannot embrace, kiss, or hold any partner without putting them in a coma (while she effectively *becomes* them), and so, *Rogue* cannot engage in sexual contact normatively conceived, irrespective of the hypothetical partner's gender.

In a mode of villainous queer imagination, however, *Rogue* deploys her mutant touch as a nonnormative sexual pleasure. The sexual



“FUN” Rogue experiences kissing Captain America is at least partly derived by the introjection of Captain America’s skills and abilities—his particular differences—into herself. Often, however, the skills, memories, and powers of the men Rogue absorbs are themselves heavily gendered. In *Marvel Team-Up* #150, written by Louise Simonson, for instance, Rogue absorbs the powers of the superstrong, hypertrophic Juggernaut and manifests the gigantic mounds of muscle mass that mark Juggernaut’s overblown masculinity (Simonson and LaRocque 1985). In effect, Rogue’s power of absorption, scripted to figure feminist identification and holding within Rogue’s form multiple antagonistic feminisms, also generates a queer orientation toward sexual difference that allows her to further masculinize and queer her female gender through acts of perverse desire. In Rogue and Captain America’s case, the effect of sexual violence and revenge shapes the power of touch into a gender vampirism of the stolen kiss, where Rogue emasculates Captain America by stealing his superpowers, which are linked to his masculine strength, vigor, bodily integrity, and sexual agency. Rogue’s feminist critique, then, produces conceptual, imagistic forms that illustrate the production of a queer embodiment and consciousness.

### The Offered Hand

In 1983’s *Uncanny X-Men* #171, Rogue, now reformed, arrives desperate for help at the X-Men’s door. She frantically explains, “Mah powers are out of control. The slightest touch triggers the transfer. It’s gettin’ so ah don’t know which thoughts—or mem’ries, or feelin’s—are mine!” Rogue crystallizes her suffering as a kind of self-misrecognition: “Ah look into a mirror an’ see a stranger’s face!” Rogue’s power of absorption, a figure for feminist identification and queer lesbian sexuality, produces a subjectivity no longer structured in terms of self-consistency or the distinction between self and other, and it is “driving [her] crazy!” Rogue’s feminist identification with Ms. Marvel is so tight and her identification with others is so uncontrollable that her coherent individuality—her sanity—is rendered painfully precarious. Rogue’s psychological dysphoria parallels the costs and pitfalls of queer theory’s anti-identitarian politics, whose embrace of difference and refusal to positively define itself in any exclusionary way resists representation and, therefore, political—or in Rogue’s case,

psychological—cohesion (see Jagose 1996, 101–3). Rogue seeks the X-Men’s help in coming to terms with her queer power of touch.

Two years later, in *Uncanny X-Men* #185, now a member of the X-Men but still plagued by her powers, Rogue makes a desperate attempt to reconstitute her racial, gender, and sexual identity in more normative terms through isolation, running away to her hometown of Caldecott, Mississippi. Rogue’s intervention on her own identity in terms of space, place, and location evokes and complicates contemporaneous critiques of feminism in terms of race, sexuality, and class. In 1977, the black lesbian feminists who made up the Combahee River Collective (1983, 264) responded to racism found in the women’s movement and sexism experienced in black liberation organizations, asserting that “black feminism,” as opposed to feminism tout court, was “the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.” For the collective, the “major systems of oppression” like gender, race, and class “are interlocking,” making the “conditions of [black women’s] lives” a “synthesis of these oppressions” (264). The identity category of “black woman,” then, the collective argued, was distinct enough from that of white women and black men in shared experience and common interest to necessitate an “identity politics” serving black women specifically (267). In 1984, drawing from Combahee, Adrienne Rich (1994) reintroduced the collective’s identity politics in terms of a spatial metaphor, the “politics of location,” which conceived of individual identity as a specific coordinate (what would later be called an intersection) of gender, nationality, ethnicity, and class such that generalizations about womanhood or feminism that did not take into account racial, cultural, and national differences were dangerous acts of colonialism and appropriation parading as identification and representation (see Crenshaw 2003). “Isn’t there a difficulty of saying ‘we’?” Rich (1994, 224) asked, explaining, “You cannot speak for me. I cannot speak for us. . . . There is no liberation that only knows how to say ‘I’; there is no collective movement that speaks for each of us all the way through.” The conversation about race and ethnicity in which Combahee and Rich participated is a project of women reconstructing their identities in ways that are both strategically powerful and ethically sound. Rogue’s power of absorption presents a similar opportunity for the ethical reformulation of identity.

