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REPRESENTATION OF THE AMERICAN SOUTH IN MARVEL COMICS, 1963-2016

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Master of Fine Arts

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ABSTRACT

My work tracks the role of the American South and Southern characters in Marvel Comics, from 1963 to 2016. This thesis spring from a simple question: how stereotypical does this Northern industry portray the American South? To achieve this goal, I read plenty of comics, applying literary theory (such as Patricia Yeager and Tara McPherson) as well as American cultural studies (1980s televangelism and the history of human trafficking in America) to my findings. After reading multiple comic books from multiple sources, I settled on four different texts, each with a unique approach to portraying the South: the portrayal of the Southern environment in Amazing Spider-Man and Adventure into Fear, the use of metaphorical Southerners in God Loves, Man Kills, the changing depiction of Marvel's premier Southern character Rogue in two limited series she stars in, and the portrayal of a modern, urban, South in the series Scarlet Spider. Likewise, they consist of different types of work: ongoing series, limited series, graphic novel, etc. Though my findings, I argue that Marvel has always had a nuanced and complex view of the South, but one must look towards the sidelines and works primarily set outside of the mainstream public consciousness in order to find it.

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I. A BRIEF HISTORY OF REGIONALISM IN COMICS

On the comics themed podcast *Jay and Miles X-Plain the X-Men,* hosts Jay Rachel Eddidin and Miles Stokes interviewed Dennis Hopeless, author of the then soon-to-be-released series *All New X-Men.* During the interview, Hopeless described the set up of the book: a road trip, where characters would travel across America. In the introductory issue, two characters would be skiing in Colorado, one would be attending a music festival akin to South by Southwest Music Festival in Austin, and one would wrestle an alligator in Florida. The last example took me by surprise. The episode was released in the year 2015: surely there was something more emblematic of Florida than wrestling an alligator? After all, it was 2015, hopefully writers knew that there was more to Florida than a swamp and they had plenty of equally stereotypical options to represent Florida instead of alligators (beaches, Disney World, retirement homes, etc.). My concerns were proven correct. Sure enough, *All New X-Men* #1 features the character Genesis in Florida, wrestling an alligator at an alligator farm. The farm itself is well attended, though the artist draws the surroundings as a murky swamp. The man who is supposed to be wrestling the alligator (identified as such by one of the characters) has a beard down to his chest and is wearing cut-off jean overalls without a shirt. Overall, the entire scene is a bit clichéd.

The concept of wrestling an alligator can be seen as representative of Marvel's haphazard treatment of the South in the Marvel Comics universe. In the 1960s, Spider-Man wrestled an alligator in Florida. In the 1970s, Man-Thing wrestled an alligator in Florida. And in 2015, Genesis wrestles an alligator in Florida. While Marvel has made massive strides from the 1960s to the 2010s with regards to race, gender, and sexuality, it has made haphazard progress with regards to region. All-New All-Different Marvel, a 2015/2016 company-wide rebranding with a launch of over forty new titles featured headlining characters which included a Pakistani Muslim superheroine, multiple female led books, and an African-American Captain America. While (to the best of my knowledge), only two books headed by an lgbtq+ character were announced, at least four All-New All-Different team books prominently feature an lgbtq+ character in their roster. And yet, the majority of the All-New All-Different Marvel superheroes are either from New York or a fictional world (Asgard, Atlantis, the moon, etc.). Marvel is attempting to make stride with regards to gender, race, and sexuality why is region getting left behind? Is it getting left behind in the first place? In my thesis, I attempt to analyze this discrepancy, tracing the regional history of the South in Marvel comics, from the 1960s to today.

Surprisingly, Marvel Comics has a relatively multifaceted portrayal of the South from the 1970s onward. However, one has to dig deep in order to find this portrayal. My thesis strays away from the larger, flagship Marvel titles (*Uncanny X-Men, The Avengers,* etc.) to focus on limited series, individual issues, and lesser-known series. This is simply because the lesser-known series actually *depict* the South, in comparison to flagship series that exist mostly in New York City. With a brief dip into the 1960s for contrast, I examine the growing complexity of the South from the 1970s onward, as Marvel writers incorporate real world events in their depiction of the South, ranging from the 1960s environmental movement to the 2010s concern against

human trafficking. Characters like the Mississippi mutant Rogue and Mexican superhero Aracely Penalba show a synthesis of character and regional identity as they are regularly portrayed with complexity and nuance, occasionally subverting stereotype in the process. Even non-Southern books can be viewed as a critique on aspects of Southern identity, as shown by the concept of the mutant metaphor, where the mutant characters effectively stand in for Southerners. Though the complex portrayal of region has not garnered as much attention as the complex portrayal of gender, race, and sexuality, I argue that it *is* there; one simply has to look past the top sellers to find it.

A few terms must be defined before this work can continue. A single comic book is known as an issue: *Amazing Spider-Man* #6, *Uncanny X-Men* #180. All the collected issues of a comic book are known as a series: the series *Scarlet Spider* consists of issues one through twenty-five. A limited series is a series that is set to run for a specific amount of issues, usually somewhere below twelve: the miniseries *Marvel Divas* ran for four issues. Another term for limited series is miniseries. Since series can share names, the term volume is used to specify which series one is talking about: *Rogue* volume 1 came out in the 1990s, *Rogue* volume 3 came out in the 2000s. A run is a set of issues marked by the same creator. If someone talked about Chris Claremont's run on *Uncanny X-Men,* they are talking about all the issues in which Chris Claremont was the writer. A final important term is continuity. Continuity basically means that the stories from 1960s Marvel still apply to 2016 Marvel. Spider-Man of 2016 is the same Spider-Man that appeared in 1963 and the stories of 1963 Spider-Man still happened to and can still affect 2016 Spider-Man. If a series is set out of continuity, that means that what happens in the series does not affect the mainstream Marvel universe as a whole.

Regionalism in Mainstream Marvel

The majority of Marvel's superhero teams are based in and around the Northeast: the Avengers, Fantastic Four, and X-Men all regularly reside in and around New York City. Marvel's solo heroes reside in New York City as well, most notably Spider-Man and Daredevil. The sheer concentration of heroes around New York City means that, instead of the city itself having an association with characters, the characters are associated with part of the city: Spider-Man lives in Queens, Daredevil protects Hell's Kitchen, the X-Men live somewhere in Westchester County, the county across from Manhattan. Since a single character can star in multiple books, this creates a glut of books set in one city. For example, in the 1980s there were only three ongoing series directly linked to Spider-Man (*Amazing Spider-Man, Peter Parker: The Spectacular Spider-Man* and *Marvel Team-Up* which was replaced with *Web of Spider-Man).* In December 2015, at least nine books featuring Spider-Man or Spider-Man supporting characters were released (*Spidey, Venom: Space Knight, Spider-Man 2099, Amazing Spider-Man, Silk, Spider-Gwen, Web Warriors, Carnage, Spider-Woman).* While some of these books are obviously not set in New York City, the fact that they share supporting cast members means that it is perfectly likely for Venom to visit Spider-Man if the book needs to bring in new readers, thereby moving the book (at least temporarily) to New York City.

In comparison, the major players of DC Comics, Marvel's main competition, are scattered across America: Superman has Metropolis and Batman has Gotham. Even smaller, more "b-list" DC superheroes are continually identified with a city of their own: Starman has Opal City, the various Flashes protect Central City, Green Lantern has Coast City. Though the location of these fictional cities tends to vary, writers regularly tend to place the cities in specific regions: Central City is in the Midwest, Coast City is in California, Metropolis is an analogue for

New York City. An oft-repeated quote, usually attributed to writer Frank Miller says that "Metropolis is New York City in the day, Gotham is New York City at night," showing that while not set in stone, there is a definite regional identity for DC cities.

In Marvel's defense, other, lesser-known superhero teams protect other cities and countries in the Marvel universe. The West Coast Avengers operated out of California, Alpha Flight resides in Canada, the Rangers operate out of the American Southwest, the X-Men operated out of Australia for a few years in *Uncanny X-Men*, and so on. To criticize Marvel, these depictions are often stereotypical at best. The X-Men's Australia was completely set in the Outback and the West Coast Avengers left California as soon as they were needed in a different book. These teams are often "b-list", barely scraping up enough sales to sustain the book for a long period of time. The fourth volume of *Alpha Flight,* released in 2011 as an ongoing series, was retooled into an eight-issue limited series due to poor sales. The 1982 limited series *Contest of Champions* could easily have been renamed 'National Stereotypes: The Series' as it introduces heroes like Shamrock (Ireland), Blitzkreig (Germany), Collective Man (China) and Talisman (Australia), all of whom have superpowers somehow relating to their regional identity. As an example, Shamrock has the superpower of being supernaturally lucky; she literally has the luck of the Irish.

With some exceptions, most of these groups rarely have a synthesis between characters and place, treating the setting more as something interesting than an integral part of the storyline. For *West Coast Avengers,* the California setting was minimally used: the team spent most of their time travelling in the past, in the dimension of Cat People, etc. *Uncanny X-Men* attempted to successfully integrate the team into Australia through the indigenous character Gateway, though Gateway was a series of 'magical Native American' stereotypes. With *Great Lakes Avengers,* the

team's regional identity is treated as a joke—why does the Midwest need superheroes anyway? The members of the team are all terrible superheroes with bizarre powers, furthering the concept of a Midwestern superhero team as a total joke. *Alpha Flight* was perhaps the most successful in integrating place, character and plot: it featured characters from all walks of life and all parts of Canada. However, the series tended to default to stereotypes (the Quebecois member continually threatened to quit the team and the First Nations member knew magical indigenous magic), the first major death of a character took place in America, and integration of character and place was questionable at best. The most notable example is the character Snowbird, a blond-haired, white character that was a goddess in Marvel's bastardized version of Inuit/First Nations mythology. What brief glimpses the reader gets of her godly parents are not reassuring: they are also blonde and white.

Though regional settings are few and far between, characters with an expressed regional identity are more prevalent in superhero comics. Perhaps the biggest source of regional identity in Marvel is the X-Men. *Uncanny X-Men* stories of the 1960s were never good at portraying a nuanced view of region and regional identity. The original five X-Men (Cyclops, Jean Grey, Beast, Iceman, and Angel/Archangel) were all from somewhere nebulously American, as was their leader, Professor Xavier. Their main enemy was a team of nebulous mutant non-Americans, the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, consisting of one white man of indeterminate nationality, two Eastern Europeans, one Brit, and their leader Magneto. In the early 1970s, writer Len Weir, who wrote *Giant Size X-Men #1,* and Chris Claremont, who took over the revival of *Uncanny X-Men,* introduced diversity to the roster. Compared to the rather W.A.S.P. original five, the "all new, all different" X-Men were a roster of different nationalities and ethnicities: German Nightcrawler, Russian Colossus, Kenyan Storm (the only woman on the

team), Irish Banshee, Japanese Sunfire, Canadian Wolverine, and Native American Thunderbird. Later members continued to be regionally diverse. New X-Men members in the 1980s included Cheyenne Forge, British Psylocke (who's racial identity changed from white to Asian in a complicated series of events), Chinese-American Jubilee, Southern Rogue, Cajun Gambit, and all-American Jewish teenager Kitty Pryde. Writers imply that being a mutant is a random genetic rarity, the reason why members are pulled from all over the world in comparison to the relatively Northeastern American Avengers. Out of text, editorial mandate proved the reason for the increase in diversity. When discussing the concept of reviving the X-Men, Marvel editorial stressed the idea of creating a global market, creating superheroes from other countries where they sold comic books. Though some aspects vanished from ideas to print (Marvel never had a strong reader base in Kenya, for example), the idea of diversity shone through (Darowsky 39).

It cannot be understated just how *Giant Size X-Men* and Claremont's run on *Uncanny X-Men* revived the series and brought the X-Men to the cultural consciousness they have today. Under Stan Lee's pen, *X-Men* had middling sales, originally canceled after sixty-six issues. Lee's X-Men lacked distinct voices and he drastically underused the concept of mutants being 'hated and feared', as the text often proclaimed. Writing the series from its revival in 1975 to 1991, Claremont deftly juggled plots and characters, introducing something only to revisit and revise it later. Supporting characters such as Stevie Hunter and Moira Mactaggart became a regular part of the X-Men universe. Under Claremont's tenure, the concept of mutants being 'hated and feared' briefly explored in Lee's run became a reoccurring concept as the X-Men dealt with anti-mutant bigotry. Claremont's plotlines and characters have become the default for X-Men, as shown by the numerous adaptations reworking distinctly Claremontian plotlines and focusing on characters created by Claremont over those created by Lee and artist Jack Kirby.

This regionally and racially different roster set the bar for *New Mutants,* the equally diverse spin-off, as well as starting a trend of ethnically diverse mutant student groups. After all, Professor Xavier was a *professor,* and the original five X-Men were his students. Though the main team was purely superhero, this concept of teenagers learning to control their powers at a mutant school lasted in spin-offs and sister series. *New Mutants*, published in the 1980s, consisted of Southern Cannonball, Cheyenne Danielle Moonstar, Scots Wolfsbane, Brazilian Sunspot, Vietnamese Karma, Russian Magik, and American Cypher among others. Marvel published the next teenage superhero book, *Generation X,* in the 1990s. Members included British Chamber, Monacan M, Southern Husk (Cannonball's younger sister), African American Synch, and former X-Men Jubilee. The 2000s teenage mutant book *New Mutants,* later renamed *New X-Men*, included Welsh Pixie, African American Prodigy, Venezuelan Wind Dancer, Southern Icarus (yet another of Cannonball's siblings), Italian-American Rockslide, and Muslim Afghani Dust. The *New X-Men* run further enhanced the concept of a mutant school, peppering the background with minor characters of multiple nationalities, including Hawaiian, Indian, and African. The teen mutant team of the 2010s, the Five Lights, included Mexican Velocidad and Nigerian Oya.

This unique regional background often bordered on stereotypical. In *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor,* Joseph J. Darowski criticizes this overreliance on regional stereotypes. He writes,

> Banshee has many identifiably Irish characteristics. He has red hair, dresses in green, speaks with a thick brogue…inherits an Irish castle, which is infested with leprechauns, and his powers and name are derived from an Irish myth. One problem for Banshee is that for much of this run his defining characteristics are entirely those Irish stereotypes. Initially there is not much more to the character than a thick Irish accent. (67)

While Banshee received the worst treatment, characters in the early issues of Claremont's tenure on *Uncanny X-Men* were often saddled with these stereotypical traits in their design, dialogue, characterization, and plots. Sunfire's uniform resembled the Rising Sun Flag, used by Japanese warlords during the feudal period. Exclamations such as Storm's "by the goddess!" and Colossus's "Lenin's ghost!" as well as verbal tics such as Gambit's "chere," Rogue's "sugah" and Banshee's "boyo" served as short hands to the character's nationality, but often rang as cliché. Personality traits also rang stereotypical. The Native American characters Danielle Moonstar and Thunderbird were originally skeptical of joining the X-Men, as that meant they had to work under a white man. Stereotypical personality traits still creep up in modern Marvel: Muslim Afghani Dust, created in the mid 2000s, rarely has a personal moment that does not revolve around her religion or her status as a war refugee. Likewise, in a 2005 issue of *Rogue,* Japanese Sunfire attempts to commit *seppuku*, ritual suicide, when he feels he has dishonored his clan.

Today, Marvel's heroes are arguably the most regionally diverse they have ever been. And yet, with a few exceptions, the heroes are usually confined to New York City or to space. A brief scan of 2010s company wide events show that these events involve something seeking out the characters ('Avengers vs. X-Men,' 'Fear Itself'), take place in New York ('Shadowland') or take place in space ('Infinity', 'Original Sin').[1] Only one company-wide event takes place in an Earth location that is not New York: 'Siege,' which takes place in Oklahoma, temporary home of the Asgardian gods. While diverse heroes with different regional identities are at an all-time high, the promotion of those identities wavers at best.

[1] The concept of company-wide events boils down to "something big happened and now the characters must react to it," relying heavily on the fact that all Marvel comics are set in the same superhero universe. For instance, in the event 'Secret Invasion', Marvel superheroes react to the fact that some superheroes have been replaced by shape-

All in all, this looks like dire straits for multifaceted regionalism in mainstream Marvel. However, once you look past the heavy sellers and large crossover events, nuanced portrayals of regional identity can be found. A key example is *Ms. Marvel,* a currently (as of 2016) running series by writer G. Willow Wilson and artists Adrian Alphona and Takeshi Miyazawa. Ms. Marvel is teenager Kamala Khan, based out of New Jersey. Ever since her creation in 2014, Ms. Marvel's ties to Jersey City have been an integral part of her character, as she views herself as the protector of the city.[2] In *Ms. Marvel* vol. 4 issue 1, Ms. Marvel finds that her image is being used without her permission by a shady real estate developer to promote gentrification of Jersey City. This issue came out around the same time as the "Make It Yours" campaign, an ongoing effort to rehabilitate the image of Jersey City by trying to attract businesses and creating new housing. The campaign is blatantly trying to attract millennials, a demographic that Ms. Marvel is a member of, as shown by the JC Make It Yours Instagram Selfie Contest, a contest designed to help residents "show their civic pride" (Bhattacharya). In contrast, locals argue that the campaign promotes a narrow view of Jersey City which "only show you the good parts," with some activists outright calling the campaign gentrification.

When an X-Man has a distinct regional background as well as another minority status (race, religion, sexuality), there often is an equal emphasis on both. The 2013-2015 series *Amazing X-Men* features the character Northstar, a gay Canadian. A multi-issue arc deals with the X-Men team visiting Canada in order to stop an infestation of wendigos, a monster that is magically bound to Canada. In Canada, the team is assisted by Alpha Flight, Northstar's old teammates. The Canadian setting is barely used, with most of the arc taking place in a forest and

[2] Ms. Marvel's identification with New Jersey is so strong that it's even brought up in spin-off media, such as the mobile game *Avengers Academy.* When you tap on the character, she has the chance of saying this quote: "Do not talk smack about New Jersey."

an unnamed suburb, but at least it gets the X-Men out of New York. A later issue focuses on Northstar and Nightcrawler (a mutant with a visible mutation: he's blue and fuzzy) helping Anole, a gay student, come to terms with a visible mutation. Northstar's region is given a larger focus than his sexuality, with the wendigo arc taking up five issues in comparison to the single issue focused on his sexuality.

Why Comic Books

In order to properly establish the history of regionalism in comics, we first need to establish the history of regionalism and the history of comics. With regards to the history of regionalism in the United States South, the best place for analysis is in the field of New Southern Studies. In the most basic terms, Southern Studies is a field of study about the American South. Historians such as C. Vann Woodward and seminal texts such as *The Mind of the South* and *I'll Take My Stand,* have all attempted to define and explore the concept of Southern identity, viewing it as essentialist as they try and explain/talk for all Southerners. Modern critics such as Patricia Yaeger, Houston Baker, and Tara McPherson take a less essentialist approach, focusing on examining and exploring aspects of the South: the black South, the South for women, etc. The work of these scholars, as well as others in the 2000s, and their efforts to introduce diversity into the field of Southern literature, formed the basis of what would later be called New Southern Studies. Another aspect of New Southern Studies, relevant to this thesis, is globalization. The concept of the global South puts the South into play against and in reaction to Central and Latin America as well as the Caribbean. Prime examples of works examining the global South are *American Mediterranean* by Matthew Pratt Guterl, and *Look Away!,* a collection of essays edited by Jon Smith and Deborah Cohn. Guterl, as well as all of the authors featured in *Look Away!,*

paint a picture of a South that is global, a South that regularly interacts with other spaces for a complex regional view.

