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1   The X-Men, created by Jewish American comics legends Stan Lee and Jack Kirby in 1963, is a team of mutants, a class of human being first introduced as people that "possess an *extra*power...one which ordinary humans do *not!!*" (*EUX1* #1: 8 [ii]). Especially after the introduction of the mutant-hunting robot Sentinels in *X-Men* #14 (Nov. 1965, *EUX1*), Marvel Comics' mutants have been increasingly inscribed with allegorical Otherness. They have been subject to many of the prejudices that have historically plagued marginalized minorities, including, among other things, forced and voluntary segregation, slurs, persecution, and genocidal campaigns, and , conspiracy theories about their aims as a group.

2   Because Otherness and persecution have become central to the series, the idea that *X-Men* is an allegory of racial tolerance has been "resoundingly universally accepted," writes comics critic and advocate Julian Darius; through repetition, "it's become an article of faith" (Darius). Although the claim is overstated in its focus, Darius makes an important point. Analysis has focused almost exclusively on identity, alternatively claiming disability politics (Ilea; Chemers), sexuality (DiPaolo chap. 8; Dussere), race (Pierce), and ethnicity, commonly read as Jewishness (e. g. Weinstein chap. 8; Fingeroth chap. 8; A. Kaplan chap. 16; Malcolm), as the "most forceful" or "primary" metaphor.

3   This article will confront some common claims in *X-Men* commentary to suggest that writing on comics and identity is vulnerable to strong confirmation bias, "a type of cognitive bias in which one tends to look only for evidence that confirms one's beliefs and to ignore or pay less attention to evidence that contradicts one's beliefs" (Sullivan 100). The literature, which includes both popular and academic writing, is open to criticism on several levels: essentialist perspectives are often applied to both characters and their creators; fallacious comparisons sometimes elide important historical and contextual

differences; insufficient source criticism promotes the passage of parochial myth into academia; and grand generalizations are often based on readings of a small number of texts. After engaging critically with these issues, I will present a few methodological suggestions that might help reduce bias in comics and identity scholarship.

4   This article presents a brief overview of interpretations of *X-Men* comics[iii] from their first publication in September 1963 through the initial run guided primarily by Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Roy Thomas, until the end of writer Chris Claremont's 1975–1991 tenure. Much commentary treats this publication history as a cohesive text, indiscriminately bundling together decades of comics and even movies (e. g. Baron; Malcolm; Kavadlo; DiPaolo chap. 8; Lyubansky). But, while a series like *X-Men*, with over fifty years of backstory, contains elements that allow for nearly endless interpretive variety, no character is static, no characterization eternal, and no series or theme timeless. As comics scholar Richard Reynolds phrases it: "[C]ontinuity is [...] something malleable, and constantly in the process of being shaped by the collective forces of artists, writers, editors, and even the critical voices of fans" (47).

5   It stands to reason that new comics relate to earlier ones in some measure but, although it seems to be internally consistent and linear, continuity cannot be taken at face value in critical comics studies; it must be regarded as made up of synchronic and diachronic elements. Otherwise, later additions to continuity are all too easily anachronistically projected onto earlier iterations, which can lead to a- or antihistorical readings. Thus, the coming argument treats each run within the defined text as both continuous and distinct.

X-Men – First Class: Mutants in the Cold War

6   When he created *X-Men*, Stan Lee took a familiar trope – the stock science fiction *homo superior* figure (cf. Attebery chap. 4) – and gave it his own twist. As he tells it, he was being lazy and did not regard mutantcy in terms of Jewishness or any other identity (Brevoort and Lee; Lee and Mair 165). Perhaps owing to *X-Men* commentary's focus on identity, ideology rarely plays a role in interpretation (Darius is a rare exception). But most of Lee's mid-1960 work was permeated with explicit and implicit Cold War issues (cf. Costello; Genter) and, albeit seldom explicit, the same political climate is present in the Lee/Kirby *X-Men* from the beginning: the X-Men first reveal themselves to the world when they thwart the supervillain Magneto's attempt to hijack several nuclear missiles, described as "democracy's silent sentinels."After their victory, the X-Men promise to return "should America's safety ever again be threatened" (*ECX1*#1: 23).The second issue deals with the theft and recovery, after a symbolically suggestive showdown on the White House lawn, of America's "ultra-important" secret defense plans.

7   Most early *X-Men* villains were cowardly, dishonorable, arrogant, selfish, and totalitarian, the antitheses of consensus culture American ideals. More than any other foe, Magneto stood for everything the X-Men did not. Whereas they worked as a team, cared for each other, showed moral virtue by sometimes saving their enemies from death (cf. Costello chap. 2), and fought for a greater good in democratic spirit, Magneto was bent on unilateral, totalitarian world-domination and unhesitatingly deserted even his most devoted follower (e. g. *EUX1* #4; #6; #7; #18). Thus, his evil was configured in line with the day's moral certainty and simplistically dualist anti-totalitarianism, and his and the X-Men's fight was defined in Cold War term as freedom versus tyranny, hope versus fear (Gaddis chap. 3, esp. 98–104; Costello 47–48; Kennedy, "Salt Lake City").

8   This divide is powerfully articulated in *X-Men* #4 (Mar. 1964, *EUX1*) where Magneto tells the X-Men's leader Charles Xavier that his team is the only thing that stands between mutants and world conquest before asking why, when he too is a mutant. "But I seek to *save*mankind," Xavier replies, "not destroy it." The debate continues:

> Xavier: We must use our powers to bring about a golden age on Earth—side by side with ordinary humans!
> Magneto: *Never!*The humans must be our *slaves!* They are not *worthy* to share dominion of Earth with us! You have *made* your choice—forevermore we are mortal foes!
> Xavier: The X-Men will *stop* you, Magneto! It will be mutant against mutant—to the *death*, need be!! But mankind must be saved! (#4, 10.)