In *Uncanny X-Men* #185, written the same year as the publication of Rich’s “Notes toward a Politics of Location,” Rogue explains to Storm,

the X-Men's black, female, and recently masculinized leader, why she has run away from the X-Men to Caldecott, citing her powers as problematic in ways that echo Rich's analysis of universalizing, colonizing feminisms. Storm is a major part of Claremont's X-Men mythos, especially its exploration of intersectional feminism. During the period of lesbian-identified Rogue's induction into the X-Men, Storm had gone through her own sexual reawakening and gender reinvention, cutting her long white tresses into a Mohawk and leaving behind her disco-inspired costume for a punk-inflected leather jacket. Thus, the interplay between Rogue and Storm constitutes a major junction for multiple feminism-oriented character arcs within the Marvel Universe. Rogue asks Storm, "How can anyone trust me . . . when the slightest physical contact" can reapportion the powers and experiences of those she touches, effectively appropriating their subjectivity and agency such that Rogue, then, literally "speaks" not just "for" but "as" her victim (Rich 1994, 224) even as she "destroy[s] 'em" (Claremont and Romita 1984).

Rogue's view that her power erases and replaces what it touches, making positive relations with others impossible, takes on added significance in light of the race and gender expression of her interlocutor, Storm. Rogue's white flesh coming into contact with bodies of color and taking those bodies' experiences into itself, leaving those bodies inert, figures a kind of sexualized cultural appropriation.<sup>14</sup> Later in the *Uncanny X-Men* series, on multiple occasions, acting out of some exigent life-or-death necessity, Rogue nonconsensually absorbs the mutant teleportation powers of her silent ally, the Australian Aboriginal Gateway. Gateway's teleportation power is intimately tied to the Aboriginal culture of Australia; he produces "gateways" to faraway places by playing a bullroarer, a musical instrument used in Aboriginal rituals. When Rogue absorbs Gateway's power, her skin darkens; taking the bullroarer off Gateway's unconscious body, she uses the purloined instrument to open a gateway for herself to wherever she pleases, and she leaves Gateway behind, unconscious (Claremont and Lee 1990). In scenes like this, Rogue's power of absorption is an uncanny and very unsettling representation of cultural appropriation. Rogue, by identifying the potential dangers of cultural appropriation inherent in her power of absorption, complicates the Radicalesbians' (1972) call for women to identify with other women in light of the Combahee River Collective's (1983) and Rich's (1994) contentions that such identifications along lines of gender, conditioned by racism and

heterosexism, can constitute harm across borders of race and sexuality. In short, Claremont's feminist trope of a touch that identifies with others to produce a nonnormative body empowered by blurring the lines between identity categories has colonialist and white supremacist implications when applied across races and regions.

With these dangers in mind, Rogue refuses to see her power of queer touch as compatible with ethical or happy living. Storm tries to reassure Rogue of her "decency." Rogue responds: "Decency has nothin' t' do with how ah feel—the cruelest sadist in creation couldn'tve thought up a worse punishment. Is it any wonder ah'm so full of anger an' hate?!" Rogue's anger and self-hate stem from her conception of her queer touch as "destruction" and appropriation, and her queer subjectivity as a "punishment." In an attempt to avoid the dangers of appropriating absorptions and escape her own formless, contingent subjectivity, Rogue retreats to Caldecott, where she enacts a kind of reverse "politics of location" intended to normalize and stabilize her identity.

Caldecott, the narrator box says, "is farming country, where once cotton was king and stately mansions lined the river, setting a standard for style and affluent gracious living that was the envy of the world. It was a way of life people believed would last forever." The narrator only subtly veils Caldecott's self-definition in terms of a wistful nostalgia for the institution of slavery. The "cotton" economy that built the "stately mansions" and sustained the region's "affluent gracious living," the narrator fails to mention, was run on black slave labor. This narrative construction of Caldecott is accompanied by lonely, silent landscape images of the Mississippi River that visually confirm the absence of black people amid the narrative erasure of their labor. The narrative and visual economies, then, work together to separate the products of labor from the black bodies that produce them.