Throughout this thesis, I will make heavy use of Douglas Reichert Powell's *Critical Regionalism.* Powell argues that the stories and depictions of a place make up the identity of a place just as much as the physicality of the place itself. Critical regionalism is "[a] deliberate use of region as a way to envision and critique relationships among people and places and envision better alternatives." (10) There is nothing set in stone about a 'region': ask twelve different people to define the American South, the Bible Belt, or the Caribbean and you will get twelve different answers. Critical regionalism looks beyond physical boundaries or physical characteristics to argue that story and depiction play as heavy a role in making place. Powell's emphasis on story and narrative defining a place, as shown in his retelling of a piece of Johnson City, TN history in the introduction, brings something new to the concept of regionalism, as stories (whether real or fictional) have the potential to influence a place just as much as the actual place itself. He draws out this concept of critical regionalism to explore how *everything* can help impact and influence the idea of region.

An important aspect of critical regionalism is that one does not have to be from that place to contribute to the perception of that place. This is an essential aspect of my thesis because, for the most part, none of the creators of these comics are Southern. Most Marvel creators are based out of New York City or other Northeastern states. The few creators who are Southern do not write the more stereotypically Southern characters: Alabamian Jason Aaron is best known for *The Mighty Thor,* about the Norse god of the same name, while North Carolinian Jason Latour is

best known for *Spider-Gwen,* a New York based hero.[3] In comparison, writers with a distinct ethnic, gender or religious identity that is not 'white male' are more likely to write series that reflect their identity: Muslim G. Willow Wilson writes the Muslim *Ms. Marvel,* African American Ta-Nehisi Coates writes the African *Black Panther,* and numerous female writers and artists are shunted to the 'girl books,' books stereotypically marketed on the fact that they have female characters.[4] With a critical regionalist lens, however, these non-Southern stories about the South are still Southern, through their promotion of an image of the place as well as their reliance on, manipulation of, and reworking of various Southern stereotypes and tropes. To go back to the example of the alligator, it is true that alligators live in the South. It is also true that regions of the South are swampy and that alligators have attacked humans at various points throughout history. But the continual depiction by non-Southern creators of superheroes wrestling alligators in swamps belies certain stereotypes the creators might have about the region: the South is dangerous, the South is rural, the South is swampy, and the South is full of alligators. Critical regionalism argues that once it has entered the popular consciousness and no matter the region of the creator in the first place, superheroes wrestling alligators can be just as potent in creating the image and dimensions of a region in the popular consciousness as a Southern creator's series or traits like state boundaries, climate, or censuses can.

As for comic books, the scholarly history of comic books, or comic studies, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Newspaper comics and comic books have always been seen as "low art", a relatively trashy piece of popular culture with little to no artistic or scholarly value. Even as Roy

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[3] Aaron and Latour do draw upon their regional heritage to create a Southern-based book, *Southern Bastards,* but that series is published by Image Comics.

[4] Girl books include, but are not limited to *A-Force, Patsy Walker AKA Hellcat, Silk,* and *Angela: Queen of Hel,* all of whom have a main female writer or artist. *A-Force* is a particularly notable example, as the book's gimmick is simply 'a team of all-female Avengers.'

Lichtenstein appropriated comic book panels for his famous works in the early 1960s, comics studies was always at the margin of academic thought. While work had been published prior to the 1970s, the growth of popular culture studies in the 1970s ushered in the first wave of comics studies. Texts such as *The Comics: An Illustrated History of Comic Strip Art* (1972) by Jerry Robinson and *The Comics-Striped American* (1973) by Arthur Asa Berger attempted to legitimize comics as a field of study, to little notice (Gabillet 296-300).

Two books helped legitimize the field of comics studies by providing a technical understanding of the form, explaining it in a way that is understandable to outsiders: *Comics and Sequential Art* by Will Eisner and *Understanding Comics* by Scott McCloud. At the time of the book's publishing, Eisner had over thirty years of experience in the comics industry. He uses that experience wisely as he dissects the form of comic books, exploring the interplay between the words and the text, as well as prominent comics strategies such as simplification, iconography, and nonverbal storytelling. One of the strengths of the book is Eisner's use of his own comics art to explore form, explaining how he does something in technical terms and then juxtaposing it with a page showing the same strategy. Written in a graphic book style, *Understanding Comics* explores the history of the comic book medium, the fundamental vocabulary of comics and how the various elements of comic books are regularly used, intertwined, and mixed in order to make a fulfilling comic book. While both spend the most of their time exploring form, *Understanding Comics* is more likely to have a philosophical beat, exploring how humans understand time in one chapter and explaining four-color coloring in the next. Unlike other academic texts, *Understanding Comics* received broad popular appeal, with popular reviews from Neil Gaiman, Garry Trudeau, and *Publisher's Weekly.*

There are plenty of books on national and ethnic identity in comics: *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* by Jeffrey A. Brown tackles African American creators and readers of Milestone Comics, a comics company specifically targeted towards African Americans. *God of Comics: Osamu Tezuka and the Creation of Post-World War II Manga* by Natsu Onoda Power focuses on Japanese culture post World War II while *Komiks: Comic Art in Russia* by Jose Alanz examines Russian comics from the USSR to post-perestroika. However, there is very little on American regionalism in comics, with one notable exception: *Comics and the U.S. South,* edited by Brannon Costello and Qiana J. Whitted, is a collection of essays all focusing on portrayals of the American South. Each of the essays featured explores an aspect of the American South, as represented in various forms of comic books. The majority of these essays deal with some aspect of blackness with regards to the South, further promoting the false equivalency that to talk about the South is to talk about the black/white binary. And, at least for this thesis, the wide scope of materials covered is more of a detriment than an advantage. Only one essay is explicitly about superhero comics: Brannon Costello's "Race, Region, and Nation in *Captain America*," an essay that analyzes a 1980s storyline where Southerner John Walker takes up the mantle of Captain America.[5]

Because there is such a lack of material on comics studies with regards to region, I will be using literary criticism and theories from scholars such as Patricia Yaegar, Tara McPherson, and Zandria Robinson. This means that I will analyze superhero comics with the same strategies that scholars use to analyze more 'high literature' such as Faulker and Welty, methods that some may scoff at but at least a few scholars should enjoy.[6] In this thesis, I will explore four different

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[5] It is due to this essay that I have chosen not to include U.S. Agent in the list of Southern superheroes/settings explored in this thesis.
[6] Most likely, Tara McPherson.

treatments of the South in four different time periods: the Florida swamp in the 1960s and 1970s, the treatment of Southerners in the 1980s, Mississippi and Louisiana in the 1990s and 2000s, and modern Houston in the 2010s. With each time period, I will analyze a different aspect of the South and how the comics react with or against it: the 1970s environmental movement, 1980s televangelism, the concept of the Southern belle, and the 2010s reaction against human trafficking. Through this synthesis of strict textual analysis and less strict contextual analysis, I hope to show that while Marvel Comics might have a surface level homogenization with regards to regional identity, if you dig past the big name comics and dig past what sells, you can find a complex, multi-faceted depiction of the South.

II. 1963-1973, THE CHANGING ROLE OF THE EVERGLADES

Marvel Comics has a rocky relationship with the swamp. The swamp is rarely seen to begin with and the few times it *is* seen, it is hardly a sustained setting. Often, the swamp is a simple location, a place where characters can spend an issue for a visit before heading back to the civilized world, often New York City. In both *Amazing Spider-Man* and *Adventure into Fear* the swamp is treated as someplace primal, with an emphasis on the connection to nature that city life inevitably lacks. At the same time, the swamp is dangerous, a place seen as 'creepy,' 'murky,' or 'gothic.' Characters intrinsically linked to the swamp tend to share that murky, primal nature, especially in contrast to any outsider who ventures into the swamp. The characters most closely tied to the swamp are inherently inhuman and therefore inherently dangerous. This is best seen through the two characters that I would argue Marvel identifies with the concept of the swamp: the Lizard and Man-Thing.

Long before the 1960s, water monsters were a staple of American folklore and pop culture. Americans retold folklore detailing river/swamp/lake monsters since the 1800s. America has plenty of large, inhuman, water monsters: Vermont's Champ, Ohio's Loveland Frog, Louisiana's Honey Island Swamp Monster, etc. In the 1930s, the Loch Ness Monster, perhaps the most famous water monster, brought water monsters back into the public consciousness, due to the famous Surgeon's Photograph, one of the first clear photos of the beast. Water monsters made their way to popular culture through the 1954 monster movie *The Creature from the Black*

Lagoon, as well as its two sequels. Florida has its own cryptid, the Skunk Ape, first seen in the 1960s in Dade County, Florida, a county adjacent to Everglades National Park.

Even before the introduction of the Lizard and Man-Thing, the swamp had permeated American comic book culture. Newspaper comics of the time tended to portray the swamp as pastoral or backwater: either the swamp was a pastoral place of idyllic peace (*Pogo*) or a backwater den of ruralized rednecks played entirely for laughs (*Snuffy Smith, Lil' Abner*). For early horror comic books of the 1940s and 1950s, the swamp was a site of racialized horror. One issue of *Tales of the Crypt* features white tourists visiting the swamps and primitive jungles of Haiti, bringing back voodoo trinkets that accidentally unleash zombie horror on white suburbia (Whitted 197). Arguably one of the first swamp monsters in comics was the Heap, a grassy muck monster that first appeared in Hillman Periodicals' *Air Fighters Comics* in 1942. The death knell of the swamp as a place of utter horror came with the 1954 installation of the Comics Code Authority (CCA), which prohibited depictions of violence and depravity such as torture, gruesome crimes, excessive bloodshed, and the walking dead. While companies could publish comics without the CCA approval, any title without this stamp of approval would inevitably run into distribution problems. Due to public backlash against violence in comic books, most distributors refused to stock comic books without the CCA label (Gabilliet 45). When writers introduced the Lizard in 1963, CCA authority was still very important and mandated what could be written. By the early 1970s, when *Adventure into Fear,* an anthology comic set in the swamp, ran, companies had started to push back and challenge the CCA, most notably by outright challenging the CCA's prohibition against drug use, or writing around CCA bans, such as simply not using the word 'zombie' to refer to a resurrected superhero. As such, *Adventure into Fear* is able to effectively use the swamp to create a grotesque, grim atmosphere.

A brief note on terminology: various aspects of the swamp are grotesque, macabre, inhuman, and warped, otherwise falling into the category of Southern gothic. However, none of the writers or artists I profile is Southern, with the possible exception of Steve Gerber, from Missouri. Because of this, I will be using the term 'Southern grotesque,' as that does not contain the same 'made by Southerners' connotation that Southern gothic does. The genre of Southern gothic also contains a multitude of fields that will not be touched on in this chapter: hoodoo, transgressive gender roles, the role of the Civil War, and poverty.

Bestial Inhumanity via the Lizard

Curt Connors, also known as the Lizard, was first introduced in *Amazing Spider-Man* #6, written by Stan Lee with art by Steve Ditko, published in November 1963. The issue starts with reports of a humanoid lizard-like creature, what we now know as the Lizard, terrorizing the Florida Everglades. Peter Parker (secretly the superhero Spider-Man) arrives in Florida in order to take pictures of the Lizard for his job as a news photographer and find out what this creature is. Once in Florida, Spider-Man encounters the Lizard who, due to his strength, manages to take Spider-Man by surprise, temporarily winning the first fight between the two. Spider-Man goes to visit Curt Connors, noted herpetologist, for information on the creature, only to be told by his wife, Martha, that Curt *was* the Lizard. After losing his arm in "the war," Curt devoted himself to the study of reptiles, creating a reptile-based serum intended to regrow human limbs. [7] In a stunning display of dubious comic book logic, Curt decided to ingest the serum himself. Instead of regrowing his arm, he turned into the monster known as the Lizard. From Curt's notes,

[7] To the best of my knowledge, Marvel has never stated which "war" Curt lost his arm in. Recent portrayals of Curt Connors eschew the idea of losing his arm in the war all together—instead, he's simply lost an arm through off-panel means.

Spider-Man whips up an antidote to try and turn the Lizard human and leaves to trail the beast. The Lizard, at this time, is hiding out at an abandoned Spanish fort where it is revealed that the Lizard can command and communicate with reptiles and plans to use this to take over the world with a reptile army. This being a superhero comic book, the two get into a fight. During their fight, Spider-Man forces the Lizard to ingest the antidote, turning him back to Curt in the process. After reuniting Curt with his family, Spider-Man returns to New York.

Lee and Ditko were working with various established concepts in creating the Lizard. The concept of a reptilian humanoid dates all the way back to ancient mythology. The Egyptian god Sobek has a crocodile head, Dragon Kings from Chinese mythology are occasionally depicted as reptilian, and the Lamia from Greek Mythology are described as half-woman, half-serpent. The origin story also ties to Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde:* both stories involve a scientist who physically and emotionally transforms himself through the use of a chemical concoction. Both stories also emphasize the split between the two personas: a civilized man of propriety versus a grotesque, inhuman monster.

The main conflict of the story is the urban Spider-Man versus the rural Lizard. In contrast to the Lizard, who seems perfectly at home in the swamp, Spider-Man is decidedly an urban superhero. His main method of transportation involves swinging between skyscrapers with his webbing. While Spider-Man occasionally ventures outside of New York City, the majority of his stories (and certainly the most iconic ones) keep him within the city boundaries. Put Spider-Man outside of the city, and he is undoubtedly at a disadvantage. In *Amazing Spider-Man* #267 titled "The Commuter Cometh!", Spider-Man chases a thief to the suburbs. The result is pure comedy as Spider-Man has no skyscrapers to swing from and instead persuades a cabbie to tail the thief's car. Spider-Man is equally at a disadvantage in the swamp: the Lizard almost drowns him,

throws him half a mile into a copse of trees, and later escapes by swimming down a river. Spider-Man has to resort to half-baked solutions, such as web swamp shoes made out of his webbing and used as a push boat, in order to actually track the Lizard. Only when Spider-Man comes in contact with symbols of urbanity and technology is he able to put a stop to the Lizard's plans. At the Connors' house, Spider-Man is obviously in his element and easily creates an antidote using Curt's laboratory and notes. The climactic battle is fought at a Spanish fort, an abandoned symbol of urbanity, but a symbol nonetheless. Even the characters themselves further this rural/urban divide. Aside from the Connors family, Spider-Man does not meet any other people in the Everglades. The Everglades is home to beasts, animals, and humans-turned-monster, but not actual humans. Later issues further emphasize the urbanity of Spider-Man and the Connors family by simply moving them out of the swamp entirely: in their next appearance, Curt, Martha, and their son Billy are in New York City.

Though Lee's dialogue does not explicitly emphasize the rural/urban divide, Ditko's art and colors wonderfully contrasts the two. The city portions of the story take place in buildings that emphasize urbanity. Spider-Man reads about the Lizard on the rooftop of a skyscraper, Peter Parker goes on a field trip to a natural history museum, and Peter later visits his boss, J. Jonah Jameson, in a newspaper building. Jameson's office is specifically on an upper level—Peter can see Jameson's office from a nearby rooftop. The art always reminds the reader that they are in an urban environment: brownstones and skyscrapers are drawn in the background of outside panels and the tiles of a linoleum floor are outlined when Peter is indoors. This background detail continues in the Everglade section: almost every outdoor panel has a tree in it. Even something as seemingly simple as the coloring plays into the rural/urban dichotomy. City panels focus on yellow or red, highlighting a yellow tile floor, the yellow walls of Jameson's

office, red seats, and red panel backgrounds. In contrast, the rural panels are predominantly green, due to the natural world. Ditko's swamp is green and lush, consisting of various grasses, trees, and hanging Spanish moss. Only when Spider-Man and the Lizard fight at a Spanish fort does the background of the panels shift to predominantly yellow, tying the fort to the yellow tile floor and office walls of the previous pages.

If Ditko's art emphasizes the rural/urban divide inherent in the Lizard, then Lee's dialogue and storyline emphasizes the innate savagery and inhumanity. The Lizard is seen around water each of the three times that he fights Spider-Man. The first fight starts with the Lizard ambushing Spider-Man, grabbing his ankle from the water. In the second fight the Lizard escapes from Spider-Man by diving into the water and swimming away. The third water encounter features the Lizard controlling a group of alligators near a river, plotting world domination. Each water encounter emphasizes the inhumanity of the Lizard. During their first fight, Spider-Man is at a major disadvantage in the water, compared to the Lizard who has an innate biological advantage. He cannot catch the Lizard when he escapes and has to fashion "web swamp shoes" in order to punt down the river and track the Lizard, an example of the urban adopting to the rural. As for the third point, he simply cannot talk to alligators. Later issues featuring the Lizard enhance the character's inhumanity, as the Lizard cannot grapple with the human concept of technology and science. Trying to recreate the formula that brought about his transformation in the first place in order to raise a lizard army, the Lizard breaks into Curt's lab and discovers that he cannot make sense of Curt's equations. "It's no use! I can't understand any of this stupid scientific gibberish! The pages contain nothing but chemical symbols… numbers… equations!! What good is that to me?!!" (*ASM* 45:4). Eventually, the Lizard's inhumanity is so pronounced that he cannot speak, reduced only to snarls and hisses or, if he

does speak, he speaks in ‘snake talk’, with the s sound elongated, usually represented by three or more s letters (‘Ssspider-Man’, for example).[8]

The depiction of the swamp in *Amazing Spider-Man* #6 draws heavily from the promotion of the gothic south as a place of difference and danger. As early as 1870, journalists linked the South with the grotesque and the medieval. In one 1870 travelogue, Spanish moss “[hung] down like tattered but gigantic banners.” Another travelogue compared swamp trees to grand cathedrals, the backdrop to where one can “dream of knight and troubadour.” *Amazing Spider-Man* calls to the idea of the swamp as medieval through the use of a Spanish fort as the final battle scene: hardly medieval, but crumbling and decrepit nonetheless. Travel narratives often placed the oddness and chaotic images of the Southern swamp in direct comparison to the North. The South was exotic in a way that the North was not, while still remaining a dangerous other bordering on the macabre (McIntyre 33, 44-53). The grotesque and macabre swamp assured Northern readers that the South was an aberration, something strange and unusual. This idea of the South continues through the Lizard’s backstory: he is the first Spider-Man villain to be decidedly inhuman. The previous villains were all men in super-suits or men with superpowers that still looked like *men*. The Lizard is blatantly bestial. Modern day swamp tourism emphasizes the bestial, non-civilized nature of the swamp, billing it as a “primitive splendor.” The centering of alligators and alligator feeding in the swamp tour narrative reaffirm the swamp as dangerous. Tourists can get a brief taste of danger, while safely remaining in their boats, and returning to civilization an hour or so afterwards (Wiley 120-26).[9]

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[8] As with most trends in comic books, whether or not the Lizard is capable of human speech and to what extent he has a speech impediment all depends on which writer is writing him.
[9] While Flint Marko aka the Sandman can be argued as inhuman due to being made of sand, he regularly takes a human form.

The Lizard is explicitly described as “grotesque” by Spider-Man in their first fight. He “walks and talks like a man,” showing that the Lizard simultaneously is human but is not (*ASM* 6:1). While later artists would chose to give the Lizard a diapsid skull, Ditko draws him with a relatively flat face, looking more humanoid than later depictions, but paradoxically emphasizing his inhumanity. Later-Lizard is a beast, a giant monster with an elongated snout; early-Lizard is inhuman, a lizard that looks eerily like a man. The flat-faced Lizard continues until the 1990, specifically until ‘Torment,’ *Spider-Man* #1-5, where writer/artist Todd McFarlane draws the Lizard with a gaping maw of teeth, a dramatically diapsid skull, and a long, inhuman tongue. McFarlane also portrays the Lizard as the most bestial and inhuman yet. Controlled by the voodoo queen Calypso, the Lizard does not speak and will continue not to speak for his next consecutive appearances, even when removed from Calypso’s spell.