9   What prompts this confrontation is Magneto's invasion of a small island with the help of illusory, Nazi-like soldiers.[iv] In his fervor to get revenge on the X-Men after his defeat, Magneto arms a nuclear device and threatens to kill the island population, seemingly revisiting Nikita Khrushchev's repeated 1957–1961 thermonuclear posturing and the October 1962 Cuban Missile Crisis (Gaddis 5–27, 50–82). A similar story appeared in *X-Men* #17–18 (Feb.–March 1966), where Magneto takes over the heroes' home in middle class suburban Westchester, New York. Kidnapping one X-Man's parents for their "cell patterns," he begins creating an army of "super-powerful" mutant slaves to "conquer all —in the name of **Magneto!!**" (*EUX1* #18, 12). In both stories, Magneto uses what were perceived as "international communism's" favored expansionist tactics: infiltration, overthrow of legitimate rule, suppressions of individualism and spontaneity, and exploitation of subjugated populations. And in both stories, the X-Men respond with a superheroic version of containment, "the policy of the United States to support free people who are resisting attempted subjugation by armed minorities or by outside pressures" (Truman; Gaddis 27–32, 98–101).

10   When Roy Thomas took over writing, he initially retained Cold War themes. Issues #20–21 (May–June 1966, *EUX1*) revealed an alien plot to spread mind-controlling influence over the world in a way resembling the propaganda construct of the "Soviet Octopus"; #22–23 (July–Aug. 1966, *EUX1*) saw Washington D. C. held hostage by the villainous Count Nefaria; and in #25–26 (Oct.–Nov. 1966, *ECX2*),the X-Men fought a resurrected Mayan god who sought to enslave the world. Issues #28–#39 (Jan.–Dec. 1967, *ECX2*) ran the "Factor Three" storyline, about an alien who tries to provoke a third world war and wipe out human life. The story foreshadows the multinational 1968 nuclear non-proliferation treaty by focusing on the global dimension of the threat of nuclear annihilation and through comments about there being too many missiles to disarm in time to stop the evil scheme (*ECX2* #38, 11; Gaddis 80–81). At the story's climax, the X-Men and several established evil mutants work together (extending their aid even to "our anti-capitalistic comrades" [*ECX2* #38, 7] in the USSR), signaling the breakdown of consensus and the move toward "live-and-let-live" détente. Xavier sums up the lesson: that day, there were no good or evil mutants, "only a handful of *men*—fighting side by side to protect the world from a common foe! So long as *life endures*—andeven sworn enemies can *reason*—there shall always be*...hope!*" (#39, np).

"Beware the fanatic!": Mutant and the Emergence of Identity Politics

11   It is often asserted that Xavier and Magneto were modeled after Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X (e. g. Goldstein; Godoski; DiPaolo 238; Lyubansky 86–88). Although such direct inspiration is unlikely, influences from civil rights discourse made their way into the early *X-Men* (anything else would have been surprising, given its high visibility at the time). On the question of difference, however, mutantcy initially apparently also owed much to stock tropes: it was common to suggest that *homo superior* would be feared if his existence was known, for instance in Philip Gordon Wylie's *Gladiator* (1930) and Superman (1938), among others (Attebery chap. 4; Lund 95, 291).

12   Nonetheless, rhetoric that is in some sense racialized appears as early as *X-Men* #1, when Xavier says that he has "realized that the human race is not yet ready to **accept** those with extra powers. [...] Here we stay, unsuspected by normal humans, as we learn to use our powers for the benefit of mankind... to help those who would distrust us if they knew of our existence!" (*EUX1* #1, 10). Beyond providing motivation for the secret identity trope, this appears as an integrationist appeal: acceptance will come, if mutants continue to serve and protect rather than turn to violence.

13   Few stories in the Lee/Kirby run connote civil rights or persecution, and the ones that do generally advocate compromise with majority society. The early X-Men policed mutants and quashed dissent. Conversely, Magneto and his ilk were terrorists and fanatics, not activists (e. g. *EUX1* #2; #3; #4; #5; #7; #18; #20). This dichotomy appears to reproduce white fears about black claims and suggests an inability or unwillingness to comprehend the structural advantages of whiteness or to "shift identities imaginatively" and to inhabit the position of the Other (cf. Michael 2008: 18–20) that constrained much Jewish and white liberal rights activism. Read in this light, the early *X-Men* appear to stand for a type of peaceful racial liberalism common among Jewish civil rights activists, while the evil mutants stand for Black Power and other emergent radical activisms (cf. Brodkin [esp. 26]; Greenberg chap. 6). These X-Men, then, to the extent they should be regarded as ethnically or racially marked, were framed as a model minority. They used their difference in constructive ways, contributed to American security and society, and deferred to authority.