The landscape images are populated only when Rogue's bikini-clad form is pictured gracefully jumping off a cliff, diving into the Mississippi. With a rare smile on her face, Rogue gives a carefree, joyous cheer of "Yahhooooooooo!!!" that swirls in bold red letters across the page. The solitude of sunbathing on a secluded riverbank allows Rogue to wear a small black bikini without fear of absorbing the psyches of passersby. In a wide vertical panel, Rogue sunbathes on her back, thinking, "[The] sun feels so good." This reengagement with her flesh, as it is constructed by the narrative and visual sequencing, is inseparable from the racial politics of the region. Caldecott, whose

narrative construction erases the black labor that built it, allows Rogue to expose and reexperience her body, her white flesh, as a source of uncomplicated joy. It is ironic but perhaps typical of white supremacy that Rogue's attempt to avoid the appropriation of other bodies' experiences occludes those bodies, even as it depends on their labor, while it also centers (literally, in the panels of the comic book) and magnifies her own.

Rogue's racialization of herself through a politics of location "interlocks," as the Combahee River Collective would say, with the neutralization of Rogue's powers and therefore the normalization of her gender and sexuality. As Rogue swings off a line to perform a flipping dive into the Mississippi, in the distance, slightly out of perspective, a tugboat labeled *M* floats down the river. The boat apparently holds multiple admirers signified by a smattering of overlapping speech bubbles floating over the boat and cheering Rogue's sexualized athleticism: "Beautiful! Way t' go darlin'" one disembodied voice says. "Stop the boat, I wanna get off!" In this case, the desire to get off has a doubled meaning; the presumably male viewer wants to disembark the vessel so he can pursue Rogue, but "getting off" is also sexual gratification. Rogue is pleased by the attention. "Thank you, boys!" she yells back, securing the heterosexuality of the expressions of desire. The *M* on the boat could stand for *mutant* or *Mississippi*, but given how this scene plays out, it would aptly stand for *men*.

Rogue takes the heterosexual flirtation as an opportunity to normalize her gender. "Y'all really know how t' do a girl's heart proud!" she answers. From the long distance between herself and the tugboat, the intimacy of physical contact is replaced by the optical register of male sexuality. As she mentions her "pride," Rogue bows toward the boat in the distance. The perspective of the panel, though, is from behind Rogue and thus centers on Rogue's bottom, jutting toward the reader as she bends forward. Rogue's body is in full view of the male gaze, both from the perspective of the boat and from the reader, while the men's bodies are not visible at all. Rogue plays her part in feminine objectification, even intimating that the men's view of her has informed her own self-conception as a normatively gendered "girl" when she says the men's catcalls make her "*girl's* heart proud!" (my emphasis). Rogue is no longer the butch power- and masculinity-draining succubus who androgenizes her body in layers of green cloth. Thanks to the powers of distance, she can reimagine herself as a bikini-clad "girl" performing for the male gaze. The feminized



**Figure 4** Storm gives of herself “freely, [and] without reservation,” challenging Rogue to reconsider the ethical and affective potentials of physical contact. From Claremont and Romita (1984), *Uncanny X-Men* #185

gendering and heterosexualization of Rogue are coeval with her visual racialization, both accomplished by neutralizing her queer power of touch (defined by contact) and restoring her body to the male gaze (projected through distance).

In an effort to prevent Rogue from possibly reverting back to villainy and keeping her impressive array of powers at the X-Men’s disposal, Storm follows Rogue to Caldecott, where she challenges Rogue’s reliance on the politics of Caldecott’s location to neutralize her power by shifting attention to the affective, relational, and ethical context of the use of Rogue’s power. “Do you trust no one?!” Storm asks. “Has every exercise of your power been an act of violence? Has no one ever given himself of his own free will?” The language of Storm’s queries regarding the circumstances in which Rogue has used her powers—especially that of “giving” oneself and “free will”—reference the narrative contexts

of sexual violence and bodily agency that gave rise to Rogue's creation as a feminist palimpsest for both analyzing and representing rape in *Avengers Annual* #10. In effect, Storm questions whether those contexts alone can or should define Rogue's power and by extension her queer relation to others and her own identity.