Ever since his inception, the Lizard has slowly drifted away from the swamp. Three prominent storylines featuring the Lizard are all set in New York City: ‘Torment’ (*Spider-Man* vol. 1 #1-5, published in 1990), ‘Feral’ (*Sensational Spider-Man* #23-27, published in 2006) and ‘Shed’ (*Amazing Spider-Man* #630-633, published in 2010). Dialogue continues to link Curt to the swamp: Curt identifies himself as “a dime-a-dozen research scientist from the Everglades” and conversation between Spider-Man and Curt in a later issue references Florida and the Everglades twice (*ASM* 73:20). Gradually though, the Lizard as sewer beast replaces the Lizard as swamp beast. Starting in *Amazing Spider-Man* #44, the Lizard uses the murky water of the sewers to his advantage. The replacement of sewers for swamp is mostly practical: the Lizard is an established villain, Spider-Man will have to fight the Lizard on occasion, and the narrative cannot continually justify Spider-Man, a superhero with perpetual money troubles, flying down to the Everglades at a moment’s notice. As such, the swamp starts to fade. The aspect of

Southernness and the swamp has been removed so far from the Lizard that, in the character's feature film debut in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012), Welshman Rhys Ifans portrays Curt, using a British accent. The film itself is set in New York City and, again, the swamp is traded for the sewers.

So if the Lizard has been so far removed from the South and the swamp, why include him at all? This removal of the swamp does nothing to change the fact that, in the comics, the Lizard's origin is tied to the swamp. Modern adaptations draw and rework the same source material; though the exact criminal and circumstances vary, Spider-Man's Uncle Ben will always be shot, as that is a pivotal moment in Spider-Man's backstory. In the same vein, if a Spider-Man adaptation features the Lizard, certain character beats and moments need to be established. The core of the character is an innocent man trapped inside a bestial creature due to his own hubris, but the possibility of turning beast back to man always exists. The swamp is incidental—but it still is *there* and the Lizard has a strong association with it. For all we know, when the Lizard is introduced in a Spider-Man television show ten years in the future, he will be introduced in Florida. As such, the role of the swamp in the Lizard's backstory needs to be analyzed and taken into account, even if it's only for a 'just in case' scenario.

Natural Inhumanity via Man-Thing

To get the obvious out of the way first, Man-Thing is a comic book character with a *terrible* name that inherently makes people giggle like a twelve-year-old boy.[10] Man-Thing was first introduced in the anthology series *Savage Tales* #1, written by Gerry Conway and Roy Thomas with art by Gray Morrow, published in May 1971. In this story, the reader meets Ted

[10] To make things even worse, Man-Thing later stars in a series titled *Giant Size Man-Thing.*

Sallis, a scientist stationed in a government lab in the Everglades, with his lover Ellen. He created a chemical to "change an ordinary soldier into an indestructible warrior." Unfortunately, Ellen betrays Sallis, selling him out to an unnamed corporation. Sallis breaks away from Ellen and her thugs, driving away in his car. Haunted by his actions in creating a previous wartime chemical, Sallis decides that no one shall get their hands on his current project and injects himself with the chemical while driving away from the corporate goons. He loses control of his car and crashes it into the swamp. The waters of the swamp react with the unstable chemical, twisting and transforming Sallis into the "grotesque Man-Thing." Man-Thing returns to the scene of the crime, killing Ellen's thugs. As it touches Ellen's face, Man-Thing's touch burns, searing her flesh. Confused, it leaves the scene of the crime. The issue ends with condemning narration: "Well you made it, Ted Sallis. You have your super-soldier—your indestructible killer. Too bad you couldn't have known that your ultimate victim would be…yourself! (*Savage* 1:9)"

As shown in this quote, the use of the second person permeates *Savage Tales* and *Adventure into Fear,* the series Man-Thing later starred in. *Adventure into Fear* was also an anthology series, with Man-Thing taking the lead story starting with issue 11. Man-Thing is regularly referred to in narration via the second person: you monster, you killer, etc. The second person narration also calls out to Man-Thing, attempting to rekindle a spark of humanity that may or may not reside in the inhuman beast: "Now, as you watch these two other humans, you sense an ominous pall of evil around them. Can you make yourself want to reach out and touch them…warn them of danger? (*AiF* 11:1)" This narration is an example of the speaker-referring second person pronoun, where the addressee interprets the use of the second person as an attempt at empathy, to put themselves in someone else's shoes. As Helen de Hoop and Lotte Hogeweg outline, the use of second person pronoun increases the reader's engagement and identification

with the main character. The reader self-ascribes her identity to the pronoun, interpreting the pronoun to refer to herself. Since the second person pronoun is regularly used with regards to Man-Thing's inhumanity, this invites the reader to empathize with Man-Thing, to view his situation as tragic, not bestial (de Hoop 112-14).

Though it is not mentioned in the first issue, later appearances of Man-Thing usually include a phrase that has come to be exclusively associated with the character, to the point that it is still used in modern portrayals: "Whoever knows fear burns at the touch of Man-Thing." This phrase neatly explains Man-Thing's supernatural abilities: Man-Thing can sense fear and feels some undefined level of repulsion against those who show fear. If it touches those who fear it, Man-Thing's hands start to burn wherever it is touching, normally the victim's faces. The burns are to such an extent that the narrative usually describes these characters as deformed or horribly mutilated by his touch. It is certainly no coincidence that a disgusting, inhuman monster that lives in the remote, dangerous swamp has a power directly related to fear. Man-Thing's supernatural abilities draw from the long history of the swamp as a place of ruralized danger for the North to fear as described earlier.

Despite the fact that his first appearance was written by Conway and Thomas, Steve Gerber is the creator most closely identified with Man-Thing. Gerber wrote Man-Thing's appearances for most of the 1970s and brought his own unique sensibilities to the book, pushing boundaries in bizarre ways. He made Man-Thing's swamp the "nexus of all realities," a place where alternate dimensions blended into each other, letting Gerber narratively leave the swamp and send Man-Thing on bizarre cross-dimensional adventures. Gerber pulled focus away from Man-Thing himself and instead introduced a varied cast of supporting characters: teenage sorceress Jennifer Kale, an Atlantean-worshipping cult called Zhered-Na, hippie disc jockey

Richard Rory, jar of peanut butter turned barbarian Korrek, and, perhaps his most famous character, a talking, cigar-smoking duck named Howard. Throughout his entire work at Marvel, Gerber skewered multiple ideologies from student radicals, to hippies, to corporate culture. From his work on *Adventure into Fear* to *Howard the Duck*, Gerber drew from and attacked social issues of the time. He lampooned popular culture (*Star Wars*) as well as popular buzzwords of the time (violence in the media, the shifting morals of inner-city life). Gerber was not shy when it came to infusing comics with his thoughts and beliefs (Howe 134-5).

Though Gerber gets more praise with regards to Man-Thing, the work of artists Gray Morrow and Val Meyerick cannot be overlooked, especially with regards to Man-Thing's character design. Man-Thing is obviously inhuman: a hulking green creature, he has large dark eyes, no visible ears, no mouth, a long root-like nose (if it even is a nose to begin with), and two root-like eyebrow protrusions running down the side of his face. Man-Thing's design works against one of comics best known traits: cartooning. According to comic theorist Scott McCloud, cartooning is amplification through simplification: the more abstract a character's features are, the easier it is for people of any facial structure to empathize with them. Realistic drawings are more likely viewed as "the other," while the cartoon is seen as oneself. McCloud posits that these factors of universal identification and simplicity help children identify with cartoon characters and comic book characters (McCloud 28-31, 36).

The character design of Man-Thing is the complete opposite of McCloud's theory about simplification. Man-Thing has a complex character design, drawn with various pieces of swamp grass and swamp muck sticking out from his body. Man-Thing's outline is usually rendered in jagged lines, reminiscent of cross-hatching, explicitly a trait to emphasize his inhuman nature. His silhouette is *huge*, often in full frame or drawn against normal humans to emphasize his

hugeness. He is covered in grass, leaves, and roots. Despite the fact that not all of the grass/leaves/roots are individually rendered, enough of them are rendered to give the reader the impression that Man-Thing is completely covered in plant matter. The parts of Man-Thing that are most human, his hands, are still drawn in a jagged, elongated style, cragged with long nails and numerous examples of cross-hatching. Compared to the simple lines of the other human characters, the complexity of Man-Thing's character design stands out and further serves to alienate him from the human environment. It also serves to alienate him from the reader. There is nothing simplistic about Man-Thing's design; therefore it is harder to identify with him. His features are defined, not abstract, further othering him and emphasizing his inhumanity. Because of his features, it is hard for Man-Thing to have any sort of visible expression, further alienating him from readers.

The coloring of Man-Thing also ties him to the swamp. Unlike the Lizard, who is bright green, Man-Thing is brown, the same shade of brown as the swamp floor he lives in. The brownness of Man-Thing's swamp is noticeable because the rest of *Adventure into Fear* is brightly colored, reflective of coloring processes of the time. The nether-spawn that Man-Thing fights in *Fear* #11 is blindingly red, providing a contrast to Man-Thing's brown, but also emphasizing how this creature is *not* part of the swamp. Bright colors were the norm at this time. From the 1940s to the 1960s, most color comics were printed using the bright four-color process, using hues of cyan, magenta, yellow and black as well as their various combinations and permutations (for Marvel, this included a lot of green and purple). The bright, primary colors reflected the bright, expressive world superheroes fought in, as well as to stand out on dull, cheap newsprint. The florid dialogue and strong fight scenes reflected the bright colors of the images. For the protagonist to be a bright yet unimpressive brown further emphasizes how

removed Man-Thing is from the main comics world, removing him from his superhero counterparts (McCloud 187-91).

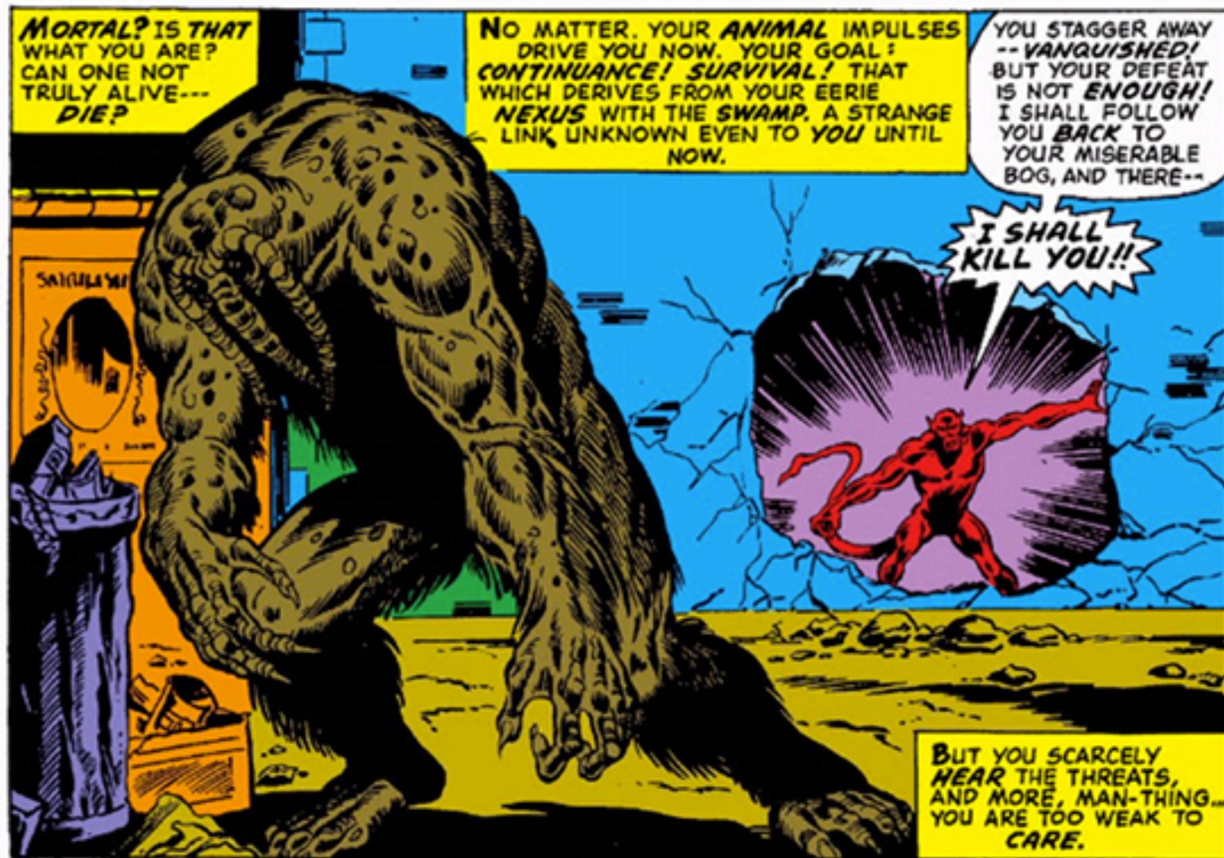

Image 1: Adventure into Fear #11

Unlike the Lizard's swamp, the Everglades of Man-Thing's world regularly encroaches on civilization. Construction workers come to the swamp, Jennifer Kale comes to the swamp to perform an arcane ritual, and the town is close enough to the swamp for Man-Thing to visit a movie theater. People also live in Man-Thing's swamp. And yet, it is decidedly **not** civilization and is always portrayed in contrast to civilization, with civilization literally killing Man-Thing. As such, the Everglades of *Adventure into Fear* draws upon Christopher Rieger's concept of the antipastoral. In comparison to pastoral literature, where nature is seen as the relic of an idyllic

past, a lost Garden of Eden in which 'pure' people are the ones closest to nature, the antipastoral is a complete opposite: being closely identified with nature is seen as *bad.* Poverty is tied to the landscape, those close to nature or living off nature mirror nature's deformities or seem detached from the world around them, and there is no happy ending. The Everglades of *Adventure into Fear* is a place of sheer violence, as shown by the people who live there. Hank and Billie Jo are a couple who live in the swamp. In the span of an issue, Hank tries to drown Billie Jo's child and threatens her with a shotgun, Man-Thing drastically burns Hank's face, and yet Billie Jo still takes Hank back in the end. A few issues later, an African American fugitive escapes to the swamp, fleeing the advance of a blatantly racist white sheriff. The swamp mirrors their hate, as the fugitive is almost killed by a large snake. Later, it is revealed that the fugitive himself is heavily tied to violence, as he is on the run because he killed a white police officer. The narration describes the "cancerous hatred" of the police officer and the fugitive as "inhuman", directly comparing them to the blatantly inhuman Man-Thing.

Man-Thing still remains tied to the swamp today. His appearances in the 2010 series *Thunderbolts* draw heavily from the Steve Gerber written *Adventure into Fear.* Though Man-Thing's role in the series is liminal (he mostly serves as the team bus, getting the Thunderbolts from place to place), the swamp still creeps in. When protagonist Luke Cage meets Man-Thing, Man-Thing is now living in the basement of the Thunderbolt's base of operations. Originally a sterile building, Man-Thing's presence has turned the place into a swamp, with mangroves, butterflies flitting around, and knee-high water. *Thunderbolts* #154 even has the feel of a 1970s *Adventures into Fear* story, not only because the issue is titled "Adventure into Fear." Man-Thing and Jennifer Kale visit the Everglades and team up in order to send a host of dimensional invaders back to their own dimension. His character design has not changed as well—if

anything, it has grown even more complex. Declan Shalvey, one of the artists on *Thunderbolts,* draws Man-Thing with practically neon red eyes and even more swamp grass on the creature's body. Whereas the Lizard becomes the alligator in the sewer, Man-Thing still remains an emblem of the swamp and a symbol of the region's sheer inhumanity.

Growing Environmentalism of the 1960s-1970s

In between *Amazing Spider-Man* #6 and *Savage Tales* #1, a major ecological event happened: the publication of *Silent Spring*.[11] Author Rachel Carson published *Silent Spring* in autumn of 1962. It attacked the uncontrolled use of pesticides, bringing attention to the danger these chemicals caused. Through examples such as the Clear Lake case, where the toxic chemical DDD killed unimagined numbers of fish and frogs, Carson attempted to light a fire under the government, propel the public into action, and argue for the controlled and careful use of chemicals. Carson had ample statistics and examples to back her up; the 1962 *US Report of the Committee on Environmental Health Problems to the Surgeon General* listed around "500 million pounds of highly toxic chemicals" spread over the land (Travis 84). Though a popular success, scientists, policy-makers, and government committees brutally attacked *Silent Spring* in the press, painting Carson as everything from a hysterical woman who did not know what she was talking about to a left-wing hippie. The public ultimately swayed towards Carson's side, partly due to an April 2, 1963 *CBS Reports* installment about Carson and *Silent Spring,* watched by ten to fifteen million viewers. Because of this, consumers started to question the regular and habitual use of pesticides.

[11] Technically, *Silent Spring* was published before *Amazing Spider-Man* #6. However, we have no way of knowing when Stan Lee actually wrote the issue. As he was writing numerous series at the time, it is entirely possible that he wrote *ASM* #6 before *Silent Spring's* publication.

While Carson might have been one of the first to question the widespread use of chemicals*,* she certainly was not one of the first to have that concern*.* From the late 1950s to the early 1960s, fears about uncontrolled uses of chemicals and pesticides played on the public consciousness. In 1959, the government issued a ban on cranberries harvested in 1957, 1958, and 1959. The 1957 harvest of cranberries showed traces of the herbicide aminotriazole, which could cause cancer. The fact that the FDA refused to set an accepted level of aminotriazole that could be used in herbicides only confirmed in the public's mind the idea that the chemical was unsafe at any level (Lytle 145). Pre-*Silent Spring,* there also existed definitive proof of how unsafe chemicals could be to humans. In the early 1960s, Dr. Francis Kelsey promoted the idea that thalidomide, a chemical used in flu medicine, could cause birth defects if used in the first trimester. Against pressure by the drug company, she insisted for further studies before the drug could be manufactured and sold on a larger scale. Kelsey was proven right: mothers who had taken thalidomide in the first trimester birthed babies with massive birth defects, ranging from a loss of arms to brain damage. The worries and fears about chemicals already existed; *Silent Spring* simply put those fears, stories, and statistics into an easily readable and unapologetically passionate form (McCay 69).

In *Silent Spring,* Carson attacked the idea of a "control of nature," as shown by entomologists and agricultural officials who, despite changing public discourse and new research being brought to light, had not changed their policies, still pursuing total eradication of pests. For Carson, the idea of controlling nature only led to ruining nature, where the sheer amount of chemicals used to control nature ended up killing animals and changing humans. Popular scientific discourse of the time only proved her point. In a rebuttal to *Silent Spring* entitled "Silence, Miss Carson!", William Darby of the Vanderbilt University School of Medicine argued

that scientific development was based on the "increased ability to control or mold those forces responsible for man's suffering, misery, and deprivation" (Smith 738). In *ASM* #6, Curt Connors practically parrots Darby's argument as he explains why he shifted his work to reptiles: "A man might even grow a new pair of legs, or arms! Perhaps even new eyes, or a new heart!" Later, he justifies his work by telling his son that he is working on "something to make you *proud* of me, Billy! Something to help all mankind!" (*ASM* 6:10) In *Adventure into Fear* #11, magic is used to control nature instead of science, as aspiring sorceress Jennifer Kale accidentally summons a nether-spawn, a "formless force" that changes a dragonfly into a "thing of monstrous evil" (*AiF* 11:14). It is Man-Thing, the closest analogue to primal nature that the comic has, who has to rise up and stop the nether-spawn, gaining strength from nature in the process. After being knocked into a swamp, the swamp waters empower Man-Thing, who rises up to handily defeat the nether-spawn. In Marvel Comics, no matter whether it is magic or science used to control nature, the sheer attempt of man manipulating nature always ends up in man's downfall.