14   The failure to shift identities imaginatively, however, does not mean the abandonment of identity as an issue. The Lee/Kirby Sentinel story (*X-Men* #14–16, Nov. 1965–Jan. 1966, in *EUX1*) takes a clear stand against the kind of fear-mongering that warned about communist influences on civil rights and racist and nativist rhetoric about threats to American culture, as expressed for instance by politicians like Strom Thurmond and George Wallace, the right-wing John Birch Society, and the 1964 Republican presidential candidate Barry Goldwater's argument that desegregation impinged on states' rights (cf. Patterson 156–158, 417, 476, 477; Greenberg). The mutant-hunting robots soon attempt to enslave mankind to protect them, showing how the intolerance of a few becomes a danger to all. The lesson articulated at the end of the story is to "*[b]eware the fanatic! Too often his cure is deadlier by far than the evil he denounces!*" (*EUX1* #16, 20). Not only does this read like a direct counter to Goldwater's acceptance speech ("extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice [...] moderation in the pursuit of justice is no virtue"), but also to the anticommunist zealotry of red-baiters like J. Edgar Hoover and Joseph McCarthy that had

skirted totalitarian means in the pursuit of a communist-free America (e. g. Greenberg 196–202).The Sentinels, then, are dangerous also because they threaten civil liberties.

15   Stories by Roy Thomas and other late-1960s *X-Men*-writers were much harsher in their condemnation of militant activism. If Magneto had been a symbolic totalitarian before, he returned in *X-Men* #43 (Apr. 1968, *ECX2*) as a symbolic figure for radical Black Power, separatist Black Nationalism, and, not least, four consecutive years of what one historian labels "massive racial violence" (Schulman 2–3; cf. Patterson; Greenberg). In a storyline by Jewish American writer Arnold Drake (*EXC2* #49–52, Oct. 1968–Jan. 1969), Magneto-acolyte Mesmero awakens "latent mutants" and builds an army. One of the latents is Lorna Dane, supposedly Magneto's daughter.

16   Lorna is torn between the integrationist X-Men, with whom she has a stronger affinity, and the separatist Magneto, to whom she feels beholden because of her newfound blood-ties. Despite having just met Magneto and in spite of her doubts about his agenda, Lorna sides with her supposed father, thinking with unselfconscious bluntness that "[t]he genes we share command me more than *laws* and ethics" (*ECX2* #52, 13; see also #50, 11; #51, 2). Thus, she symbolically stresses what from a liberal perspective was a politically destructive and paralyzing potential of parochial essentialism. Her choice is not only between working for individual-centered integration or making particularistic claims to group-based rights, but also suggestive of the growing trouble among Jewish civil rights proponents to reconcile competing liberal positions, such as the relationship between civil rights activism and respect for law and the democratic process or between immediate equality and working within the system (Greenberg 214–223).That Lorna is ultimately revealed to not be Magneto's daughter drives home the argument that blood should not determine activism.

17   Several additional examples could be given – e g. Gary Friedrich's lynching-narrative origin for Iceman (appended to *ECX2* #44–46, May–July 1968) or Roy Thomas' Sentinel story (*ECX3* #55–59, April–Aug. 1969, in) – but perhaps most interesting for the present discussion is *X-Men* #62–63 (Nov.–Dec. 1969, *ECX3*). In the story, Magneto again creates an army of mutants, this time from normal humans, to further an agenda described as a "twisted, tortured vision of a world ruled by *evil mutants!*" (#63, 20). After Magneto's defeat, the artificial mutants revert to their original form, as if his corrupting separatist ideology was what marked them as Other. One of the X-Men's allies wonders: "*Who* could be happier...to lose vast powers which set them *apart* from other men?" The X-Men's reply is suggestive: "*Offhand* [...] I can think of at least *five* people, without even trying!/ And their *initials* [...] are... *the X-Men!*" (20). These X-Men, far from radical and far from the Lee/Kirby model minority, resist diversity and deemphasize difference in favor of a perceived fundamental unity and human sameness that condemned those on society's periphery who demanded a change in circumstances.

18   From the way the X-Men and their foes' perspectives were represented, it would appear that neither Lee and Kirby nor Thomas or Drake could identify with those who demanded restitution. Rather, the strongest indicator of rights-consciousness in the construction of the series perhaps lies in the intensity of its opposition to militant activism. Lee and Kirby's work appears informed by a Jewish double consciousness, a sense of being fully American but not quite full participants in American life, which Lee at least has professed awareness of in relation to his "mixed marriage" to a Episcopalian woman (Lee and Mair e. g. 69, 74–75; cf. Prell [esp. 163–165]; Brodkin). Conversely, the Thomas run's more vehement opposition to radical calls for equality suggests a more internalized whiteness

and, perhaps, a reaction to intense and prolonged criticism of "whitey," the Establishment, and the majority culture, to which he, as a white Midwestern lapsed Protestant, belonged by default.

"Children of the Atom": Diversity and Authenticity

19   *X-Men* was cancelled after issue #66 (March 1970, *ECX3*). A new team was introduced in a "giant-sized" special issue in May 1975 (*EXM1*). The next issue was the first in what would become a decade and a half long run for writer Chris Claremont, a culturally literate British-born science fiction writer and college student. The special had promised "all-new, all-different" X-Men, and Claremont and his collaborators delivered. That the series went from a bi-monthly publication schedule to, for a time, a twice-monthly one, and that it became an industry top-seller is an indication of how well Claremont tapped the zeitgeist and pegged his audience's mood.

20   The original team had been largely defined by their mission, whether that meant fighting the Cold War, promoting integration, or opposing emergent identity politics. Following a growing general inclination toward self-realization in American culture (Schulman chap. 3; Wolfe), which was reflected across the entire Marvel line from the mid-1970s through the mid-1980s (Costello chap. 4), Claremont's X-Men turned inward. The original team's characterizations were fleshed out, the team introduced in the special was developed, and the characters created by Claremont et al. were less formulaic from the beginning (Lund 311–314).