Then, in a move reminiscent of Rogue's pulling off her green glove in anticipation of absorbing Captain America, Storm rips off her own black glove. Storm's removing her glove, however, reimagines and reinterprets Rogue's first use of her power. Instead of touching Rogue against her will, Storm raises her naked hand palm up between them, offering it to her. Storm invites Rogue to absorb her. "Today," Storm says as she extends her naked hand, "I give of myself freely, without reservation." Whereas Rogue's "stolen kiss" is an affective form of sexual violence, Storm's offered hand is an affective form of "trust," "free will," and intimacy (see fig. 4). It is these affects that constitute Rogue and Storm's touch, reshaping the act of absorption and the two women's orientation toward difference.

Trust and intimacy define Rogue and Storm's renegotiation of individual difference across racial identities. However, the offered hand that distills that trust and intimacy also centers and ratifies the presence and agency of Storm in the very location where the narrative sought to occlude the existence of black bodies and labor. Rogue, at first, rejects Storm's offer in fear of permanently absorbing Storm's powers and persona as she did Ms. Marvel's. Above Storm's offered hand, Storm's speech bubble insists, "I am prepared to take the risk." The image of the offered hand is parallel with dialogue marking informed consent. This parallelism highlights that Storm has no illusion about the negative possibilities that emanate from the renegotiation of difference across identity categories and by giving one's agency and experience over to another who has not lived those experiences. Physical, psychological, and cultural harms are distinct possibilities within the potentials of queer contact and feminist identification across racial boundaries. However, it is Storm, the leader of the X-Men, marginalized and occluded within the politics of location already established by the narrative, who conceives, suggests, and provides the opportunity for that contact. Storm's hand is what is visible, and when Rogue accepts, it is Storm's hand that clasps Rogue's. Storm is in control even as she gives herself to Rogue, suggesting that perhaps when it comes to the ethical queering of race,

trust and free will cannot predominate unless the orientation toward difference restores the visibility and centers the agency of those whom white supremacy represses (see hooks 2009, 371).

By shifting the evaluation of erotic and political relations (Rogue's power makes them one) into terms of free will and trust, Storm subtextually injects into her conversation with Rogue (concerning women's sexuality, identity, and race) the language and concepts of pro-sex and lesbian sadomasochistic feminisms. There is a danger to Rogue's touch that, like sadomasochistic sex, must be managed with trust, awareness, and faith (see Califia 1994). However, Storm, by intimating the possibility of willed absorption, radically suggests that queer contact, not just between identity categories of gender but also of race, is not in and of itself problematic, emphasizing the context of that contact—whether of sexual violence and appropriation or trust and free will—in determining its ethical and psychic quality. Storm uses pro-BDSM concepts to mediate the exchange of difference between Rogue's white body and her own black one, suggesting a conversation between black and lesbian sadomasochistic feminisms.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, Rogue's touch, activated within the context of trust and affection, takes on a starkly different value. When Rogue takes Storm's offered hand, she says, "Ah'm full of excitement—and joy—nothing seems beyond me! And because Ororo did not resist the transfer . . . her memories have yet to cause me trouble. Perhaps they never will." Instead of feeling "crazy" or dysphoric as she did when she nonconsensually absorbed Ms. Marvel's powers, Rogue's absorption of Storm is a borderline religious experience of "excitement" and "joy."<sup>16</sup>

The discourse regarding Rogue's powers shifts from agonism to cooperation, stealing to sharing, and rape to consent, producing a parallel shift from identity politics to relations of subjectivity. When Storm first offers Rogue her hand, she asks, "Would you like to see the world through my eyes?" Storm's positive emphasis on vision is unusual in Rogue's narrative. It serves to emphasize that this absorption does not result in Storm becoming Rogue's "possession," but rather it allows Rogue an opportunity to feel and negotiate the world in a different way—Storm's way. Rogue sees Caldecott, the location she used to normalize herself, through Storm's "special perceptions." As a mutant with the ability to manipulate the weather, Storm—and now Rogue—sees her surroundings as "patterns of energy resonating