Man-Thing was first introduced in 1971, after these links between pesticides, the swamp, and birth defects have been established. As such, his origin emphasizes how nature AND chemicals create this inhuman thing. Only when the chemicals react to the waters of the swamp does Ted Sallis change into the Man-Thing. Because Man-Thing is a relatively obscure character, a brief primer on his character is usually given in his latter appearances, each time with the emphasis on the mixture of swamp water and chemicals restated. Likewise, as comics readers might notice, the serum Sallis was working on pre-transformation is explicitly stated to be a version of the serum used to give Captain America his powers. The same turn of phrase is used to describe both formulas: "super-soldier." Chemical methods of the past pose new dangers to the present. In comparison, Curt's transformation into the Lizard is purely though chemical

means. There is none of the tragedy of Man-Thing's transformation. Information given on the Lizard to bring new readers up to speed usually boils down to the transformation, not the cause. The Lizard's transformation plays more akin to a B-Movie Monster or a Jekyll/Hyde transformation. While nature is used in the solution's creation (as represented by the lizard DNA Spider-Man resynthesizes), there is not the emphasis on nature reacting with chemicals as with Man-Thing.

As *Silent Spring* and *Adventure into Fear* criticized the use of chemicals, power dredging and mismanaged water management played havoc with the Everglades. The growth of land speculation around the Everglades from the 1900s to the 1930s meant that Florida officials and land barons were constantly trying to find a way to create new useable, cheap land for farming or housing. This power dredging meant that the cheap land was prone to flooding. The results of artificial timing and water management of Everglades water levels in an attempt to prevent flooding and create useable freshwater aquifers were readily apparent; by 1974, the wading bird population of the Everglades had been reduced by ninety percent. Of course, the chemicals sprayed on the newly dredged farmland eventually made their way into the Everglades themselves. Since the early 1970s, analyses reveal that Lake Okeechobee, a lake in the Everglades, has been increasingly polluted by runoff from dairy farms (Douglas 314-16, 396-413).

This forced changing of the Everglades played into various plots of *Adventure into Fear*. *Adventure into Fear* #16 features a protest between Native Americans living in the swamp and construction workers, as the two groups grapple with the construction of an airport on swampland. Interestingly enough, nobody is entirely in the right. A Native American character promotes respect for land, in a land ethic ideology similar to Aldo Leopold's famous work, but

the Native Americans retort against the construction workers with violence, destroying one of their bulldozers in a hit-and-run attack on the construction site. The construction workers maintain that they are only taking this job to make ends meet, but seem perfectly willing to shoot at the Native Americans as they trespass on the construction site. Both groups meet at a protest, which ends with an all-out brawl. The only blatantly villainous characters in this issue are the foreman of the project and Jake Simpson, a construction worker who the narration describes as a man who "…cared nothing for the world, save for the space in it he occupied. Watch, now, as that arrogance floods every corner of his being—as he rides its crest to a hellish doom." (*AiF* 16:14) In a particularly on-the-nose sequence, Simpson runs Man-Thing over with his bulldozer. Moments later, Man-Thing resurrects, a hand "…now oozes up from the bruised Earth" as Man-Thing draws life from the swamp to be reborn. Simpson leaves the bulldozer to fight, knocking the brake off the bulldozer in the process. After their altercation, Man-Thing grabs Simpson's face, blinding him as Simpson's flesh sears. Less than thirty seconds later, the bulldozer runs over Simpson, gruesomely killing him off panel. As the construction workers flee from Man-Thing, the narration casts an even gloomier note on this admittedly gloomy story: "Tomorrow the work will begin anew. Men have sentenced this fen to death…and with it, the Man-Thing. They will likely carry out that sentence. Eventually. They always do." (*AiF* 16:19)

The ending fight between Man-Thing and Jake Simpson takes on a different meaning when viewed in an allegorical context, with Man-Thing representing nature and Jake Simpson representing humanity/progress. Man-Thing has a set affiliation with nature at this point: he cannot leave the swamp for too long, he is strengthened via swamp water, he is constantly described as inhuman. Jake Simpson becomes representative of humanity/progress through a piece of narration addressing the reader: "And watch closely. For there is a little of him in each

of us." (*AiF* 16:14) Viewing these two characters through an allegorical lens, *Fear* #16 starts with man trying to overtake nature, man succeeding in overtaking nature, nature rising up to overtake man, and a foregone conclusion that man will eventually take over nature. Gerber paints a multi-faceted complex picture of the ecology movement and working class construction workers. Both sides have valid points but quickly degrade into violence when provoked. The Kale family, the closest thing this issue has to audience surrogates, attend a protest against the airfield, but only appear for a few panels and do not espouse any feelings towards or against the protest. Gerber paints a complex picture of the interplay between the environment, the environmental movement, and blue-collar construction workers opposing the movement by simple necessity.

An environmentalist reading of *Fear* is justifiable because the basic structure of the plot (sans swamp monsters) parallels real life: the 1960s/1970s attempt to build an Everglades jetport. In 1967, the Dade County Port Authority (DCPA) approved the building of a new jetport directly adjacent to Everglades National Park's northeast boundary. Neither the National Park Service nor the Flood Control District was consulted about the location of the jetport, which would pass directly through a conservation area. Conservationists around the state, who would later organize themselves under the name 'Everglades Coalition', started to rally against the construction of the jetport, bringing the matter to national attention: the *New York Times* stressed the threat to Everglades Park, *Business Week* reported on the growth of land prices adjacent to the jetport perimeter, *Look* attacked the building of the jetport at the expense of the park. The matter worked its way up to President Nixon's Cabinet—the fate of the jetport was eventually settled by presidential veto, which specified that the construction of any type at the Everglades site was now barred (Gilmour 723-32). As stated before, Gerber had his finger on the pulse of modern

life, trends, and pop culture. It is entirely plausible that the basic premise of *Fear* was ripped from the headlines. Considering that Gerber seemed to be skeptical of any sort of extreme ideology (he lampooned everyone from left-wing radicals to right-wing racists in his work), it only makes sense that his characters would choose a middle path.

To Sum It Up

Characters associated with the swamp are still liminal figures in Marvel Comics. The Lizard is one of Spider-Man's less used iconic villains, never headlining his own series or starring in any story arc deemed 'classic' or 'influential' by comics pundits or message boards. [12] While Man-Thing starred in multiple series, none lasted past twenty-five issues: Man-Thing headlined around ten issues of *Adventure into Fear, Man-Thing* (1974) lasted twenty-two issues, and *Man-Thing* (1979) lasted eleven issues. And yet, with the introduction of the Lizard and Man-Thing, Marvel Comics expanded their universe from New York City to a real-world setting in America. The swamp was now put into context, compared with real-world urbanity, such as New York City, or fictitious locations, such as Atlantis. While the swamp was mostly treated as a place of othering and inhumanity, the early 1960s and 1970s depictions of the swamp brought the South into Marvel's cultural context for the first time. Later writers would expand on this concept of the South, drawing the Marvel South out past alligators and the Everglades, slowly painting a new, modern standard.

[12] Possibly the biggest example of the Lizard's joke status in the Spider-Man villains roster can be seen in the most unlikely of places: the Spider-Man ride at Universal Studios Orlando. Part of the set dressing features a file cabinet ranging all the way from "Lizard, The" to "Loser."

III. IN-TEXT AND FANDOM RECEPTION OF THE MUTANT METAPHOR AS SOUTHERN IDENTITY

One of Marvel's longest-running and most profitable superhero teams is the X-Men. The concept of the X-Men is that the team is almost entirely comprised of mutants, superheroes who receive their powers by a genetic mutation, randomly appearing when they reach puberty. Because mutants get their powers by natural means instead of alien technology or other factors that still keep them human, mutants are viewed in-text as a separate species. As a result, the citizens of the Marvel universe are often prejudiced against mutants, as receiving powers via a genetic mutation is somehow seen as stranger or more dangerous than the multiple superheroes who receive their powers via chemical accident or magical space rock. Mutant characters and characters sympathetic to the mutant plight have been harassed, attacked, and killed due to their identification, often times by organizations such as the Purifiers or the Friends of Humanity, thinly veiled parallels of real world hate groups.

Due to the prejudice against mutants, the concept of the mutant metaphor has emerged in Marvel texts as well as outside criticism. The mutant metaphor is the concept that the experience of mutant discrimination in-text can serve as a representative stand-in for the experience of any real-world minority group. The minority group itself does not matter, what matters is that they feel persecuted enough to identify with mutants. Occasionally, the persecution of mutants in-text parallels the persecution of minority groups in the real world. The 1980s portrayal of the fictional country Genosha serves as a parallel to apartheid South Africa, where mutants are treated as a lower class much like black Africans. Mutants were enslaved, forced into menial labor positions

and, in some cases, literally brainwashed to serve their human subordinates. In the 1990s, Marvel introduced the Legacy Virus, a virus that targets and eventually kills mutants, serving as an explicit parallel to the HIV/AIDS crisis of the time. Characters in-text compare the fictional slur "mutie" to real-life slurs of the time. The mutant metaphor extends to the film *X2,* where mutant Bobby Drake 'comes out' as a mutant to his parents, in a scene that parallels coming out as homosexual. His parents blame themselves, with his mother asking, "Have you tried *not* being a mutant?"

Because of the mutant metaphor, some writers explicitly write the X-Men as parallels of real life minorities, most notably African Americans and the lgbtq+ community. This allegory can be seen in the graphic novel *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills* where the prejudice against mutants is representative of the prejudice against others by Southern/Sunbelt televangelists. Through this chapter, I argue that William Stryker, the villain of the text, can be viewed as an analogue to 1980s Southern televangelists, with his ministry a parallel to the state of televangelism at the time. While the *God Loves, Man Kills* analogy of mutants paralleling those televangelists deem 'sinful' is outright stated as authorial truth in supplementary materials, fan interpretations of the mutant metaphor as other minorities are promoted and argued across the internet and fan forums today. The allegorical South continues through fan-curated analysis of the mutants Magneto and Professor X, as well as critical rebuttals to this fan analysis of the two. With Magneto and Professor X, the mutant metaphor is expanded into a Civil Rights Movement metaphor, and the two are often compared to Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., respectively.

Mutants as the Sinful Other

Published in 1982, *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills* was a stand-alone graphic novel. Ostensibly set outside of mainstream Marvel continuity, the graphic novel proved popular and influential enough that it serves as the basis to the movie *X2: X-Men United.* Eventually Marvel retroactively inserted *God Loves, Man Kills* into mainstream continuity in 2003, around the time of the film's release, when writer Chris Claremont revisited the storyline in his run on *X-Treme X-Men*.[13] Reviewers for well-known comic websites such as *Comicvine, Den of Geek,* and *Comic Book Resources* praise the graphic novel's complexity, arguing that it still merits examination thirty plus years later. Written by Claremont with art by Brent Anderson, *God Loves, Man Kills* tells the story of the X-Men's confrontation with William Stryker, a televangelist who preaches for the destruction of mutant kind. This graphic novel set against the boundaries of what the X-Men could do: published without the Comics Code label, it let Claremont and Anderson push the envelope with regards to fight scenes, religious concepts, and language, creating iconic visuals and sequences that the creators certainly would not be able to get away with if constrained by the Code. Characters and concepts introduced in *God Loves, Man Kills* are still being used today: William Stryker leads an attack on the Xavier Institute in *New X-Men #27* (Aug. 2006), dying in the process. *All New X-Men #20,* published in December 2013, features Stryker's (seemingly, as it turns out) dead mutant son as the antagonist.

God Loves, Man Kills explicitly parallels mutants with the experience of African Americans. At the time of the novel's publication, the horrors of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement were likely still on Claremont's, as well as the reader's, mind. Perhaps one of the most iconic moments is the opening: two young children run from armed gunmen, pursuing them. They flee to a playground, where the gunman finally confronts them. As one of the

[13] This use of retroactively inserted stories, ideas, or characters into mainstream continuity is called a 'retcon.'

children asks why they're doing this, a gunman responds, "You have no right to live" before shooting them both. Later, the supervillain Magneto comes across these children's bodies, tied up via swings of a swing-set, with the word "mutie" written on the swing itself. At this point in the main X-Man book, *Uncanny X-Men,* 'mutie' had already been established as an anti-mutant slur. This scene is expressly set up to resemble a lynch scene. The children are African American and the narration mentions the bodies were set up, "as an example for all the school children to see." Magneto later furthers the parallel by stating, "Their only crime—that they had been born." (Claremont 1-3)

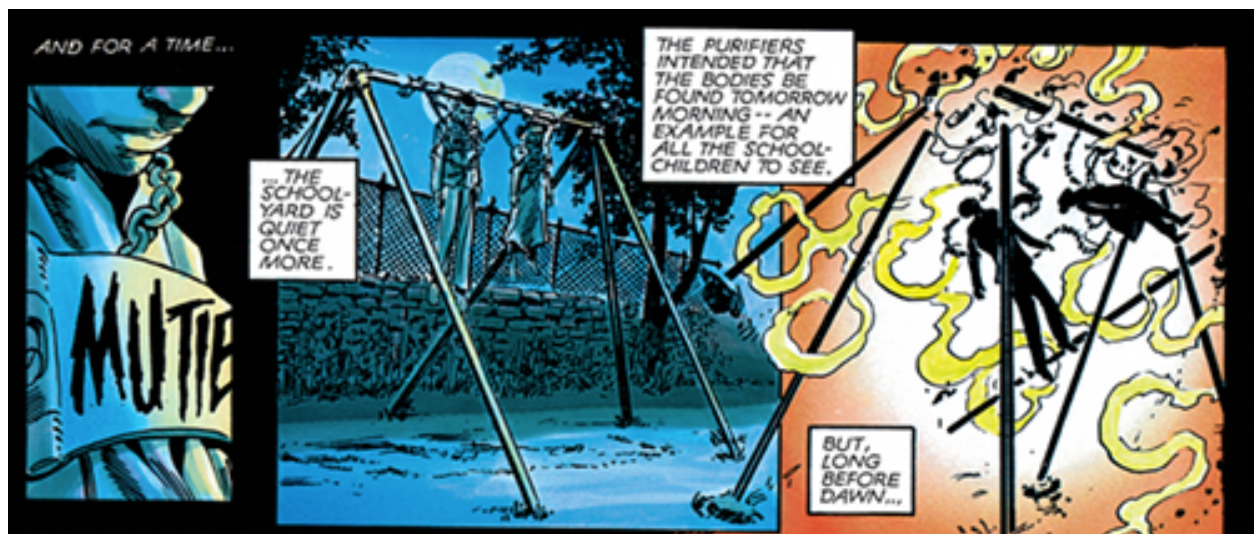

Image 2: *God Loves, Man Kills*

A more direct analogy is made when teenage X-Man Kitty Pryde gets into a fight with one of her classmates whose parents support William Stryker's ideologies and who is bigoted against mutants himself. Kitty picks the fight after the classmate calls her a 'mutie-lover.' Stevie Hunter, Kitty's African American dance teacher, attempts to calm her after the fight. Kitty responds: "Suppose he'd called me a nigger-lover, Stevie?! Would you be so damn tolerant then?!!" (Claremont 7) The slur is not censored in the text. In an interview with Chris Claremont twenty or so years after the book's publication, he defends his use of the word 'nigger', as he

wanted to make a point about pain and how words can hurt. Claremont emphasized the fact that the graphic novel was published without the Comics Code label on it, thereby implying an older or less 'family friendly' audience. By the 1980s, the authority of the Comics Code had lessened to the point that publishing *God Loves, Man Kills* without the code's approval did not harm the book's sales. Claremont also stressed the whiteness of his audience: while minority readers were all-too aware of various slurs used against them, white readers would know the 'greatest hits', slurs that were so prolific or so steeped in history that they have entered the public consciousness. By using the term 'nigger' as a comparison, Claremont shows just how much impact this fictional slur has on the mutant characters. As both of these examples take place within the first ten pages of the text, the reader is quickly made aware of the in-universe cultural climate. Claremont effectively parallels his fictional minority against real-world minorities of the time, showing the reader just how much is at stake for these characters. Later, the metaphor of mutants simply shifts to the prejudiced against the 'other,' with the villains taking on a more direct analogue of popular thought and discourse.

The most important character who has transferred over from *God Loves, Man Kills* to mainstream Marvel continuity is the main villain, William Stryker. Stryker is a hellfire and brimstone television evangelist, who heads a million dollar religious empire, complete with television shows. He is the head of the 'Stryker Crusade,' a ministry that seems to solely be based on anti-mutant sentiment. Stryker is influential enough that a massive public sermon of his attracts high-profile guests, notably a United States senator. Stryker is blatantly prejudiced. He uses Biblical scripture to condemn mutants, labeling them as abominations and "an affront to the Lord." (Claremont 30) Stryker's ministry is exceedingly Old Testament; when readers first encounter him, he quotes Deuteronomy 17:2-5:

> If there be found among you, within any of thy gates which the Lord thy God giveth thee, man or woman, that hath wrought wickedness in the sight of the Lord thy God, in transgressing his covenant …. Then shalt thou bring forth that man or that woman, which have committed that wicked thing, unto thy gates, even that man or that woman, and shalt stone them with stones, till they die.

In an interior monologue, it is revealed that Stryker delivered his own son, who was obviously a mutant at birth. Traumatized by the child's appearance, he killed the baby and then killed his wife. This hatred fuels his crusade.