21   While not free from failures of empathy, Claremont's run displays an awareness about gender, class, and ethnoracial issues seldom seen before or since (Lund 325–334). The ethnic revival that began in the mid-1960s had gone into full swing and the new team was multicultural. Although the balance still leaned toward whiteness, Claremont and his co-creators introduced several new characters that broke the first iteration's WASP norm, such as Jewish American Kitty Pryde, Chinese American Jubilee, and Cheyenne Vietnam veteran Forge, all of whom struggled with and maneuvered their ethnoracial and national identities on their own terms.

22   Mutantcy, of course, is unavoidably a group essence. Because *X-Men* addresses prejudice and persecution, because it occasionally evokes the Holocaust, and because Lee and Kirby were Jewish and Claremont's mother is Jewish, mutants are sometimes claimed as stand-ins for Jews (e. g. Malcolm; Baron). In an argument that omits significant non-Jewish *X-Men* creators like Roy Thomas, Dave Cockrum, and John Byrne, literary critic Jesse Kavadlo claims that "the X-Men are, metaphorically at least, Jewish" (Kavadlo 42). But one need not accept Kavadlo's claims about comics' "Jewish roots" to agree with him that Claremont's *X-Men* contain literary examples of existential crisis (38). The X-Men's struggles to make sense of the world and to thrive in it do indeed often "mirror each of our own searches for authenticity and self-hood" (40).

23   The weather-controlling Storm is a prime example: throughout Claremont's run, her character arc was highly focused on her search for self and on remaining true to who she was. Initially, she was a proverbial "fish out of water" from Africa with little understanding of American convention (esp. *EXM1* #109, np [Feb. 1978]). Over the years she adapted, her sense of self becoming destabilized in the process. In #171 (*EXM4*, July 1983), Storm thinks about her recent actions: "They all fly in the face of all I have ever

believed about myself. I feel as though I stand at a cross-roads. To remain an X-Man—especially as leader—I must sacrifice the beliefs that give my life meaning. Yet the alternative means leaving those I love forever" (np). Breaking from her reverie, she notices that the gentle rain she has summoned to water her plants has grown into a storm, her doubts manifesting as violence. In anger, she screams into her empty loft: "It is because of *you*[Xavier]that I became an X-Man [...] and that decision is *destroying me!*" (np). In a short personal note about the issue, Claremont wrote simply that Storm has "no resonance with home. Bereft of self."[v]

24   Following this outburst, Storm's journey of self-discovery continues apace. She eventually accepts that she has changed from the Africanized girl she was when Xavier found her to the Americanized woman she has become (e. g. *EXM5* #186 [October 1984]; #198 [October 1985]; *EXM7* #225–227 [January–March 1988]). Shortly after this measure of closure, however, she is physically regressed to childhood, becoming amnesiac and beginning a new journey of self-discovery (esp. *EXM9*#248 [Sep. 1989] and #253 [Late Nov. 1989]).

25   Examples of similar existential conflicts abound (Lund 314–320). Nightcrawler, a blue-furred and demon-faced mutant who had originally been conceived as a "bitter, tormented, ugly person," was reconceived by Claremont and artist Dave Cockrum. In Claremont's vision, Nightcrawler's blues were only skin-deep:

> This wasn't a mutation that appeared when he was thirteen. It seemed to me that no human being could survive twenty odd years of being like that. It would be like the ultimate extension of being black. You just can't survive if all you're aware of is that I am this color and I am a minority and I'm hated and I'm persecuted because of what I am. [...] [S]o you only have two alternatives: you learn to live with what you are, you accept it, perhaps even enjoy it, or you end your life. [...] [Nightcrawler has] come to terms with himself at a very early age. He knows who he is. He accepts it. He likes it (Sanderson, "Claremont Pt. 1" 91–94).

26   Cockrum put it more succinctly when he said that Nightcrawler wound up having a "blue-is-beautiful-and-to-hell-with-you-guys attitude" (Sanderson, "Cockrum Interview" 54–55).

27   It is important to note the references to blackness in both quotes: artist and writer both conceived of the character as ethnoracially marked (but not metaphorically Jewish) and proud of it. Nightcrawler thus echoes the language of existentialism and recalls the notion of authenticity by accepting himself; he does not try to hide from who he is, since his physical difference will always mark him as Other, but embraces it (cf. Charmé). Nightcrawler's existential self-affirmation is nowhere more striking than when, disregarding Xavier's stress on mutants' need to keep a low profile, he discards the holographic image inducer he was given and used for a while to hide his true appearance. In doing this, he gives up on trying to "pass" as human: "God—or fate—or dumb luck made me what I am, and I won't hide anymore. Not even for the X-Men" (*EXM2* #130, np). He becomes (for a time) at peace with himself.

"A World that Fears and Hates Them": Mutants and Persecution

28   In one of the most far-reaching examples of the tendency to reduce mutantcy to one metaphor system, English-scholar Cheryl Alexander Malcolm writes:

> One of the most significant features of the X-Men comic books is that difference is outward and inward, both voluntary and involuntary. By eluding easy classification, mutants resemble Jews. Looking like everyone else, yet perceived as different, they are easily misunderstood. They experience only provisional acceptance and a precarious sense of belonging. The language of those who persecute them is comparable to Nazi rhetoric against Jews (156).

29   While it is easy to read Jewish experiences into *X-Men*, Malcolm's claims are severely overstated and rely on "cherry picking," or argument by selective observation. One of the most notable examples comes in a discussion of *X-Men #*210 (October 1986, *EMX6*). In that issue, Kitty Pryde joins the X-Man Colossus in defending Nightcrawler against a mob who are out for mutant blood. The mob only cares that he is not human. "Just open your eyes" they tell Kitty. She replies: "That simple, huh? Well, a whole chunk of my family was murdered in gas chambers because the Nazis said it was just as 'obvious' that *Jews* weren't human. And not so long ago, in this country, people felt the same about blacks. Some still do. Is *that*right?" (np). Malcolm ends her treatment of the comic there, concluding that the mob's "silence is telling. With the words 'gas chambers' and 'Nazis,' Kitty Pryde defuses their self-righteousness and feelings of superiority over mutants" (157–158).