within my own being.” Rogue came to Caldecott to cut herself off from cross-identification, using the isolation of the riverbank to render her subjectivity self-contained and static. Through Storm’s eyes, though, Rogue reapproaches the relationship between place and identity as an ecstatic, fluid “playtime.” Using Storm’s elemental abilities, Rogue “shape[s] the appropriate natural forces” to produce a miniature rain cloud. The shaping of “natural forces” parallels the way Storm’s “special perceptions” teach Rogue that the relationship between environment and self—the politics of location—can also be dynamic and dialectical. In this new interpretation Storm is suggesting, Rogue’s absorption is not about appropriating Storm’s experiences but instead is about producing with Storm new experiences of a present place and time through a hybrid subjectivity that belongs to both women.

Rogue does not replace Storm through a vampiric, one-way intersubjectivity. Rather, Storm invites Rogue to coexist with her in a mutually interpenetrating intrasubjectivity. Thinking to herself, Rogue observes that the “voice” of her inner monologue “is changing—Hah!—becoming a blend of mine and Ororo’s. Ah still have mah accent, but the tone is deeper and my speech more formal, like hers!” Usually, Rogue’s distinctive accent is crucial in marking her regional identity. Storm’s regal diction is almost equally idiosyncratic, reflecting her transcontinental upbringing in North America, Egypt, and Kenya. However, in this scene, within Rogue’s thought bubble, voice stands not for identity, how Rogue and Storm represent themselves or how they identify, but subjectivity, the way in which they view, experience, and interact with the world, including each other. Rogue does not merely “hear” this “hybrid” voice. Rather, the use of the thought bubble renders the perspective decidedly internal. The reader knows that this speech is Rogue’s thought, the way Rogue’s subjectivity encounters itself. Having absorbed Storm through the offered hand, Rogue “thinks” as a hybridized or “blended” intrasubjectivity that does not represent itself in terms of identity categories because it is felt and experienced as sensation, the sound of Rogue-Storm’s voice. Amber Jamilla Musser (2014, 23) theorizes sensation as “connected to politics, bodies, and feelings,” but she also conceives of it as “a way to understand structures at a level beyond the discursive . . . without having to appeal to identity; this is about opening paths to difference.” Viewing the world through Storm’s “special perceptions,” sensations

arising from Storm's completely singular mutant powers, provides Rogue an access to Storm's unique and personal (rather than racialized and immediately cultural) differences. Rogue is not absorbing experiences of a generalized cultural identity—"experiences" with capital *Es* (see Scott 1992). Rogue is experiencing the subjectivity and physical capabilities of Storm as an individual, which in effect does not appeal to identity formations at all and therefore absorbs without culturally appropriating.

In fact, as Rogue loses control of her weather formations, she realizes the amount of concentration and discipline demanded by Storm's link with the weather. Of a sudden monsoon, she asks, "Am I the cause?!? Is this a reflection of my rage . . . ?!?!?" Rogue's experience of Storm's powers results in an intimate and informed empathy with Storm. "No wonder [Storm] has been going squirrely, if this was what she has to live with . . . her every emotion echoed by the weather around her." Thus, the perennially isolated and self-involved Rogue, by experiencing Storm's differences, develops a sense of Storm's emotional and psychological complexity. Rogue is changed by her experience of Storm's subjectivity in such a way that makes Storm's labor, discipline, and experiences more knowable. Moving from an identity politics of discourse, representation, and intersectionality to affinities of intrasubjectivity composed of sensation, physical contact, and difference, absorption through Storm's offered hand does not allow Rogue to claim what Storm has or to appropriate it culturally, but, rather, it gives rise to experiences of shared Storm-ness that generate Rogue's informed empathy with Storm.

If Rogue's absorption of Storm's powers produces an empathy for Storm's unique situation, it also reflexively reconditions Rogue's view of her own mutant power. When she awakens, Storm notes that Rogue "look[s]—strangely happy." Rogue replies, "Just comin' t' terms with myself—concedin' you may know what you're talkin' about—perhaps ah'm not as rotten as ah liked t' think." Thanks to Storm's intervention, Rogue has learned to embrace her power of absorption as an ethically viable orientation toward difference when defined by trust and free will. In the affective form of the offered hand, physical contact becomes the production of an (intra-)subjectivity that arises out of but cannot be made reducible to identity categories, a queer orientation toward difference that acts as an alternative

interpretation of the feminist politics of location. But, of course, as the *M* tugboat sails by, its crewmen, still watching in the distance, hardly able to “b’lieve what we’re seein,” simply write it off as another example of “wimmin’s lib.”