Stryker is also a blatant supervillain. The driving force of the story is Stryker kidnapping members of the X-Men: Professor Xavier, Cyclops, and Storm. He intends to brainwash Xavier, a telepath who can read and control minds, hooking him up to a power amplifier and ordering him to destroy all the mutants by attacking them with a mental pulse. This mental pulse reveals itself by giving all mutants a crushing headache that causes them to bleed from the ears and the nose. It is revealed at this point that Anne, Stryker's right hand woman, is a mutant, though she did not know herself. Anne's years of service are not enough to save her, as Stryker pushes her from the stage, killing her as she falls, neck snapping against the ground. The issue ends with William Stryker attempting to murder Kitty Pryde. As he fingers the trigger, a human police officer opens fire on Stryker. When questioned about it, another officer justifies his actions, pointing out that Stryker "was about to shoot an unarmed little girl." (Claremont 58)

Before I proceed, a few terms must be defined: evangelism, fundamentalism, and the New Christian Right. These terms tend to be used interchangeably, despite their different meanings. Evangelicals are not all fundamentalists. Fundamentalists view the Bible literally: it is not open to interpretation. They are critical of other religions, often separating themselves from other branches of Christianity. For evangelicals, the Bible is more flexible, the words can be interpreted as metaphorical, and the emphasis is on evangelizing: evangelicals place a large

emphasis on the act of conversion, accepting salvation, as well as promoting and spreading their beliefs. As such, *tele*vangelists are those who spread their religious beliefs mostly through an audio/visual method, such a television or radio. The New Christian Right is a loose, informal coalition of evangelical Christians, all with right wing, conservative beliefs. The term *New* Christian Right specifically focuses on the Christian Right around the late 1970s and 1980s, as headed by men like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robinson.[14]

On television in-text, William Stryker fits the role of a 1980s televangelist perfectly. With the exception of flashbacks, Stryker is always portrayed in a crisp black suit, whether in public or private, obviously a telegenic man. Editors in the studio remark that Stryker knows how to play to the crowd and seem congenial, despite his admittedly scary message. Cyclops fears that they have 'lost' the debate, most notably due to Xavier's stern appearance, describing him as "grim" and "almost scary." (Claremont 11) The X-Men are rarely on television and have rarely served in this sort of public capacity, explaining Xavier's stern behavior. The debate is broadcast on *Nightline,* showing how important televangelists have become in public conversation. Televangelists on a real-world national news program were nothing new: in 1985, a few years after the publication of *God Loves, Man Kills,* Falwell and Rev. Jesse Jackson debated how the United States should respond to apartheid in South Africa on a special segment of *Nightline.* Later, during a public sermon, two police officers remark how Stryker has managed to sway a large crowd of people to his side. This influence is so pervasive that Stryker convinces the crowd to attack Magneto, who ostensibly crashed the public sermon simply to talk, not attacking Stryker or the crowd when he arrives. Public sermons are a staple of televangelism. In

[14] These definitions are taken from multiple sources including Doug Banwart's "Jerry Falwell, the Rise of the Moral Majority, and the 1980 Election", S.D.J. Green's "The Medium and the Message: Televangelism in America", Jeffrey K. Hadden's "The Rise and Fall of American Televangelism", and Steven P. Miller's *The Age of Evangelicalism.*

1976, Falwell embarked on a series of "I Love America" rallies across the nation, where he attacked homosexuality and the proposed Equal Rights Amendment.[15] All good televangelists have to be somewhat telegenic, playing upon the sensitivities of the viewers, seeming warm or cold when needed, as well as somewhat physically attractive in order to be attract viewers in the first place. Stryker succeeds at both. (Gutwirth 126)

An association with politics also links Stryker to televangelists of the time. Attendance at Falwell's "I Love America" rallies included Senators Jesse Helms (NC), Paul Laxalt (NV) and Gordon Humphrey (NH), all conservative Republicans. Falwell mixed politics with religion again, as he supported Republican candidate John N. Dalton in the 1977 Virginia gubernatorial election. This mixture of religion and politics came full force in 1979 with the formation of the Moral Majority. Falwell's Moral Majority was ostensibly a pro-American pro-family values organization that regularly lobbied the government to promote those causes. At its peak, the Moral Majority consisted of over a million members. The Moral Majority later supported President Ronald Reagan during his election campaign and his presidency itself, with a public endorsement and millions of dollars worth of radio ads attacking Jimmy Carter. The Moral Majority regularly supported Reagan's stances on defense spending and foreign policy, parroting them in the pulpit (Williams 138-9, 142). While Falwell overstates the actual influence of the Moral Majority in politics (Reagan preferred to focus on economics over the Moral Majority's campaigns against homosexuals and prayer in schools), the fact that Reagan specifically contacted Falwell before making the Supreme Court nomination of Sandra Day O'Connor

[15] The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was a proposed Constitutional amendment stating that equality under law shall not be denied or abridged on account of a person's sex. During the 1970s and 1980s, interest groups lobbied state governments to pass the amendment, citing discrimination in the workplace and a lack of equal pay as reasons it was needed. Proponents of traditional gender roles such as housewives, pastors, and other conservative special interest groups heavily lobbied against the proposed amendment. Overall, the ERA did not reach the required 2/3 majority to become a Constitutional amendment.

official says enough. Falwell had enough clout and Reagan had a close enough relationship with him that Reagan felt comfortable asking Falwell to refrain from denouncing O'Connor in the pulpit. Though he does not have a set politically based organization like Falwell's Moral Majority, Stryker influenced and courted important politicians in-text (Banwart 151-2). During his sermon at Madison Square Garden, a news reporter states that Stryker has invited multiple prominent politicians: only a few refused. One panel features a senator talking with another politician, implying that the president is attending the event as well. "Does the president have any idea what Stryker's saying?! Does he support it?!" (Claremont 47)

Linking *God Loves, Man Kills* to the televangelist movement of the time also links the graphic novel to the South. A large number of the most popular televangelists of the 1980s came from the South—Jimmy Swaggart (Louisiana), Pat Robertson (Virginia) and Jerry Falwell (Virginia). These televangelists started their missions in the South: in 1960, Robinson established the Christian Broadcasting Network out of Virginia Beach, VA while Swaggart's 1960s radio programs broadcast out of Baton Rouge, LA. Others, though Northern, started their ministry in the South, such as Jim and Tammy Faye Baker, who helped found religious organizations the 700 Club and the PTL Club when they moved to South Carolina. These organizations also heavily targeted Southerners: Falwell's Moral Majority drew most of its constituents from the Sunbelt region. Additionally, some notable televangelists such as Pat Robertson specifically associated with the Southern Baptist Convention. While it never officially associated with some of the televangelists, the Southern Baptist Convention has a long association with the New Christian Right and televangelists as a whole, seemingly just because the two groups are conservative right-wing Christian organizations. A survey by Nancy T. Ammerman further explores this association, showing specific traits that link the two, such as the

Southern Baptist Convention's approval of the Moral Majority, dislike of the Equal Rights Amendment, and general anti-modern attitudes (77-8). In contrast to these men, Stryker is never officially identified as Southern—in fact, his crusade is based out of Connecticut. He has no dialect in his accent and flashbacks never identify where he is from. Considering that Claremont heavily uses dialect while writing accented characters (such as the Irish Banshee and Scottish Moira MacTaggart), if Stryker had an accent, Claremont would have written him with one. It is a point of note that in the film *X2,* actor Brian Cox portrays Stryker with a deliberate Southern accent; Cox himself is Scottish. The Stryker of the films is a military colonel over a televangelist, but still hates and plans to exterminate all mutants: the first human villain of the X-Men film franchise is Southern, drawing upon long-established images of Southerners in the popular discourse as bigoted.

If Stryker is a televangelist, then the mutants of *God Loves, Man Kills* are those Stryker is preaching against: the Sinful Other. Introduced by Michael W. Hughey in the essay "Internal Contradictions of Televangelism," the Sinful Other is a generic term, standing in for whatever feminist, politician, ERA advocate, gay rights advocate, etc. is ruining America and/or Christianity with their actions. In short, they are the people against whom televangelists preach. Considering that typical viewers of these religious programs were over fifty years old, churchgoing, and lived in a rural location, a large number of people in the public consciousness could be deemed a Sinful Other just by default (Hughey 42). As Michael Hughey defines in "Internal Contradictions of Televangelism," the Sinful Other is not a member of the congregation; a deliberate outsider. By their nature of not being in the congregation, they are explicitly different and, due to the focus on conversion in evangelical ministry, they are damned and in need of saving. Alternatively, they are damned by their actions. In the world of *God*

Loves, Man Kills, mutants are an enhanced version of the Sinful Other, a race bringing about the ruin of America and explicitly damned due to their 'otherness.'

One notable fact separates Stryker's Sinful Other from the Sinful Other of modern televangelism: conversion. While the Sinful Other can be redeemed by conversion, all mutants are inherently damned in Stryker's eyes. When it is revealed that Stryker's right hand man is a mutant, he pushes her from the stage without hesitation, killing her in the process. In perhaps the most iconic scene of the graphic novel, Stryker points at the blue-skinned, three-fingered X-Man Nightcrawler and exclaims, "Human? You dare call that…thing human?!" (Claremont 55) Stryker preaches against mutants, describing them as "those…whose existence is an affront to that divinity." He continues to preach about the devil as the revival meeting continues: "We are as God made us! Any deviation from that sacred template—any mutation—comes not from heaven, but from hell!" (Claremont 47) Later, Stryker explicitly links mutants to the devil, quoting scripture about the devil being cast out of heaven at Magneto as the brainwashed Xavier attacks Magneto with a telepathic attack.

The timeliness of the issue is deliberate. In an interview with Claremont, he describes the graphic novel as a "portrait of a specific era," specifically 1982 America. When discussing the genesis of the story, Claremont describes a six-month tour of the United States, travelling to comic conventions. During that time, he watched a lot of Sunday morning religious programming. 1982 was practically the height of American televangelism, as ministers such as Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggart, and Jerry Falwell dominated Sunday morning television. In the same interview, Claremont mused on the cultural mindset of the time:

> There was a considerable difference between the faith and presentation of the faith and what the Bible actually says versus an interpretation that's put on it by certain people: these might be two different things. And that the stridency and the passion and, to a certain extent, the rage that some of these gentlemen of faith felt towards those who were not of their various persuasion… (68-70)

Research on televangelism in the early 1980s backs up Claremont's claim that a) televangelism was everywhere and b) regularly featured televangelists conveniently ignoring certain portions of the Bible. According to the 1984 Annenberg/Gallup report, 13.3 million Americans watched a religious television program every week. The content of these programs mirrored the content of Stryker's sermons in-text. A 1983 survey by Robert Ableman and Kimberly Neuendorf analyzed a random sample of the top twenty-seven televangelism programs for references to popular and topical social, political, and religious topics. These programs had a greater emphasis on sinning than being purged or forgiven of sin. God and Jesus were most often mentioned as the solutions to problems (at 39.8%), though solutions by human means were a close second (25.5%). Interestingly, references to women's rights, homosexuality, minority rights, and ethnic prejudice were rarely referenced on the shows (Ableman 154-7, 164).

As for Claremont's "difference between the faith and presentation of the faith," he is most likely talking about the televangelist response to homosexuality and women's rights. In contrast to Jesus's acceptance of those different from him, as shown by the parable of the Good Samaritan as well as the Samaritan woman at the well, televangelists roundly attacked those they deemed as 'sinful,' bypassing "love thy neighbor" entirely. In 1977 and 1978, Falwell campaigned for state referenda preventing homosexuals from teaching in public schools, as well as campaigning against other gay rights ordinances. Falwell described homosexuals as "…involved in open immorality as they practice perversion…They are not a minority any more than murderers, rapists or other sinners are a 'minority' (Williams 140)." The evangelical

movement that the televangelists drew from was equally anti-homosexual. Anita Bryant, an outspoken Florida Christian and one of the more notorious members of the evangelical movement, led the 1977 "Save Our Children" campaign to repeal a Miami-Dade County ordinance that prohibited discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Bryant used some tricks of the televangelist trade to get her message across, most notably a three-hour comic and variety program titled "The Anita Bryant Spectacular," which aired in 1980.[16]

Claremont's beliefs about homosexuality at the time are unknown; however, one can infer his approval or tolerance of the homosexual lifestyle. Unsurprisingly, Claremont could not make characters in a high-selling comic book gay: the first mainstream Marvel superhero came out in March 1992, in the weaker selling series *Alpha Flight.* In a few issues of *New Mutants,* a Claremont-penned series, the mutant metaphor tends more towards sexuality than race, as a bullied teenage mutant commits suicide at the thought of his mutant identity being exposed. The close female friendship of Storm and Yukio, a non-mutant supporting character, occasionally blurred the lines of friendship and lesbianism. Most notably, the very femme Storm took on a more butch appearance meeting Yukio, trading her long hair and her flowing cape for a Mohawk and a leather vest. In *Uncanny X-Men Annual* #11, each of the characters is tempted by visions of their heart's desire: Storm's is reuniting with Yukio. "I never knew truly how to laugh before I met Yukio. In many ways, I have never been as happy since." (7:42) As detailed in a later chapter, Claremont portrayed supervillains Mystique and Destiny with a closeness that he eventually revealed as homosexuality.

[16] To be frank, I managed to find absolutely no information on "The Anita Bryant Spectacular." The **exceedingly** skin-friendly blog *Boomer Beefcake and Bonding* described the special as a "hate-fest" but makes no mention of the actual content.

In his fight against the Equal Rights Amendment, Falwell claimed that "feminists, unisexualists, secular humanists and others" were trying to force the amendment on the American people in a "satanic attempt to destroy the biblical concept of the Christian home." (Williams 139) A survey of Southern Baptist clergy and lay ministers revealed that over half of those surveyed agreed with the New Christian Right's agenda, specifically opposing passage of the ERA (Ammerman 77). Though Claremont's personal beliefs on the ERA are unknown, it seems understandable that a feminist-leaning author would take offense at the preachers' words. Claremont's website puts particular emphasis on the author's role in creating strong female characters, emphasizing his "progressive treatment of women." In comparison to the 1960s, where female X-Men were known for their beauty and often trained their powers in a domestic situation, Claremont introduced women of sheer power and complexity as well as reworked existing female characters to new complexities. The most notable example, Jean Gray, went from the token girl on the team who worked as a model and practiced her powers by telekinetically threading a needle to a powerful planet-destroying force, who was tempted by and eventually rejected the sheer danger and potential of her superpowers at the cost of her own life.

Of course, the metaphor of Stryker as a 1980s televangelist and the X-Men as the Sinful Other is not perfect. Feminists, homosexuals, and abortion advocates do not have metal claws or the ability to shoot lasers from their eyes. As such, there is arguably a nugget of truth and justifiable worry in Stryker's preaching against mutants as they are dangerous, and have proven themselves to be time and time again. The X-Men regularly fight mutant antagonists such as the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants and the Hellfire Club, both of whom seek to rule the world in various forms. Also, William Stryker is a supervillain. While critics argue *God Loves, Man Kills* endures due to its timeless and adult message, the fact cannot be ignored that Stryker's

main plan to kill all mutants is exceedingly supervillain-like. When 1980s televangelists fell, they fell in a less drastic manner, usually by prostitute scandals or tax fraud. None attempted murder, which is what gets Stryker arrested as he attempts to shoot Kitty Pryde on live television. The televangelists of real life are certainly morally gray but the media rarely portrays them as downright evil. The torture of Charles Xavier, murder of his infant son and wife, and attempted murder of Kitty Pryde puts Stryker beyond the pale in comparison to other televangelists.

Mutants as Civil Rights Leaders

While *God Loves, Man Kills* parallels mutants with a nebulous 'other', Marvel creative forces and Marvel fans actively parallel mutants with specific minority groups. For this chapter, I will focus on the parallel with African Americans. Partly due to the continued ambiguity of the Mutant Metaphor, the release date of the first *X-Men* issues (1963), and the growing awareness of the Civil Rights Movement as an important chapter of American history, comic book actors, producers, and writers have made parallels between the characters of Professor X and Magneto and the real world figures of Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Despite the fact that Professor X and Magneto both fight for the promotion of mutant rights and the acceptance of mutants in the public sphere, their methods are radically different. Professor X tends towards more pacifistic methods, working with humanity or working within the system in order to change things, while Magneto seeks to overthrow humanity or, at the least, establish a mutant-only national state.

Here I have to admit to a little caveat: Malcolm X is not Southern. His work with the Nation of Islam rarely impacted the South, instead combatting and fighting against racism from a

Northern plain. Due to advocating against the Civil Rights Movement and his separatist rhetoric, Malcolm X was often (and still is often) compared against Martin Luther King in the white press and in popular criticism, which painted Malcolm X as radical and dangerous, especially compared to the relatively 'safe' King. It is this Malcolm X/Martin Luther King dichotomy detailed in popular culture that I will mostly focus on, rather than a detailed case study comparing their works to those of to Magneto/Professor X. As one half of the civil rights dichotomy is Southern and actively campaigned for African Americans in the South, the Malcolm X/Martin Luther King dichotomy is 'Southern' enough in my eyes to warrant inclusion.

In an article for the *LA Times, X-Men: First Class* (2011) actor Michael Fassbender, who portrayed Magneto in the film, discusses the Magneto/Malcolm X comparison: "These two brilliant minds coming together and their views aren't that different on some key things…But the split is what makes them even more interesting and tragic." An article for the website *Geek and Sundry* compares the two, claiming that both Magneto and Malcolm X are misunderstood 'villains,' fighters for change who were willing to fight instead of debate.[17] In one of the final scenes of the film *X-Men* (2000)*,* Ian McKellan as Magneto paraphrases a famous Malcolm X quote: "We want freedom by any means necessary. We want justice by any means necessary. We want equality by any means necessary." (Malcolm X) Magneto's version: "The war is still coming, Charles. And I intend to fight it, by any means necessary." The comparison is so well ingrained in comics fandom and popular theory that reviewers almost have to bring it up when talking about the Mutant Metaphor, even if they are not talking about Professor X or Magneto.[18]

[17] Interestingly, the comments section for this article, as of February 14, 2016, contains only two comments: an all-caps comment calling "Brother Malcolm X" an "inspiration to the oppressed masses of people all over the globe" and another comment refuting the comparison by directly comparing Magneto to Hitler.

[18] Fandom roughly equates to a loosely organized group of people who all consume the same form of media. To be part of the *Star Trek* fandom, for example, one simply must like *Star Trek*.

A NPR article about race in comics mentions the comparison in the third paragraph, internet reviewer Lindsay Ellis mentions the comparison in a video critique examining an unrelated X-Man, Joseph J. Darowski talks about the comparison in the first chapter of his book *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor.* In the eyes of comics fandom, the mutant metaphor/Civil Rights Movement comparison is here to stay.

Official word on the comparison is muddled at best: Marvel has never officially gone on the record as saying that the mutant/Civil Rights Movement comparison is deliberate. In a 2000 interview, Stan Lee hints that the comparison might have been subconscious: "[Professor Xavier and Magneto] were meant to emphasize the conflict between people who felt that we've got to all work together and find a way to get along, and people who feel, 'We're not treated well, therefore we're going to strike back with force!'" (Hoevel) A different interview with Lee reveals that he never considered Magneto to be a villain in the first place: "I did not think of Magneto as a bad guy. He was just trying to strike back at the people who were so bigoted and racist…He was a danger of course, but I never thought of him as a villain." (Lucas) I could not find any interviews where Jack Kirby offered his opinion on the idea of mutants paralleling the Civil Rights Movement—though considering that Kirby died in 1994, and Lee gave most of these early interviews in the early 2000s, that is not surprising. In a 2011 interview, Claremont emphasizes the real-world circumstances with regards to the mutant/Civil Rights comparison. On his early 1970s issues, "It was too close. It had only been a few years since the assassinations [of King and Malcolm X]. In a way, it seemed like that would be too raw… As we got distance from the '60s, the Malcolm X-Martin Luther King-Mandela resonance came into things. It just fit." (Hanks) As the 1970s and 1980s progressed, Claremont introduced some more explicit race-based metaphors, most notably the South Africa analogue Genosha. Public opinions on the

mutant/CRM comparison by other, lesser-known comic book writers are shaky at best, non-existent at worst. Because of their iconic statuses in creating and reworking the X-Men, Lee and Claremont are the go-to interviewees for major news sites.[19]

Thankfully, most bloggers, comic book writers, et. al., have come to the right conclusion that the comparison is reductive at best, complete nonsense at worst. More so than the mutant metaphor with regards to Stryker, the mutant metaphor with regards to Professor X and Magneto is simply rocky. In making these comparisons, most actors/writers/critics turn to the Professor X and Magneto of the 1960s, written by Lee and drawn by Kirby. The Magneto of the 1960s, written at the same time as the Civil Rights Movement was happening, was a dyed in the wool supervillain. In his first appearance, Magneto takes over a military base and fires missiles at the five X-Men. In a later issue of *X-Men,* he remarks to fellow Brotherhood member Scarlet Witch: "Humans are like sheep! They respond to certain stimuli—and *fear* is one of the most potent!" (*UXM* 4:11) Later in the issue, he **does** admit that they are fighting against the humans in self-defense, as Magneto believes that the humans would kill them if they could. Unfortunately, he says this as he wires a nuclear bomb to blow up an entire island nation, X-Men included. Lee and Kirby did not portray the character with any sort of nuance or complexity. Due to the popularity of the film *X-Men: First Class,* which is set in the 1960s, I believe that people accidentally associate the more progressive nature of Magneto in the film with the Magneto of the 1960s comics, ignoring the fact that *X-Men: First Class* is not a straight adaptation and instead draws from multiple sources from the 1960s to the present. The Magneto of *X-Men: First Class* is more morally gray, working closely with Xavier for the first two-thirds of the film, only breaking apart from his friend near the climax. Of course, the question becomes how much

[19] In the same interview, Claremont emphasizes how he wrote Professor X and Magneto came out of his response to the Holocaust and how each man came face to face with evil and reacted against it.

of Lee's beliefs impacted his 1960s writing and how much is Lee ascribing present motives to his past work. As the current face of Marvel comics, it only makes sense for Lee to portray his work in a positive light, even if that means retroactively adding meaning. Personally, I find is hard to believe that a man who leads an organization titled the Brotherhood of **Evil** Mutants and is willing to blow up an entire island full of innocent people was originally conceived as a figure who was not villainous.[20]

The more sympathetic Magneto who occasionally worked with the X-Men and was portrayed as an anti-hero over a downright supervillain only appeared when Chris Claremont took over writing duties in the 1970s and 1980s. For a brief period of time, Magneto worked with the X-Men, taking charge of the teenage team the New Mutants, while Professor Xavier traveled in space with his bird-alien girlfriend Liliandra. He served as the teacher figure for the New Mutants, trying desperately (and often failing) to keep the teenagers out of trouble. Magneto's villainous tendencies continued, as he sought an alliance with the outright villainous Hellfire Club, the organization that helped hasten Jean Gray's transformation into the evil Dark Phoenix. By the start of the 1990s, however, Magneto had retreated into full-blown supervillainy, though supervillainy portrayed with more nuance and complexity than his 1960s days.