30   Malcolm's analysisnot only ignores Colossus' initiative and Kitty's reference to American race relations in the quoted text, but also omits the fact that she keeps talking, saying that she and her companions might also be mutants: "Maybe, when you're done, you can hang our heads on your wall as trophies. Or, better yet, take our scalps, like they did in the Wild West." The Holocaust's rhetorical primacy in this case is not mutant-as-Jew-metaphorization so much as it is a matter of characterization. Kitty Pryde is Jewish and she uses the particular to say the universal.

31   Persecution storylines in the Claremont years, although more common than in the initial run, were still few, far between, and, importantly, situational. Perhaps most famous is "Days of Future Past" (*EXM2,* #141–142, Jan.–Feb. 1981), which Claremont plotted from a premise suggested by artist John Byrne. "Days" jumps between two timelines; one set on October 31, 1980 (#141, np), the second thirty years into the future when America has become a Sentinel-ruled racial dictatorship. In this alternate future, registration of mutants has been enacted and humanity divided into three categories: pure human; those "possessing mutant genetic potential" and therefore "forbidden to breed"; and mutants, who must wear an "'M' for 'Mutant,'" identifying themselves as belonging at "[t]he bottom of the heap, made pariahs by the Mutant Control Act of 1988. Hunted down and—with a few rare exceptions—killed without mercy" (#141, np). Survivors have been interned in concentration camps.

32   Thus, while it may be taken to connote Apartheid, Jim Crow, or even proposed American anticommunist legislation, "Days" contains several likely references to Nazi persecution of Jews: mutant registration echoes the Nuremberg Laws of 1935; "M"-marking the yellow badge; mutant camps the Nazi camps. Not always the subtlest storyteller, Claremont makes the association between story and history explicit when a supporting character remarks that as far as she is concerned the mutant-baiting Senator Robert Kelly, presently stating his case on the Senate floor, has already made up his mind: "Registration of mutants today, gas chambers tomorrow" (#141, np). Nonetheless, the Holocaust appears not as the Nazi genocide of European Jewry, but as rhetorical gesturing about victimization. Set in New York, Washington, D.C., and on the Senate floor, not Berlin or even Moscow, "Days" employs metaphorical Holocaust language to speak to its own time. Adversity, wrote historian Christopher Lasch in 1984, "takes on new meaning

in a world where the concentration camp stands as a compelling metaphor for society as a whole" (72).

33   When read in this light, "Days" emerges as an example of everyday situations interpreted in extreme terms. Lasch wrote:

> The dominant imagery associated with political protest in the sixties, seventies, and eighties is not the imagery of 'personhood,' not even the therapeutic imagery of self-actualization, but the imagery of victimization and paranoia, of being manipulated, invaded, colonized, and inhabited by alien forces. Angry citizens [...] see themselves as victims of policies over which they have no control [...] as victims not only of bureaucracy, big government, and unpredictable technologies but also, in many cases, of high-level plots and conspiracies involving organized crime, intelligence agencies, and politicians at the upper reaches of government. [...] [A] popular mythology has taken shape that sees government as a conspiracy against the people themselves (44).

34   Rather than being represented as a force for good, as had previously been the norm in superhero comics, institutional authority was increasingly depicted as cracking down on the denizens of the Marvel universe (cf. Costello 133–138). Senator Kelly was already well-established, "Days" presented the Pentagon as "more truly representative—for good or ill —of the *reality* of America" (#142, np), and the arc ended with a shady back-room deal between Kelly, a munitions manufacturer, an intelligence agent, and the President.

35   "Days"'s Holocaust imagery is then perhaps best regarded as accompanying or accommodating the emergence of a culture that, in anti-Semitism and Holocaust scholar Alvin H. Rosenfeld's lament, "seems to encourage and reward victimhood status" (75), wherein the Holocaust has "dissipated into a new social myth, that of a universal 'Auschwitz,' which makes victims or potential victims of us all" (50; see also Novick [esp. 233–235]). Claremont said as much at the time of "Days"'s publication:

> [*X-Men*] is a story about downtrodden, repressed people fighting to change their situation, which I think anybody can empathize with. [...] The Jewish situation is the most obvious genocidal example in the human experience. Cambodia is probably the second. It's something that all of us can relate to and that all of us should relate to (Sanderson, "Claremont Pt. 2" 32).

36   The Claremont run included a few other large persecution-themed stories. *God Loves, Man Kills*, a 1982 graphic novel (reprinted in *EXM4*), confronted the politicization, rise to prominence, and often contemptuous rhetoric of Fundamentalist Protestants, where mutantcy became a symbol for the reductive and essentialist identity-ascription practiced by the Moral Majority, among others (see Claremont's afterword in *EXM4*; cf. Schulman 92–96; Ammerman; Lund 341–343). The two storylines featuring the fictional African island-state Genosha (*EXM8* #235–238, Early Oct.–Late Nov. 1988 and *EXM10* #270–272, Nov. 1990–Jan. 1991) broached slavery, Jim Crow, Apartheid, and Nazism through political allegory that supported the international anti-Apartheid movement and told a version of racism's declining trajectory in the 20th century (Fredrickson; Lund 344–346).