The tugboat crew is not wholly wrong. Rogue operates as a fantasy figure for a point of contact between queer theory and feminism, where the self-assuredness of identity in terms of gender and race comes under question and moves into an exploration of the possibilities of identification. Rogue’s touch presents the idea that who we are cannot be wholly determined in advance by the preordained matrix of classification we have come to know as identity (and, perhaps, as identity politics). Instead, Rogue suggests we might also be conceived as ongoing processes of relationality, empathy, and individual and shared experiences that give rise to subjectivities unforeseeable in terms of established discourses of identity. Consequently, Rogue’s touch widens the conversation about “diversity” in superhero comics (and other genres and media) beyond representational inclusion to how media conceptualizes the relationship between difference and consciousness and generates new possibilities for affiliation, solidarity, and recognition that have yet to reveal themselves in the “real world.” Crucially, Rogue and Storm suggest what an ethical cross-identification in terms of race might look like. Specifically, they seem to say, it might look like an offered hand. However, this shift from identity and representation to difference and subjectivity is not exclusionary. The access of identification and reconsideration of subjectivity figured by flesh-to-flesh contact that promises new, “mutant” forms of consciousness necessarily arise out of absorbing and negotiating the specificities of identity (and identity politics) and the ineluctable presentness of history, memory, and power.

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## Notes

- 1 Having appeared in countless comic book publications, numerous television programs, and multiple major motion pictures since her 1981 introduction, the readers of *Playboy* magazine in 2005 voted Rogue, a Southern belle hailing from Caldecott, Mississippi, the most popular fictional character ever to be associated with the state of Mississippi. See Threadgill 2016.
- 2 For a reading of Rogue's power as disability, see Ilea 2009, 173.
- 3 My methodology draws from Brinkema's (2014, xi–xvi) formal intervention on affect theory.
- 4 Rogue is, in fact, one heroine in a series of Claremont's feminist superheroines, many of whose storylines connect with and reflect on one another. For a queer feminist reading of Phoenix and Storm, see Fawaz 2016, 144–63. For an African American feminist reading of Storm, see Carrington 2016, 90.
- 5 For more on the fissioning of feminist movements in the latter half of the twentieth century, see Echols 1989, 199; Rosen 2000; and Hesford 2013.
- 6 For more on the placement of feminism in the United States' national imagination, see Hesford 2013.
- 7 Ruth Rosen (2000, 88) writes, "At times, ideological or generational differences bitterly divided feminists, but neither branch or the movement, by itself, could have brought about the staggering changes that swept through American culture during the remaining decades of the twentieth century."
- 8 For a brief but canonical analysis of Marvel's feminist-themed titles in the 1970s, see Strickland n.d.
- 9 For more on the male gaze, see Mulvey 1989.
- 10 For more on the centrality of the lesbian and the mannish woman in signifying and cohering a feminist identity, see Hesford 2013.
- 11 For 1980s early antiporn feminism extant with Rogue's introduction in *Avengers Annual* #10, see Lederer 1980. For a later iteration of antiporn or power feminism, see MacKinnon 1987. For an opposed, sex-positive feminism, see Rubin 1984. For a useful overview of and commentary on the feminist sex wars, see Rubin and Butler 1994.
- 12 This kind of reading that compromises between multiple and conflicting feminist agendas is very much informed by Janet Halley (2008).
- 13 For more on the recovery and re-empowerment of Carol Danvers, see Claremont and Cockrum 1982.
- 14 bell hooks (2009) theorizes this kind of sexualized cultural appropriation.
- 15 For more on the intersection among African American criticism, feminism, and porn, see Nash 2014.

- 16 Lorde (1993, 342) makes a similar distinction in *Uses of the Erotic*: “To share the power of each other’s feelings is different from using another’s feelings as we would use a kleenex. When we look the other way from our experience, erotic or otherwise, we use rather than share the feelings of those others who participate in the experience with us. And use without consent of the used is abuse.”

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