Magneto aside, working peacefully to achieve minority coexistence does not Martin Luther King Jr. make. Professor X's manner of dealing with mutant prejudice is to segregate the mutant characters to a school by themselves, teaching them to simply rise above the prejudice thrown at them and to act more along the lines of a 'credit to their race:' a philosophy more Booker T. Washington than Martin Luther King. Humans will always fear them, ergo the X-Men

[20] The team finally dropped the 'Evil' from their name in the 1990s. By this time, Magneto was associating with another mutant group, the Acolytes.

must show how unthreatening and helpful mutants can be. The analogy requires a fairly static and simple view of Martin Luther King: for instance, there is no X-Men analogue to King's social work. The King of the X-Men analogy is reduced to a dreamer, someone who idealistically strives for race reconciliation. Claremont's introduction to a 2003 reprint of *God Loves, Man Kills* mentions King twice. In the first, Claremont describes the absolute trust evangelical congregations must place in their pastor, comparing this level of trust to trust placed in King and Mahatma Gandhi by their followers. The second mention is more telling:

> Why was this story written? What makes it special? Ultimately, I think, it grew out of two quotes that pretty much defined my own adolescence. One was from Martin Luther King…which I've used myself in describing my approach to the X-Men: 'I dream of a world where my children and their grandchildren will be judged, not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.' (Claremont v)

This relatively simple view of King-as-dreamer was propagated by the mass media all throughout the 1970s and 1980s, coincidentally when the most iconic X-Men stories were set. Only during the late 1980s and early 1990s did a more nuanced view of King and Malcolm X appear in pop culture, such as the 1992 Spike Lee biopic *Malcolm X.* And, at the risk of pointing out the obvious, Professor X is an upper class white man in a wheelchair who, if he so wanted, could pass as human. Magneto is a Holocaust survivor with an occasional stint of supervillainy who likewise has the same passing privilege. Their passing status affords them a privilege that Martin Luther King and Malcolm X could not have—indeed, when Professor X is attacked by an anti-mutant mob in *Uncanny X-Men* #192 (published in 1985), they attack him for being a mutant *sympathizer* instead of an actual mutant. Passing privilege is something held by the majority of the X-Men: for the longest time, Nightcrawler was the only mutant who looked radically inhuman. But perhaps the most important fact is that both Xavier and Magneto are fictional characters, written by multiple writers, so their ideologies can change from decade to

decade, and occasionally issue to issue. While one can assign specific consistent character traits to a character in their multiple years of existing, it is harder to apply a consistent philosophy.

The Mutant Metaphor As It Stands Today

As stated before, Chris Claremont intended for *God Loves, Man Kills* to be the portrait of a specific time in American history: the early 1980s. Perhaps more than anything, the use of a televangelist as a credible threat dates the book. A series of scandals rocked the televangelism world in the 1980s, dethroning many prominent televangelists in the eyes of the public. In 1989, Jim Bakker was sentenced to forty-five years in prison for accounting fraud after he swindled $158 million from his parish. Jimmy Swaggart was caught with a prostitute in a New Orleans hotel in 1988 and, despite a heartfelt televised confession, was linked to another prostitute less than five years later. In 1987, Oral Roberts threatened that God would "call him home" unless he received enough funding to build the City of Faith Medical and Research Center, which ended up closing two years later.

Where televangelists have fallen from public eye, the pastors of megachurches have taken their place. A megachurch is a church that averages over 2,000 people in weekend attendance. Most megachurches have a conservative theology, identify as nondenominational and, like televangelists, operate under a single pastor. Despite ostensibly attempting to spread Jesus's teachings, megachurch pastors are often in the news for sexist, racist, or homophobic acts. With regards to a disagreement between a member of Pastor Mark Driscoll's congregation and his wife, Driscoll responded, "You better shut your wife up or I'll shut her up for you." (Zadrozny) While the televangelists might be fading from popularity, their hypocrisy and us vs. them rhetoric is still around, simply in a new form.

The mutant metaphor is still used today. In 2013, minor controversy ensued when straight white male able-bodied writer Rick Remender wrote straight white male able-bodied X-Man Havok giving a speech where he decries the term "mutant" during a press conference, effectively speaking on behalf of mutant-kind. In *Uncanny Avengers #5,* Havok states that "mutant" is a divisive term, as he disavows his identity and essentially attacks the concept of minority identification politics. Most pointedly, Havok states, "We're all people" and describes the term 'mutant' as the "m-word". This made a lot of people rightfully angry. Andrew Wheeler of *Comics Alliance* claims that Havok's speech shreds the central thesis of minority identity politics, presenting no alternative and implying homogenization as the preferred solution. Brett White, editor of *Comic Book Resources,* related the mutant metaphor with coming to terms with his own sexual identity, detailing his own past as he explained why Havok's rejection of his identity angered him as much as it did. What's really interesting is the sheer breadth of people who viewed themselves and their representation in the concept of the mutant metaphor. Remender was heavily criticized on Twitter and in comics blogs by readers and reviewers of all walks of life: female, queer, African American, even straight white male. That so many different people felt so strongly about the idea of mutants as a minority speaks to the staying power of the mutant metaphor, as well as its flexibility. The most important thing about the mutant metaphor is that it is generic enough for anyone to latch onto. What is important about the X-Men is that through a natural process, they are different. Anyone who has ever felt different in some regard, whether the difference that comes to all teenagers in puberty or the difference of being an African American in white society, can identify with that. Writer Scott Lobdell describes this process as he talked about the X-Men with his eighteen-year-old handler at a Florida convention:

> …she was saying how much her brother and his friends love the X-Men and how my writing spoke to them as outsiders who stuck together because of their outsider status. As [the writer] who outed Northstar [the first gay superhero in mainstream comics] years before, I assumed her brother and his friends were gay. I was surprised when she explained no, they were skinheads—specifically white supremacists. … I couldn't say that the X-Men is about finding strength in being the other and then get upset because the other didn't fit my definition of what I felt was acceptable otherness (Darowski 9).

For what it's worth, Remender's idea of 'mutant' as the m-word did not stay for long. Around four months later, in *All New X-Men* #13, Jewish character Kitty Pryde gave a rebuttal to Havok's speech, written by Jewish writer Brian Michael Bendis. After telling a story of when she first encountered anti-Semitism, Kitty finishes with the following: "I **am** Jewish. I **am** a mutant. And I want people to know who and what I am. I tell people because hey, if we're going to have a problem with it…I'd like to know."

IV. THE CHANGING ROLE OF ROGUE IN THE 1990s & 2000s

Since the 1980s, the Mississippi mutant Rogue has appeared consistently in Marvel comics, most notably the X-Men series as well as the superhero team the Avengers. Films and animated television shows such as *X-Men, X-Men: Evolution, Wolverine and the X-Men,* and the 2000s X-Men movie trilogy regularly feature Rogue as a main character. She has appeared in multiple video games (*Marvel vs. Capcom, X-Men Legends,* and *Marvel Avengers Alliance* among others) and is regularly portrayed by an actress at Universal Studios theme park in daily meet and greet sessions, where park attendees can talk with her or have their picture taken with her. In all of these appearances, she is consistently identified as Southern, usually via accent. Arguably, this makes her Marvel's most popular distinctly Southern superhero. And despite some portrayals coming off as cheesy, one-note or over the top, Rogue is also perhaps Marvel's most nuanced Southern character. Due to the nature of continuity, Rogue's personality undergoes distinct shifts from writer to writer, but her Southernness remains. Her complex portrayal in limited series of the 1990s and 2000s respond to vastly different characterizations of the heroine at the time and provide a different idea of what counts as 'Southern'.[21]

Rogue 101

Almost every adaptation, from cartoon to live-action film, gives Rogue a pronounced Southern accent, even if the actress is neither Southern herself nor knows how to do a convincing

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[21] 'Distinctly Southern' is, as everything, a point of contention. For the purpose of this paper, 'distinctly Southern' means that the character has an expressed regional identity that repeatedly comes up in-text. For instance, Spider-Man often mentions that he lives in Queens. Ergo, I consider Spider-Man to be distinctly New York.

accent. In the X-Men film franchise, Daniel Cudmore portrays Russian Colossus with an American accent, while Anna Paquin tries her hardest to give Rogue a believable Southern accent. The 1990s cartoon eschews Storm's African accent, but gives Rogue a Southern accent borderline cliché. None of these adaptations give Canadian Wolverine a Canadian accent.[22]

Rogue's accent serves as a short hand to her regional identity. In the pages of *Uncanny X-Men*, Claremont, as well as later creators, consistently write the Southern mutants with a strong dialect as well as typically Southern colloquialisms and syntax. Writers write Rogue as dropping her g's at the end of words, usually rendering the word "I" in text as "ah." "Remy, ah've been meanin' to tell you 'bout this here trip ah'm plannin' on takin'." (*Rogue* v.1 1:9) The application of her dialect is rocky at best: one of Rogue's first lines in her 1990s solo series featured "I" rendered as "I" and "ah" in the same sentence: "I'd love to stay and chat some more, but ah've got things to do and people to see!" (*Rogue* v.1 1:1-2) Modern writers tend to eschew the dialect all together. Aside from the dialect, she regularly uses Southern colloquialisms, occasionally borderline cliché, such as responding to a teammate's offer of help with "well butter my butt and call me a biscuit." (*Rogue* v.3 8:23) The use of dialect in Rogue's accent essentially sets her apart from the rest of the X-Men, who are written without speech modifiers and show their foreign nature through foreign words or exclamations, such as Colossus's "tovarish," Storm's "bright lady," and Nightcrawler's occasional exclamation of "vas?"

Authors see relatively no need to write good dialect; proper English is written as proper English. As such, the use of written dialect signifies a character as the other. Characters who speak in dialect tend to be cut off socially or geographically from other characters that speak the same language—in Rogue's case, she is physically cut off as well. If Rogue makes skin-to-skin

[22] Bizarrely, the only non-American accent Wolverine gets is an Australian one, in the failed animated pilot "Pryde of the X-Men."

contact with someone, she absorbs their memories and, in the case of superheroes, their powers. In "A Theory of Literary Dialect," linguist Sumner Ives argues that the use of a dialect automatically implies difference. Ives analyzes Joel Chandler Harris's Uncle Remus stories, examining Harris's use of dialect, most notably his lack of phrasing the word "I" as "ah." Ives argues that for Harris, "ah" was regularly used in his Southern upbringing. There was no need to use "ah" because the Southern Harris spoke and encountered it on a daily basis, ergo he did not see the phrasing as different. For British-born Claremont, who had lived most of his life in Long Island, New York, the phrasing of "ah" implicitly carries an air of difference. This focus on Claremont is because Claremont wrote Rogue's first appearance, as well as the bulk of the stories that modern audiences would find most familiar and for whom later writers would draw inspiration.

Besides being Southern, Rogue is an atoner. Rogue used to be a member of the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants and fought the X-Men and the Avengers on numerous occasions. The X-Men never hesitate to bring this up during her first few months as a team member and even after she becomes an established member of the X-Men, her prior history continues to drive conflict between Rogue and Carol Danvers or Rogue and Dazzler, both of whom Rogue fought. In her early appearances, Rogue revels in her role as a supervillain, often forcibly kissing people in order to steal their powers. Forcibly kissing Captain America, Rogue muses, "any flesh-to-flesh contact no matter how slight--will suffice for the transfer…but ah think this way is so much more—fun." (*Avengers Annual* 10:8) Aside from her ability to replicate people's powers and absorb their memory via skin-to-skin contact, during the 1980s and 1990s she possessed super-strength and flight, absorbed from the superhero Carol Danvers, known at the time as Ms. Marvel. During a struggle with Danvers, Rogue held contact for too long a time, permanently

depowering Danvers in the process. This transfer of powers also contained Danvers's mental psyche, with Carol Danvers serving as a distinct personality in Rogue's head. Danvers's powers and psyche grew out of control, leaving Rogue in a mentally fractured state. Rogue eventually sought out the help of Professor Xavier to learn how to control her powers and later joined the X-Men as a permanent member.

The overpowering focus of guilt and isolation can be seen as something specific to the white American South. According to historian C. Vann Woodward, the South has a preoccupation with guilt. The Southern identity provides a startling contrast to the American legends of abundance, success, and purity: it's a historically impoverished region with a long history of failure and defeat, the last stand for one of the most barbaric acts in human history. Woodward emphasizes this isolation, both self-imposed and imposed by others, as the South withdrew from the world community in the pre-Civil War area, insecure at the idea that it would have to give up slavery (190).[23] The South would later become isolated in the Civil Rights era, as the world looked upon it with suspicion and shame due to it's actions against integration. While Woodward's ideas about the preoccupation of the South are dated, the idea of the South as a place of guilt, ruin, and isolation has become a standard of popular culture. A large number of classic films set in the South occur in isolated areas, whether the backwoods of Georgia (*Deliverance*) or numerous small towns (*O Brother, Where Art Thou?*). Landmark films such as *Gone with the Wind* portray the South as a place of physical ruin, as Atlanta burns during the Civil War, while famous texts by authors such as Faulkner and Welty grapple with the metaphorical ruin, guilt left behind from the Civil War.

[23] Woodward published these essays, "The Search for Southern Identity" and "The Irony of Southern History" in the mid to late 1950s, before the Vietnam War, which can arguably be seen as a loss of America's success and purity.

This history of failure and defeat can also be interpreted as a history of disaster. No one would argue the fact that the Civil War was disastrous to the Southern economy. On a more literal level, the modern South is often defined by physical disasters, a la Hurricane Katrina. As such, other scholars argue that disaster and the reaction to disaster is crucial to Southern identity. In his essay of the same name, Robert Jackson coins the term "Southern disaster complex" to describe the long Southern discourse related to disasters from the Civil War to Hurricane Katrina. The disaster complex focuses on disaster as unavoidable, yet treats it with a sense of resignation. Jackson argues that works by William Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor present disaster as something unavoidable, yet purifying at the same time.

This preoccupation with guilt, isolation, and disaster is central to Rogue's character for most of her time as an X-Man. At the most basic level, her character design shows this isolation, as Rogue must physically cut herself off from the rest of the world. Her varying costumes over the years include gloves and cover her skin entirely, her face being the only bare skin exposed. Later costumes have taken the theme a step further, adding a hood to Rogue's costume. Color-wise, Rogue eschews the bright red, blue and yellow palette that most early Marvel superheroes have, a relic from a time of four-color printing (examples include: Spider-Man, Captain America, Wolverine, Spider-Woman, and almost all of Hank Pym's myriad costumes). Instead, Rogue's thematic color is green, a color that shows up in most of her superhero outfits but is also tied to supervillains (Green Goblin, Enchantress, Electro, the entire Skrull race) or characters that are more morally ambiguous (Hulk, Namor). The depowering of Carol Danvers is certainly treated by Rogue and the other characters as a disaster, disrupting Danvers's personal life as well as her status with the Avengers. She also constantly has the potential for disaster: more than one issue

has Rogue absorbing someone's psyche, temporarily switching sides or otherwise incapacitated by their alien nature.

Rogue's character interactions blatantly show guilt. When Rogue first joins the X-Men, she is so traumatized by what she has done to Danvers that she trembles, crying and rocking in a fetal position (*UXM* 171:11). As she becomes a trusted member of the team, Rogue still physically separates herself from the rest of the group, due to her guilt over Carol Danvers as well as the fear that an event such as that would happen again. As the team embraces after rescuing fellow X-Man Dazzler from being buried alive, Rogue stands away from the team, reminding the rest of the X-Men about her powers: "Ah'm always with you, sugar. In spirit…if not in flesh." (*UXM* 218:8)

Despite arguably belonging to the Southern atonement complex, Rogue's backstory contains some decidedly un-Southern elements. For most of her history, Rogue's birth parents were nowhere to be seen. Instead, this parental relationship was between Rogue and the supervillains Mystique and Destiny. Rogue tells the other X-Men that "[Mystique] and her partner Destiny, they pretty much raised me, they're more my folks than my natural parents." (*UXM* 224:7, 13) The two are partners in a superhero team as well as a lesbian couple. Their relationship was never explicitly stated until the 1990s, but eagle-eyed readers can spot hints of their relationship dating back to the 1980s: Mystique and Destiny regularly treat each other with affection, often worrying about the other before worrying about the team as a whole. One character refers to Destiny as Mystique's "leman," an archaic term meaning 'lover.' Though never officially stated as such due to comic regulations, it is entirely possible to accept the fact that Rogue was always written as the adopted child of a lesbian relationship, as Claremont served as the regular writer for Rogue, Destiny and Mystique on *Uncanny X-Men* as well as other titles

in which they appeared, such as *Ms. Marvel* and *The Avengers.* The fact that this is a **Southern** character raised under a loving, same-sex couple cannot be emphasized enough. There is still a long-standing tradition of homophobia in the South, so an accepting superhero raised under two moms provides a welcome breath of fresh air.

Some may claim Rogue's acceptance of her two parents as a sign that the X-Men would not have a homophobic character in the first place. In that case I point to the example of Omerta, a member of a supplementary team of X-Men and outspokenly homophobic to publicly gay teammate Northstar. Interestingly enough, Omerta, possibly the first homophobic X-Man, was from an Italian family in Brooklyn, serving more as a Mafia stereotype than anything else, with dialect such as "youse guys."

Rogue's origin contains a definite sense of place: she is from the fictional Caldecott County, Mississippi. Despite the fact that she ran away from Mississippi as a teenager, Caldecott County and Rogue's Southern origins have a profound impact on the character. Caldecott County is used as a grounding post, a physical location tied to Rogue in comparison to other X-Men with vague origins such as 'Kenya' or 'a collective farm in Russia.' Multiple adaptations cement Rogue's status as a Mississippian.[24] For the original five X-Men, all white Americans, their specific regional background was unimportant and rarely mentioned when their backstory was detailed in subsequent issues. More so than other superheroes, Rogue keeps coming back to Caldecott County and to her past, as shown by her two solo series, both of which feature Rogue returning to the South.