37   But, overall, anti-mutant prejudice and its opposition grew more pronounced throughout Claremont's run. By #99 (June 1976, *EXM1*) there was talk of "anti-mutant hysteria." Just after "Days," Claremont remarked that "*The X-Men* have been doing bigotry stories since the first Sentinels story, over 130 issues ago. It's never been stated, but it's been a subtext: 'We are mutants. We are feared. We are hated'" (Sanderson, "Claremont Pt. 2" 32). Scattered remarks proliferated to the point where they eventually were to be found in almost every issue. At the end of #192 (April, 1985, *EXM5*), an issue otherwise devoted to a

fight against an extraterrestrial, Xavier is brutally beaten by a group of anti-mutant bigots, and they return to try and kill him four issues later. One man in #223 (Nov. 1987, *EXM7*) argues his anti-mutantcy from a workingman's perspective (np). Mutant Otherness, expressed in a variety of ways that recall real-life corollaries, had become an unmistakable part of the Marvel universe's fabric. Indeed, in #234 (Late Sept. 1988, *EXM8*) opposition to mutant rights was identified as mainstream popular opinion.

38   Resistance and opposition to anti-mutant prejudice was also defined in broad terms, drawing on an extensive comparative lexicon. Thus, for instance, when one of the students who assaulted Xavier asks Kitty if she is a "mutie," she replies by asking: "Gee, I dunno, Phil—are you a *nigger*?" (*EXM5* #196, 14). In other cases, Claremont did not put as fine a point on it, but remained no less unequivocal; in the epilogue to #193 (May 1985, *EXM5*), an after-dinner conversation in a human home turns ugly when a guest agrees with a television pundit who says mutants are a menace bent on wiping out humanity: "since when do a few crooks speak for the whole race," the host asks in reply: "Suppose that guy was talkin' about blacks or Latinos?" (np). Forge remarks, in #262 (June 1990, *EXM9*), about an enemy who thinks that "the only good mutant is a dead mutant," that his Cheyenne "ancestors knew the type" (np). There are also references to Nazism and the Holocaust scattered throughout the run (e.g. *EXM5* #190; *EXM8* #238; *EXM9* #259; *EXM10* #272), but rarely do they appear as anything more than passing condemnations, meant to put the various villains, enemies, and bigots in a bad light and to accentuate the viciousness of Other-hatred, wherever it is directed.

Magneto the Survivor: X-Men and the Americanization of the Holocaust

39   Much *X-Men* commentary treats Magneto's Jewishness as something that has somehow always been there (e. g. DiPaolo 220–225; Malcolm; Baron). Cheryl Alexander Malcolm calls the *X-Men* an "extended Holocaust narrative" (144), a tenuous argument advanced by, among other things, refracting *X-Men* #1's Magneto through Holocaust-referencing dialogue written by Claremont in March 1991 (150). The imposed continuity such readings reflect are unsurprising from a contemporary standpoint; the 2000 *X-Men* film opened with a young Magneto in Auschwitz with a yellow star marking his clothes and the 2008 miniseries *Magneto: Testament* (Pak and Di Giandomenico) made the character's Jewishness part of canonical continuity. All of this stems ultimately from Claremont, who over roughly a decade's time tried to redeem the former villain in a process that included turning him into a Holocaust survivor.

40   Attempts to make Magneto Jewish reflect the growing visibility and importance of the Holocaust in American culture. But the Holocaust is one of the most debated events in human history, and myriad meanings have been attributed to and abstracted from it over the years, often in tune with changing political climates. Historian Peter Novick, Alvin H. Rosenfeld, and others have argued that in its emergence into American historical consciousness from the late 1970s onward, the Holocaust has been "Americanized" (Rosenfeld chap. 3; Novick; Flanzbaum). According to Rosenfeld, the cruelties and deprivations of the Nazi genocide of Jews are so alien to the American mindset, pragmatic

in its approach to history and accustomed to an ethos of goodness, innocence, optimism, liberty, diversity, and equality, that they are virtually incomprehensible: "The Holocaust has had to enter American consciousness, therefore, in ways that Americans could readily understand on their own terms. These are terms that promote a tendency to individualize, heroize, moralize, idealize, and universalize" (Rosenfeld 59–61).

41 This tendency is evident in Claremont's attempted redemption of Magneto, which began by giving the villain a personality beyond that of an unselfconsciously evil megalomaniac (*EXM1* #104, #112–113, *EXM2* #125). In issue #150 (Oct. 1981, *EXM3*), Xavier explicitly muddles Magneto's heritage, just one issue before the Holocaust background is introduced: "Origin, unknown. Although his features are Caucasian, probably Nordic—antecedents, unknown" (np). Magneto's Holocaust revelation comes after he believes he has killed Kitty Pryde (*EXM3* #151). He connects this with his own daughter's death, and then his own past: "I remember my own childhood—the gas chambers as [sic] *Auschwitz*, the guards joking as they herded my family to their death. As our lives were nothing to them, so *human* lives became nothing to me." He tells Storm:

> I believed so much in my destiny, in my personal vision, that I was prepared to pay any price, make any sacrifice to achieve it. But I forgot the innocents who could suffer in the process. Can you not appreciate the irony, Ororo? In my zeal to remake the world, I have become much like those I have always hated and despised (np).

42 The quote subversively echoes Kennedy's inauguration (cited above), which makes eminent sense in the context; Magneto has in this issue threatened to "*end* life on earth as you know it" unless world leaders, who seem not to care that they daily put the world at risk of nuclear war, cede political control to him. At a time when nuclear holocaust (Magneto uses the word) loomed larger than it had since the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Holocaust was becoming a "convenient symbol for the prevailing sense of helplessness" of the day (Lasch 111–112), it is unsurprising that the two would intersect.

43 Magneto's ultimatum is presented in extreme terms: a second, global, Holocaust threatens, and those he "has always hated and despised" are framed not only as Nazis but also their potential successors; Reagan, Thatcher, Brezhnev, and other world leaders are pictured (#150, np). This ties into a post-Watergate moral realignment that historian John Lewis Gaddis labels a "recovery of equity" (chap. 5), after which public opinion increasingly questioned the Cold War and its long-held assumptions. Particularly disturbing were the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), "hostage-taking on a massive scale [...] deliberately placing civilian populations at risk for nuclear annihilation" (180), and that American leaders, in conducting the Cold War, seemed to be abandoning the very values they claimed to be fighting for. In its context, Claremont's introduction of the Holocaust (and the "anti nuke [sic] message" he asked himself if he should include[vi]) appears as a heavy-handed warning about the cost of moral compromise, disregard for human rights, and the potential for global calamity in the pursuit of what is nonetheless perceived as a righteous goal. Echoing fears about the cost of moral compromise as they sit together after his revelation, Storm tells Magneto: "The dream was good, *is* good. Only the dreamer has become corrupted" (*EXM3* #150, np).

44 Over the coming years, Magneto would become a more democratic and judicious character. In November 1985's *X-Men* #199, he accompanies Kitty to a Holocaust memorial, where she asks about a lost relative.[vii] After a few pages, a superhero brawl

begins and Magneto surrenders to answer for his crimes. At his trial (*EXM6 #200*) he again strikes notes of equity, MAD-hostage taking, and personal, democratic, redemption. After this issue, when Magneto replaced Xavier as the X-Men's leader, references to the Holocaust became fewer, but remained coupled with personal loss and Cold War issues (e. g. *EXM3 #161*; *EXM4 God Loves*; *EXM5 #196*; *EXM11 #274, #245, X-Men* (vol. 2) *#1*; Claremont, Cockrum, and Grainger; Claremont, Byrne, and Dwyer; Claremont and Bolton, "Gentleman's Name"; Claremont and Bolton, "I, Magneto!"). Magneto ultimately returned to his villainous ways because of how other writers used him, so it impossible to know how Claremont would have further developed him. But as it stands, the Holocaust as it fits into Magneto's characterization appears less as the Nazi regime's systematic murder of six million Jews (the victims of which are almost entirely absent in the comics) than as a sentimentalized personal tragedy that deepens character background and motivates one man's loss of hope, turn to evil, and subsequent search for redemption. And nowhere in all of this is Magneto identified as Jewish.

Concluding Remarks

45   *X-Men* lend themselves extremely well to reader identification. Indeed, Lee and Claremont have both been quoted to the effect that they wanted a broad audience to relate and empathize with their work (Brevoort and Lee; Sanderson, "Claremont Pt. 2" 32). As early as 1982, Claremont had received fan mail from gay readers who believed that *X-Men* made "positive subliminal statements about gay rights" (Sanderson, "Claremont Pt. 2" 32). Comics critic Peter Sanderson, citing nationalities, ethnicities, sexualities, disabilities, and calling Magneto's Auschwitz past a parallel with "persecuted minorities," noted, "The word 'mutant' can symbolize any reason for feeling alienated from society" ("Introduction" 10–11). *X-Men*, in short, has served as the screen for all sorts of projection. Therefore, it is especially important to strive for distance in critical interpretation.

46   Psychological research has shown that training and care can help reduce confirmation bias among interviewers, even when it occurs automatically as a result of limited pre-knowledge (Powell, Hughes-Scholes, and Sharman). In comics studies, assumptions and expectations can perhaps be similarly checked by employing stricter methodologies: the evidentiary base should be clearly delineated; the delineated corpus should determine the aim and scope of the study; source criticism should be vigorously applied; materials should be thoroughly historicized and contextualized; and the range of secondary literature should be expanded.

47   The common notion that "everybody knows that" Magneto or any other character "is" one thing or another overlooks the constancy of changes and ruptures in continuity that often radically redefine it. Similarly, ethnoracial identities are not timeless and static and their histories are similarly marked by changes and ruptures that redefine established concepts or introduce new ones (cf. Sarna; Wenger). It is, then, perhaps more fruitful to study any configuration of identity within Marvel's mutant universe, or any other comics series, with the intent to produce genealogies rather than linear histories. Thus, the first step in any study should always be to clearly state which part of continuity is to be studied.

48 Scholarship on comics and identity should strive to be aware of the limitations the size of the studied corpus set on what conclusions can be drawn, so as to avoid fostering false master narratives. For example, Malcolm's above-cited grand and unsustainable claims about the thematic focus of the entirety of the series, from its creation until at least the end of Claremont's run, are based on (selective) readings of only a dozen issues (out of a minimum of nearly three hundred). Psychologist Mikhail Lyubansky's essay on prejudice in *X-Men* similarly draws conclusions about what he calls "the X-Universe itself" (76n1) from a reading of little but the movies.