Rogue in the 1990s.

[24] In the 2000s X-Men film franchise, she is identified as being from Meridian, Mississippi.

Howard Mackie wrote Rogue's first solo series, titled *Rogue,* with art by Mike Wieringo and Terry Austin. Mackie is best known for 1990s series such as *Ghost Rider* and various Spider-Man books, Wieringo for co-creating the DC character Impulse, and Austin for inking several classic issues of *Uncanny X-Men* in the 1970s. *Rogue* debuted in 1995. In the series, Rogue returns home to visit Cody Jackson, a boy from her past. When her powers first manifested, she kissed Cody, accidentally putting him in a coma. As she returns home, she discovers that the Assassins Guild, a New Orleans based group, has kidnapped Cody in an attempt to draw Rogue out. The leader of the Assassins Guild, Bella Donna Boudreaux, wants revenge on Rogue for a previous confrontation, where Rogue absorbed her power and her memories. With the help of Gambit and Tante Mattie, a woman from Rogue's past, Rogue manages to subdue Bella Donna and rescue Cody. Tante Mattie manages to link Cody and Rogue's minds, letting them 'speak' for one last time. Cody forgives Rogue for her actions as he dies in her arms.[25]

An important aspect to note is that *Rogue* v.1 was released while *X-Men* the animated series was on air. The cartoon *X-Men* debuted in 1992 and ran until 1997. The series lifted some plotlines straight from the comics, such as the 'Dark Phoenix Saga' and 'Days of Future Past,' two iconic stories that have also been adapted into feature length films. The cartoon was highly watched and highly praised, launching other Marvel cartoons as well as a video games and a comic book series based off the cartoon (making it a comic book based off a cartoon based off a comic book). The Rogue of the cartoon was aggressively flirtatious, often engaging in flirty banter with her teammates and opponents. She had a dubiously Southern accent and said at least one 'Southern' colloquialism an episode, the actual Southernness of which is massively

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[25] All of Rogue's miniseries were titled *Rogue.* As such, I will differentiate the two series I analyze in this thesis with *Rogue* v.1 (volume 1) and *Rogue v.3* (volume 3).

debatable. Compare “You look nervous as a long tailed-cat in a room full of rocking chairs” with “You’re as fast as a swamp bug on a hot skillet.” She had an on-again, off-again relationship with Gambit (Remy Lebeau), a Cajun mutant, who continued to flirt with Rogue, much to the latter’s dismay. A reoccurring back and forth with the two involved Gambit asking Rogue for a kiss, only for her to angrily retort that her powers had a chance of killing him. She was also aggressively *aggressive.* Due to powers absorbed from Carol Danvers, Rogue was usually the heavy hitter of the team. Her battle strategy often involved punching through walls, picking up villains and dropping them to the ground from the air, punching through robots, and other feats of super-strength beyond her original power of absorbing other people’s powers.

In some aspects, *Rogue* v.1 is unfortunately cliché. Every Southern character speaks with some form of dialect, whether they are generically Southern or specifically Creole, a phonetically written accent or a Southern speech pattern. Both Southern characters and Creole characters drop the ‘g’ at the end of words (thinkin’, goin’, stealin’, etc.). The generic Southern accent focuses more on dialect than syntax. Rogue and Cody speak in an unbroken sentence structure, but regularly use “ah”, while the word is rendered “I” for Gambit and Bella Donna: “Ah’m real tired of fightin’ on everybody else’s terms” or “You know ah’ll always be with you.” (*Rogue* v.1 4:6, 21) While Rogue’s dialect tends towards the phonetic Southern accent, Gambit and the Assassins Guild speak with a typical French Creole accent, represented by syntax over phonetic representation. Gambit, Bella Donna, and the other New Orleanian characters speak by dropping articles or auxiliary verbs: “I’ll not be doin’ your biddin’, Belle” or “Someday I be going back dere with my lady.” (*Rogue* v.1 2:2, 9) The New Orleans characters are more likely to drop in French idioms as well. Popular culture has often exaggerated the perception that New Orleanians speak fluent French, with New Orleans characters often speaking in French idioms or

some characters speaking fluent French. Writers like George Washington Cable and Kate Chopin, as well as Hollywood films such as *Angel Heart* (1987) and *The Skeleton Key* (2005) heavily feature characters from New Orleans that speak partial or fluent French. In *Rogue* v.1, this is represented through terms of endearment such as "chere" and "petite," mostly used by Gambit to Rogue or other female characters. The use of these terms borders on overuse: in *Rogue #2,* Gambit uses "petite" six times and "chere" eight times. In contrast, Rogue uses her term of endearment, "sugah," only twice.

One of the less developed supporting characters is Tante Mattie who strays dangerously close to being a mammy stereotype. The mammy is an overweight, older, African-American woman, portrayed as a loyal caregiver, non-threatening and non-sexual, occasionally sassy to her employer, but always deferent to white authority. Often referred to solely as Tante, she knew both Rogue and Bella Donna as children and has no shame in rebuking them as such. To Bella Donna, she remarks, "I don't care that you're the big assassin leader now. I know you since you were a little girl." (*Rogue* v. 1 2:2) Tante is described as a "witch woman" and has ill-defined spiritual powers: in the story, she is able to link Cody and Rogue's minds, as well as magically appear to Rogue via water. None of these powers are able to help Tante, as once Bella Donna finds out that Tante contacted Rogue, she is easily captured and incapacitated. Her role in the story is simply to service the white characters. The reader first meets Tante as she tends the kidnapped and still comatose Cody. She is confident enough in her belief in what is right that she criticizes Bella Donna for not taking Cody to a hospital. Her meeting with Rogue is perhaps the most clichéd as, in true mammy fashion, she imparts wisdom to Rogue that Rogue didn't even know she needed, helping her come to terms with her relationship with Gambit. After briefly reassuring Rogue that Cody is safe, Tante chides her about Gambit: "But you gotta be lookin'

after your man." Her words of advice are practical (Bella Donna is sending men to attack Gambit) but phrased in a way that implies the practicality is based solely on the relationship between Rogue and Gambit: "Remy's in danger. You can't be lettin' him go." (*Rogue* v.1 2:5-6)

The Rogue of the 1990s is aggressive, pushing back against traditional white Southern woman stereotypes with her fists. While prior issues and previous writers had characterized Rogue as someone who walks the line between Southern belle and Southern brawler, this Rogue is easily a Southern brawler. Her main action in issue three is to fight off a large squad of assassins from the Assassins Guild; the climax of the series occurs as Rogue faces off against Bella Donna in hand to hand combat, both of their powers nullified by the mutant Candra. Part of Rogue's aggressiveness draws from practical reasons: she is one of the few characters who could use her superpowers (strength and flight) to incapacitate others in a non-lethal manner. The *X-Men* cartoon had infamously tough broadcast standards and practices guidelines that hampered some of the X-Men's more creative superpowers due to its harsh requirements against violence. Wolverine could not stab anybody with his claws and Storm could not fry anybody with lightning, but it was perfectly acceptable for Rogue to pick up and drop supervillains, as long as the camera showed them getting up again later.

Broadcast standards and practices aside, Rogue's violence serves as a subversion of the ideal white Southern woman. Rogue's use of strength and violence in this series acts upon the idea of the Southern grotesque as well as the concept of the giant woman, outlined in Patricia Yaeger's *Dirt and Desire.* Yaeger describes characters that challenge Southern femininity through their physicality, subverting the idea of the Southern woman as always in need of protection. These women are strong, powerful, and noticed through their power. Women with bodies who are large or powerful disrupt Southern norms, shattering Southern complacency,

challenging traditional femininity in the process (123-6, 139). Rogue going out and physically fighting her own battles subverts the narrative of wounded white woman, the Southern woman as a paragon of honor and as something to be protected whether against crusading Northerners or the threat of African American rape.

During her fight scene with the Assassins Guild where she fights at least ten assassins, Rogue's body is broken up into pieces via the panel structure: her lower half kicking an assassin, her hand repeatedly punching the assassins, her face in a tight smile. As such, the reader is invited *not* to ogle Rogue. Very rarely do we see the full body on display, and when we do, Rogue is usually fighting or about to fight someone, instead of the cheesecake swimsuit model poses that some comic book artists seem to believe women naturally make. Cheesecake poses show off a female character's breast or butt in prominent fashions despite the fact that there is no narrative convention for that sort of pose. *Rogue* averts such poses. The fight between Rogue and Bella Donna is also a fight of power. The clichés of a 'girl fight' cannot be found here: no hair-pulling, no nails scratching, no catty dialogue, Bella Donna fighting to kill and Rogue fighting to survive. The creative team continues to break Bella Donna and Rogue down into their body parts, mostly hands, which show their action and their choices (stabbing, punching, grabbing) over anything else. The series ends with Rogue saving Cody, Gambit and Tante from Bella Donna's clutches, having proven her power, her determination, and her love of Gambit and Cody with sheer violence. [image on next page]

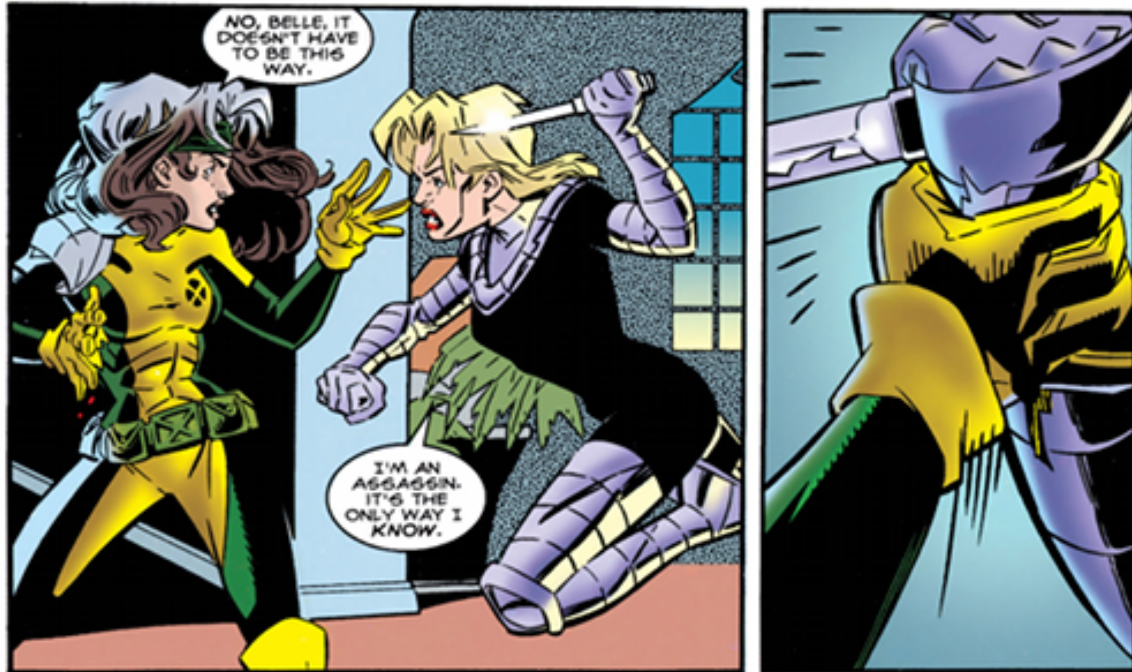

Image 3: *Rogue* vol. 1 #4

A few aspects of Rogue's body succumb to stereotypical sexist renditions of female superheroes. Her femininity is always on display, through her costume design, as well as the way she is drawn. Due to her costume design, Rogue's breasts are always on display, as the costume is drawn as relatively skin-tight. Rogue is spared 'boob socks,' a fandom term for outfits so skin-tight that the fabric clings around each breast, as if the top had pockets specifically designed to slip one's breasts into. Rogue's breasts and butt are spared the worst of comic book art fetishization/mutilation; unfortunately, her waist gets a raw deal, as Rogue is often drawn with a waist that would be worryingly small on a normal person.[26]

Rogue's physicality and forceful attitude subvert traditional notions of comic book femininity. If a female superhero has superpowers, she will probably not have super-strength. While male heroes such as the Hulk, Captain America, Colossus and Wolverine attack their foes by getting close and punching them into submission, female characters tend to have defensive

[26] The blog *Escher Girls* is a wonderful collection of the way women's bodies are contorted and sexualized in ridiculous ways in print media. Comic book art is regularly featured on the site.

powers (Invisible Woman's force fields, Kitty Pryde's intangibility), mental powers (Emma Frost, Rachel Summers, and Psylocke's telepathy) or powers that attack in a ranged manner (Storm's lightning, Scarlet Witch's hex bolts, Dazzler's laser powers). It is telling that when Carol Danvers, who used to have super-strength, is given a new set of superpowers, she has the ability to fly as well as shoot off energy bolts. Superhero females do fight but, for the most part, they do not punch or grapple. Ever since her introduction in *Avengers Annual* #10, Rogue has held Carol Danvers's powers, giving her a long established history as a physical fighter and subverting the power tropes of comic book women in the process.[27]

The broken body and physical prowess of Rogue subverts Southern feminine tropes as well. Aside from the narrative of the woman as someone to be protected, stereotypes of traditional Southern women are conventionally feminine. In her book *Reconstructing Dixie,* Tara McPherson emphasizes the performance of gender in white Southern femininity, linking it to the hoop skirts and demure attitudes of *Gone With the Wind* or the hair salon setting and focus on marriage of *Steel Magnolias.* This performance can be extended to the concept of cotillions, a debutante ball where young women learn proper manners and later 'come out' into society, usually while wearing an expensive ball-gown. The Southern woman is polite and demure, focused on beauty and appearance. With her violent attitude and brash tendencies, 1990s Rogue wonderfully buts up against the idea of what a Southern woman 'should be', smashing the stereotypes as thoroughly as she smashes through walls.

[27] There are some female superheroes with super-strength/powers/fighting styles that involve close physical combat (such as She-Hulk, Tigra, or Mockingbird). However, none of them are X-Men. Through the 1990s, the only X-Men (or X-Men spinoff book) characters that physically fought as part of their powers include Rogue, Wolfsbane (she had claws) and Magik (who had a magical sword). Wolfsbane and Magik were not main X-Men but instead were in the teen book *New Mutants.*

Rogue in the 2000s.

While comic book readers of the 1990s saw animated Rogue as "their Rogue," comic book readers of the 2000s encountered a vastly different version of the character in the public consciousness. In 2000, 20th Century Fox released the superhero film *X-Men* starring Hugh Jackman, Patrick Stewart, and Ian McKellen. Rogue, played by Anna Paquin, ostensibly serves as the film's audience surrogate. She arrives at the Xavier Institute as a new student and learns about the world of the X-Men along with the viewer. The Brotherhood of Mutants, led by Magneto, kidnaps Rogue to use in Magneto's supervillain plot: Rogue would absorb his powers and use them to power a machine intended to turn a powerful group of senators and lobbyists into mutants. The X-Men save Rogue and Magneto is arrested.

This version of Rogue has one noticeable difference from the comics: she has not absorbed Carol Danvers' powers of flight and super-strength. Rogue's only power is her ability to absorb other mutant's powers, which may or may not be an offensive power, depending on whom she absorbs. This Rogue is younger, scared, and *much* less aggressive. She spends most of the films as practically a plot device, rarely doing anything to help save the day or outright being the damsel in distress. In contrast to 1990s Rogue's outright flirty nature, the 2000s movie Rogue is more demure. While she does have a boyfriend (Bobby Drake, aka Iceman), their relationship is more akin to teenagers on a first date: there is lots of hand-holding, brief kissing, and lots of dialogue about how the two cannot get fully intimate. Comics Rogue of the time had to find a way to strike a balance between the aggressively flirty and confident Rogue of the 1990s and the new, more demure Rogue that new readers brought in by the films would recognize.

The first six issues of the 2004 miniseries *Rogue,* by Robert Rodi and Cliff Richards, attempt to strike that balance.[28] Rodi is best known for his novels, including *Kept Boy* and *What They Did to Princess Paragon* while Richards is best known for illustrating the monthly *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* series as well as the *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* graphic novel. At the start of the series, Rogue and Gambit argue, with Rogue leaving in the middle of their fight. Both characters are physically and mentally disconnected from each other and the outside world; Rogue mentions that she has picked up the habit of touching other people to gain their memories and gain a small ounce of happiness while Gambit was blinded previous to this miniseries. The X-Men go to Dodson, Mississippi to fight a mutant threat. After the fight, Rogue decides to stay behind, to explore the town and find out information about the mutant they fought. Her exploration turns into an unintentional homecoming, where Rogue once again returns to Caldecott County, this time to learn more about her birth parents after a mysterious man, Campbell Saint-Ange, confronts her with a picture of her mother.

Rogue has to come back to the South in order to confront and reclaim the memories of her past. As it turns out, Rogue's parents joined a commune, which was trying to find a mythical Native American paradise called the Far Banks. It is revealed that Rogue's mother, Priscilla, currently exists in the Far Banks, unable to live in the 'real' world. However, she is able to interact with it. Priscilla created a dream reflection of the perfect life she so desired, including an idealized dream version of Rogue. This dream version occasionally slips into the 'real' world. As for the real Rogue, Campbell, with the promise that she will receive the answers of her past, lures her into the Far Banks.

[28] The first issue of *Rogue* credits Rodi as the writer and Richards on art, though later issues simply credit 'by Robert Rodi and Cliff Richards.' As such, I will refer to them as a team whenever talking about this series.

Only in the Far Banks, and by extension in the South, can Rogue come to terms with her past and with her relationship. The Far Banks is portrayed as exclusively Southern, something that white interlopers can only access through Southern natives—more on this will be explained later. Gambit had been lured to the South by a dream version of Rogue, created by Priscilla. He rejects the advances of the dream Rogue, who tempts him with the fact that despite his blindness, he can see her and since she is a dream, she can be his ideal woman. With this rejection, he has come to terms with his blindness, accepting it as a part of himself. Rogue absorbs this dream version of herself, regaining her lost memories of childhood, and coming to terms with her parents leaving. Rogue looks blissful and refreshed as her dream self enters her body, represented as Rogue being lift up by a swirling blue light. On the next page, Campbell asks, "You all right there, chil?" Rogue, a relaxed expression on her face, responds, "Mm-hm. She's in me now. We're one (*Rogue* v.3 6:18-19)." This is the most relaxed we have seen Rogue in these first six issues. Rogue reconnects with the aunt who briefly raised her, explaining the reasons why she ran away from home. Having rejected the dream life, the story arc ends with the couple on better terms, presumably having mended their broken relationship.

Rogue and Gambit mending their relationship in the South skillfully draws from examples of Southern homecoming stories. More so that *Rogue* v.1, *Rogue* v.3 serves as a typical homecoming story. In *This Ain't Chicago,* author Zandria Robinson argues that the black rural South on film (such as the 2008 film *Welcome Home Roscoe Jenkins)* paints the white urban North as disjointed and disconnected, making people rootless and empty. The black rural South serves a place of reconnection and revival, where family ties are mended and spirits are refreshed. Though not profiled in *Chicago,* the white South serves as a place of reconnection as well. In the film *Sweet Home Alabama* (2002), the main character Melanie is only able to sort

out her feelings about herself, her life, and her love interest through a return trip home to rural Alabama, reconnecting with her family in the process. Characters in these films are often marked outsiders from the South, as shown by dress (Melanie's designer clothes) or practices (Roscoe is a vegetarian). Though not on film, Rogue's return to Mississippi is explicitly rural and explicitly reconnecting. The first issue shows the main street of Dodson, MS, a spacious setting full of one-story brick buildings. An outsider because of her powers, Rogue is also branded an outsider due to her accent, which a Dodson woman describes as Yankee. "Me…a Yankee? Have I really changed all that much?" (*Rogue* v.3 1:21) In an inversion from the 1990s, Rogue is set apart though her *lack* of dialect. Rogue's Southernness is marked with dropped 'g's and occasional Southern turns of phrase ("howdy," "y'all", "just up yonder"). In contrast, the woman who calls Rogue a Yankee has a heavy dialect accent, with "can't" written as "cain't" and "where" written as "whar."