49 Similarly, scholarship frequently appears to pay little attention to the tendency and credibility of secondary sources that confirm their hypothesis. This is nowhere clearer or more troubling than in the instances where Nazi propaganda is cited by popular and academic writers as "recognition" of Superman's "Jewish roots" and as "highlighting" his creators' Jewish heritage (Weinstein 25–26; Tye 66; "Surnames"). Less dramatically, popular "Judeocentric" (Fingeroth 25) books are problematic only to the extent that they are uncritically used in academic work. The works of writers like Rabbi Simcha Weinstein, Danny Fingeroth, and Arie Kaplan are not tested for scholarly rigor or quality and, most importantly, do not aspire to academic rigor. When these generic differences are ignored and they are cited as authoritative sources (e. g. Malcolm 159n18; Royal 1n2), parochial cultural myths can be disseminated into comics scholarship. With repetition, they can become naturalized, possibly muddling the historical record and making new insights into historical connections between comics and identity increasingly inaccessible.

50 Related to this issue is a lack of historical and contextual consideration and a certain narrowness in the material consulted. Granted, interviews and archival materials from early comics history are scarce, but the closer one gets to the present, the more one can find. Many artists and writers have been treated in biographies (and hagiographies; see the previous paragraph). Even when no archival or biographical materials are available, however, secondary literature can be used to elucidate contexts. Malcolm, again, fails to take this material into account; her essay lacks perspective on the development of Jewish American and American perceptions and conceptions of the Holocaust, leading to an ahistorical treatment of the topic from a contemporary understanding.

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Ideally, a critical perspective that pays attention to history, context, and biography, and takes authorial self-representation and stated intentions seriously should be developed as scholarship on comics and identity proceeds. In an ideal world, the meaning of neither comics characters nor cultural identities should be asserted without consideration of their contingency. Similarly, no critical study should reduce a writer's or artist's biography to only their group belongings. And no critical study should assume, for example, that simply because Jews wrote comics, they surreptitiously wrote their Jewishness into them or that, because there are Jews in some stories, it is ethnography. Nothing should take precedence over direct engagement and quotation of the comics themselves. From the shoddiest piece of Golden Age hackwork to the most ostensibly

literary graphic novel, every work of comics speaks volumes about the identity climate in which it was created; as scholars, we should try to set aside our preconceived notions and listen.

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NOTES

i. This article is an abridged and revised version of an argument that first appeared in the author's dissertation, Rethinking the Jewish–Comics Connection. See bibliography for information.

ii. For the sake of brevity and for reasons of space, this article uses abbreviations to reference the collected "Essential" editions of X-Men comics. These should be read as follows: EUX1 refers to Essential Uncanny X-Men vol. 1; ECX2–3 refers to Essential Classic X-Men vols. 2–3; and EXM1–11 refers to Essential X-Men vols. 1–11. Complete bibliographic informationis provided in the Works Cited.

iii. X-Men was relabeled Uncanny X-Men with issue #114 and renamed with #142. For the sake of brevity and simplicity, the form X-Men has been retained for all references.

iv. Drawing the soldiers and knowing that they would be defeated by the X-Men's intervention probably struck a note with Kirby, perhaps as a Jew but certainly as World War II veteran who had been deeply affected by his experiences in the field, which included partaking in the liberation of a small labor camp. Thus it is indeed possible that the iconography constituted a working-through of Kirby's wartime experiences, but the soldiers's inclusion as a potential threat is still likely to have served mainly to underscore the evil of Magneto and his Brotherhood in a then more current way, especially when read within the framework of the entire story of which they are a part. Since there was at the time a tendency to juxtapose democracy with totalitarianism of all stripes and an attendant widespread practice of representing the communist threat as analogous to the Nazi regime, and the Cold War as a continuation of World War II, the appearance of Nazi-like figures is unremarkable. (Cf. Costello 61, 68–72; Novick 86–88, 99–100, 131–134; Patterson 88–89.)

v. Columbia University Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, Claremont papers, Box 11, unlabeled Steno Notebook.

vi. Columbia University, Claremont papers, box 11, unlabeled "Calligraphy" notebook.

vii. Much has been made of this in secondary literature. Arie Kaplan describes it as showing Magneto and Kitty "bond[ing] over their shared Jewish heritage," and as being "one of the first sustained efforts to work openly Jewish characters into an established superhero book" (122–

123). For Malcolm, Magneto "instructs" Kitty in the importance of Holocaust remembrance." He becomes "a Jewish mentor" who "urges" Kitty to address the gathering (155–156). According to librarian Robert G. Weiner and historian Lynne Fallwell's entry in The Routledge History of the Holocaust, "Sequential Art Narrative and the Holocaust": "Because Magneto was a survivor, the plot of the stories brought to light the problems of racism and fear of others to a wide audience. One of the most telling narratives appears in X-Men 199–200 (1985), when Shadowcat (Kitty Pryde–a young Jewish character, whose extended family members perish in the camps) goes with Magneto to speak at the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC. The ultimate message of her talk is 'Never Again' can we allow something like the Holocaust to occur" (466).These descriptions significantly inflate the scene's importance. Magneto had never displayed any Jewish heritage to bond over with Kitty; they bond, if one can call what they do bonding, over a shared connection to the Holocaust, although hers is tenuous. Magneto does not instruct Kitty in "the importance of Holocaust remembrance," nor does he become a "mentor" who "urges" her to do anything. When Kitty speaks, she does not deliver a talk; she asks, on behalf of her recently deceased grandfather, if anybody knows anything about her "great-aunt Chava" (#199, np). All of this takes place in eight panels on one page.

ABSTRACTS

This article suggests that scholarship on comics and identity is vulnerable to strong confirmation bias. Engaging with a few common assumptions presented in writing on *X-Men* comics(1963–1970, 1975–1991) and identity, it offers alternative interpretations on the series' engagement with the Cold War, civil rights, individual authenticity, persecution, and the Holocaust. Based on these discussions, the article then offers a few methodological suggestions that might help reduce bias in future studies of comics and identity.

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