The North offers no help to our Southern characters. In order to mend their relationship, Gambit has to leave to reconnect with Rogue. However, he receives no help and no advice from Northern characters. He tries to convince fellow X-Men Iceman and Havok (both relatively regionless white men) to take him back to the South to be with Rogue, but both reject him.

It is important to note that in this miniseries, Rogue does not have Carol Danvers's powers. She only has her own powers of taking on other people's memories and superpowers. Considering that Rogue is the only superpowered individual for most of the series, this means that she solves problems and gets answers by interacting with people's memories and pasts. Fittingly, the main enemy of the series, if there could be an enemy to begin with, is ghosts. The ghost of Rogue's mother and a dream/ghost version of Rogue herself drive the plot, bringing Rogue and later Gambit further toward the South. Rogue is also introduced via her memory

absorption powers, using them on strangers to gain small moments of happiness through other people's memories.

This focus on Rogue only through her memory absorption powers is a perfect parallel to a dimension of Southern writing: the South simply cannot escape and must constantly relive the ghosts of its past. This facet is one of the most persistent in modern popular culture. Films set explicitly in the South often have a Civil War bent (*Gettysburg* [1993], *The Conspirator* [2011]), a Civil Rights bent (*The Help* [2011], *Ghosts of Mississippi* [1996]) or are simply set sometime in the past (*My Dog Skip* [2000], *O Brother Where Art Thou* [2000], *12 Years a Slave* [2013], *The Notebook* [2004]).[29] Due to the South lagging behind progressively, economically, and socially during the post-Civil War years, many critics, most famously C. Vann Woodward and William Faulkner, took to interpreting the current state of the South through what it **was**. The past creeps into the present through controversial issues as Southerners attempt to navigate complex feelings of memory and the present, most notably in the display and promotion of Confederate flags, a debate which still rages today. Likewise, the current South still grapples with the metaphorical ghosts of the past, in the form of the lingering traces of white supremacy, such as statues of Ku Klux Klan founder Nathan Bedford Forrest or reservoirs named after avowed racist Ross Barnett.

The South of *Rogue* v.3 is a white South, with one exception: Lorenzo Moontreader, the Native American man who introduced Rogue's mother to the Far Banks. Unfortunately, the portrayal of Lorenzo is rather stereotypical. He literally is a magical Native American, a shaman who has the mystical power to access the Far Banks. We first see Lorenzo using that power at the request of Rogue's father and mother, both of who are white. In *Reconstructing the Native*

[29] Of course, there are notable Southern films set in the present: *Hustle & Flow* (2006), *ATL* (2006), and *Hannah Montana: The Movie* (2009). Generally speaking, however, films trend more towards period dramas.

South by Melanie Benson Taylor, Taylor argues that Native Americans in Southern literature are often portrayed as spiritual. Native American blood gives someone a supernatural connection, while Native American characters serve as spiritual sustenance to the white characters. Native American characters often linger on the periphery, as a residue of the past, often a literal ghost. Lorenzo's magical power is his alone, given to him through his Native American bloodline—the white characters come to him because they cannot access the Far Banks themselves. In his memories, Lorenzo narrates: "But something happens to me among these foolish children…Pride. In my heritage, in my tribal beliefs, in myself." (*Rogue* v.3 3:9) Lorenzo later describes the knowledge of the Far Banks as coming from his elder's legends, further emphasizing the importance of bloodline. Most notably, Lorenzo spends the entire present plot in a coma—we only see his spiritual powers when Rogue touches him, absorbing his memory. Lorenzo physically cannot help Rogue: the white Rogue is only able to advance the plot by using Lorenzo's Native American mysticism for her own gain.

So Why Does This Matter?

The cartoon *X-Men* was a hit as soon as it aired: the Nielsen Ratings rated it the number one show with children six weeks after the show premiered (Cerone). The movie *X-Men* had a domestic gross of over $157 million, grossing over $54 million in the opening weekend alone (Box Office Mojo). For most people, their idea of the X-Men will come from one of these two sources, both of which have radically different depictions of Rogue. Therefore, it is not presumptuous to say that for a kid in Wisconsin reading his X-Men comics or watching the X-Men cartoons, Rogue could possibly be their first (and maybe even their only) contact with someone so viscerally *Southern.* And frankly, there could be worse depictions. The two main

depictions of Rogue grapple with the South in two different ways: utter subversion of Southern gender stereotypes (1990s) or drawing upon the public perception of the South (2000s). Still, both depictions eschew a litany of stereotypes and instead offer a multifaceted and complex view of Marvel's premier Southern character. If Rogue is the kid from Wisconsin's first introduction to the South, then I would argue it's a good one.

V. THE MODERN SOUTH, *SCARLET SPIDER* IN THE 2010S

Scarlet Spider was published as a twenty-six issue series from January 2012 to December 2013. The writers are Chris Yost and Eric Burnham and the main artists include Ryan Stegman, Khoi Pham, and Carlo Barberi, all with prior history in comic books. The series is mostly self-contained, though occasionally crosses over with the series *Venom* and *Superior Spider-Man.* The first issue sold over 50,000 copies but as of July 2013, the series had dropped to around 22,000 copies sold a month, sales figures that put the book on the verge of cancellation. Spun out of the event series known as Spider-Island (and more broadly, the Spider-Man franchise itself), *Scarlet Spider* starred Kaine, the on-again off-again superhero, as he navigates his role as a hero in the public's eye.[30]

More than other comic books, *Scarlet Spider* gives a multifaceted look at the modern South. The book is set in Houston, which the creative team portrays as a unique city filled with people of different races, sexualities, and walks of life. *Scarlet Spider* effectively draws upon the current history of Houston to portray a modern city in the modern South. While a few moments tend towards the stereotypical, *Scarlet Spider* strays away from cowboy hats and open pastures. Through the in-series emphasis on human trafficking and main character status of a Mexican character, *Scarlet Spider* effectively puts the American South in a global context.

The backstory of Kaine is messy at best. In the 1990s, Marvel Comics published a long, convoluted storyline through the multiple Spider-Man books titled the Clone Saga. In this

[30] As Eric Burnham takes on duties as co-writer starting with issue 19, for most of this thesis I will refer to Yost as the sole writer, unless specifically describing an issue that Burnham co-wrote.

storyline, the supervillain Jackal created two clones from Peter Parker/Spider-Man's DNA. One of them, Ben Reilly, ended up serving as Spider-Man for a time before taking up the mantle of Scarlet Spider. The Jackal discarded the other clone, Kaine, as Kaine started to show signs of cellular degeneration process (his skin was starting to break apart and break down). As he slowly grew insane, Kaine murdered a fair number of Spider-Man's enemies in New York City, framing Spider-Man for the crimes as they shared the same fingerprints. Kaine slowly redeems himself, before the Jackal kills him. Later, Kaine is resurrected, dies again, is resurrected again, is mutated into a creature with a man's body and a spider head, fights on the same side as and later against the Spider Queen (a supervillain trying to turn all of New York into spider people) and is returned to his pre-mutated body with no cellular degeneration after he falls into a vat of the concentrated cure used to turn the spider people back to humans. After defeating the Spider Queen, Kaine leaves New York, taking a superhero suit with added stealth capabilities before he leaves. This is the point where the series *Scarlet Spider* starts.

Scarlet Spider himself serves as the point of view character for the series. An outsider and a New Yorker, Kaine never meant to permanently stay in Houston, only treating it as a way station on his way to Mexico. As he defends his supporting cast from attacking supervillains, Kaine unintentionally finds himself beloved by the people of Houston and adopted as their superhero—their *only* superhero. The contrast between New York, which is dripping at the seams with superheroes, and Houston, which only has Kaine, is noted time and time again. Marvel's Houston is not in a vacuum: the city officials occasionally have contact with New York superheroes and officials, most notably Iron Man. The idea of a superhero story set in Houston is novel enough that, when news broke, the *Houston Chronicle* ran multiple interviews about the comic book's setting and Scarlet Spider's relocation. Aside from his New York background,

Kaine finds himself an outsider in Houston due to his temperamental personality. Kaine is grumpy and often short-tempered, more of an anti-hero than an actual hero, who constantly grapples with his belief that he is a monster, due to his nature as a clone and his villainous actions in his past. Kaine's powers include the basic set of Spider-Man powers (heightened agility, swinging from webs, sticking to walls) as well as what he calls the 'Mark of Kaine', a superpower which Kaine literally uses to rip off criminals' faces. Needless to say, this last power does not get much use in *Scarlet Spider.* Due to Kaine's role as an outsider and a non-Texan, he serves as the audience surrogate whenever the characters come up against something that non-Texans might have little to no experience with, whether it is as innocuous as rodeos or as dangerous as human trafficking.

Scarlet Spider portrays a nuanced view of the South through its wide array of supporting characters, representing various genders, races, and sexualities, all co-existing together in Houston. Kaine's sidekick is a young Mexican girl named Aracely, the sole survivor of a human trafficking operation gone wrong, first found in a shipping container full of corpses. Her status as a Mexican citizen is mentioned multiple times in-text. Due to the fact that *Scarlet Spider* has multiple colorists, her skin-tone is never portrayed consistently. Aracely's skin tone ranges from cedar brown to barely lighter than the very white Kaine. Oddly enough, when she wears her superhero costume and acts as a 'hero', her skin is a shade of mint-green, something never explained. [image on next page]

Image 4: top row: both from *Scarlet Spider #17;* middle row: *SS #16, New Warriors #1, SS #24;* bottom row: *NW #2*.

Aracely's status as an illegal immigrant plays into the group's struggles since, because of her, Kaine and the rest have to occasionally operate under the law: Kaine pays for a hotel with cash and later has to forge Aracely a passport. Aracely has superpowers of her own, though hers are mind and feeling based: Aracely can read thoughts and influence emotion. She is also possibly a reincarnation of the Aztec god Huitzilopochtli. Most of the overarching plot revolves around Aracely; the driving question of the series is Kaine trying to figure out who exactly she is and what she is capable of, while also facing off against various super-powered assassins who are trying to kill her. Though these questions are never fully answered in *Scarlet Spider*, Chris

Yost's next series, *New Warriors,* features a scene where Aracely, possessed by Huitzilopochtli, fires a blast of godly fire at the demon Cthon, further hinting at her connection with the god.

Since ancient mythology is public domain and filled with various mythic figures with impressive powers, it makes sense that superhero comics would draw heavily from this source. The mythology that Marvel has drawn the most from is Norse, as shown by the high prominence of the characters Thor and Loki et. al. in comic series, films, television, and tie-in merchandising. Marvel's treatment of Greco-Roman mythology is complex at best: in continuity, the Greco-Roman gods simultaneously exist with the Eternals, godlike characters who have been mistaken for Greco-Roman gods, have powers similar to Greco-Roman gods, and have names similar to the Greco-Roman gods. Except for Hercules, who is a member of the Avengers and, as of March 2016, stars in his own solo series, none of these characters has made a lasting impact.

The introduction of Aztec mythology is important because it introduces a new cosmology for Marvel writers. And, unlike Norse mythology, which is introduced in continuity through all-American New York doctor Donald Blake, Aztec mythology is introduced through a Mexican character and, through Aracely's dreams, is decidedly Mexican flavored. Characters aligned with Aztec mythology come from Mexico and, most importantly, speak Spanish. Linking Houston to Mexico like this broadens the borders of the series, creating a hemispheric South, where influence is able to travel from country to country. Unfortunately, we can only speculate how Chris Yost planned to further develop Aztec mythology in the pages of *Scarlet Spider,* as the series was canceled before he could probe further into Aracely's identity.

Aracely's outsider status is compounded by her non-American status. Because she is a relative newcomer to American culture and a talkative teenager with no brain-to-mouth filter, Aracely can voice the stereotypes that are undoubtedly playing in the reader's head. When Kaine

leaves New Orleans, Aracely asks him if he tried gumbo and if it was Mardi Gras. In Houston, Aracely practically forces Kaine to eat barbeque with her because she saw an ad for it on television. She's the most ecstatic about going to a rodeo, while the other Texan characters view going to a rodeo more as a rite of passage or something you just *do* over anything else. Because Aracely serves as the outsider, she helps pre-empt any questions or preconceived notions readers might have about the South.

Aside from Aracely, three other characters feature prominently in *Scarlet Spider's* supporting cast. One is Annabelle Adams, a hotel bartender and singer, who becomes Kaine's main love interest throughout the series. The other characters are Dr. Donald Meland and his husband, police officer Wally Layton. The fact that Meland and Layton are gay is never commented on and the two are never victims of any sort of lgbtq+ prejudice or violence, something that is reassuring and yet odd at the same time. Their identification as husbands is also interesting because, from 2012 to 2013 when the series was published, same sex marriage was illegal in Texas. However, in November 2013, after the series had ended, employee benefits of city employees were available to couples that married in a state where same-sex marriage was legal, showing that Houston at least recognized the validity of same-sex marriage even though it was illegal in the city itself. Mayor Annise Parker, an out lesbian, passed the measure. Parker served as mayor from 2010 to 2016 and was one of the first openly homosexual mayors of a large American city. The focus on and acceptance of a gay couple shows that Houston is far from uniformly homophobic, and instead is an actual *city* comprised of different people with differing opinions.

Yost does not take the easy way out of surrounding Kaine with ranchers and hicks, instead creating a multifaceted supporting cast that somewhat reflects the urbanity and greater

diversity of Houston itself: the key word here is ‘somewhat’. Despite the diversity of gender and sexuality, the supporting cast is hardly perfect: Annabelle, Meland, and Layton are all white and middle to upper class. Crowd scenes are also overwhelmingly white. *Scarlet Spider* #16 is set at a crowded rodeo, where the only non-white characters with actual dialogue are Aracely and Annabelle’s ex-boyfriend, a textbook example of the ‘scary black man’ stereotype, whose main purpose in the scene is to look intimidating and threaten Kaine. Villains are more likely to be people of color, whether hit men sent from Mexico to kill Aracely, lower level drug dealers, or human traffickers. In contrast, villains who are corrupt executives or who the human traffickers report to are overwhelmingly white. One scene in issue 12.1 features a Japanese human trafficker who directly reports to a white higher-up. In a scene rife with subtext, Bruiser, a white supervillain, snaps the neck of the Japanese human trafficker at the command of the trafficker’s white subordinate. [31]

Yost expertly uses Kaine’s status as an outsider to shine light on aspect of Houston life that some readers might not be aware of, as well as to poke fun at aspects of life Houston residents are already aware of. In a particularly amusing moment, Kaine, who is used to swinging from skyscraper to skyscraper in New York City, suddenly runs out of skyscrapers in downtown Houston, slamming into a roof. While played for laughs, it is important to note that Yost and Pham portray Houston as having skyscrapers to begin with—a remarkable difference from the one-story town of Dodson, MS, explored last chapter. In a later issue, Kaine complains about the heat: “I thought I knew what humidity was, but I was wrong. I was so wrong. Houston is Vietnam-level hot. It’s like I’m web-swinging through steam.” (*SS* 7:3) In the same issue, a confused Kaine asks Layton what “Galveston” is, not knowing that it is a city relatively close to

[31] As part of the Marvel Point One promotion, various series had an entire rebranding or renumbering, while others had an issue designated as ‘#.1’.

Houston. The series also features multiple Houston buildings, features and landmarks: the River Oaks residential community, The Galleria, Park Plaza Hospital, Greenspoint district, the Chase Tower (incorrectly called the Chase Building). Aside from names, some aspects of the landmarks are obviously pulled from real life: Yost describes Greenspoint as an area riddled with crime and uses the district's "Gunspoint" nickname, despite the fact that the area's crime rate has steadily decreased since the 1990s. In the letters column, editor Stephen Wacker emphasizes the multifaceted depiction of Houston, noting that Yost and Stegman took a trip to Houston for inspiration as well as to take reference pictures after the first issue hit the stands.

It is hard to describe the overall plot of the series, as due to the sheer nature of comic books, multiple plotlines are running at different times. Some of the plot threads that run throughout the series include Kaine's belief that he is a monster, the mystery of Aracely's true identity, and Kaine's attempts to stop a human trafficking ring. Kaine constantly grapples with his beliefs of whether he is a monster or someone who deserves to be called human, partly due to his villainous past and status as a clone, but also due to new powers granted in-series. These include a monstrous spider-like appearance as well as an initial inability to control his new powers, as Kaine almost kills Aracely. As for the mystery of Aracely, she has reoccurring dreams throughout the series tinged with Aztec imagery and the repeated phrase "Mictlan rises." As the series goes on, Aracely becomes more and more proficient with her psychic powers as her Aztec-themed dreams increase.

Kaine vs. Human Trafficking

A reoccurring theme in *Scarlet Spider* is Kaine trying to grapple with the existence of the human trafficking industry in Houston. In issue 12.1, Kaine is called to the scene of a murdered

Japanese illegal immigrant teenage girl. Her nationality is important, further emphasizing the multiracial aspect of the city—though under sad circumstances. Because the teenager bears a facial scar similar to Kaine's own Mark of Kaine and because of her close proximity in age to Aracely, Kaine takes the case personally, vowing to avenge her. He finds and attacks the man who trafficked in and scarred the teenager. Later issues show Kaine fighting human traffickers in Houston, waging a one-man crusade against the entire industry, ranging from saving civilians one at a time to breaking up entire prostitution rings. He certainly knows that his one-man crusade against human trafficking will not work: "I hate this. There's no workable solution out here. I've been taking down every aspect of the human trafficking operation I can find here in Houston. … No matter how many of these places I shut down, another will take its place." (*SS* 13:7-8)

To talk about human trafficking, one must first establish a set definition. The term 'human trafficking' seems to gain a different definition each time it is used. For the purpose of this essay, I will use the definition given by the United Nation's *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons,* an international accord signed in December 2000:

> …the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of abuse of power or a position of vulnerability or the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation.

Human trafficking differs from smuggling in that it can occur within a nation's borders and occurs without consent of the victim. Statistics are always vague due to the clandestine nature of the endeavor, but the U.S. State Department estimates that around 800,000 to 900,000 people are trafficked annually, with 14,500 to 17,500 in the United States alone. Other trafficking statistics

are equally shaky due the lack of reliable data, a lack of systemic research, and the simple illegality of the proceeding (Gozdziak 103-4, 108, 111).

Houston serves as an important point in the human trafficking trade. According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Rescue and Restore Campaign Results, April 2004-2006, YMCA Intl. Houston served over 105 victims. Multiple factors help make Houston a popular entry point for human traffickers: it is a large city close to a Mexican border town, has a significant population of Latinos, is a port city, and is located near the I-10 highway. This highway runs between El Paso and Houston and serves as a major route for Southwestern human trafficking. According to J. Gilmore's "Modern Slavery thriving in the U.S.," Mexico tops the list of countries that traffic people into the United States. Not only is this a wide problem but also it is lucrative for the traffickers, earning revenue in the billions (Ngwe 104). As there are very few definite statistics of those sold into slavery, each of these statistics has a little margin for error. That does not change the fact that human trafficking is a major problem for Houston, linking the South to the modern world as well as all of America itself: trafficking in America is a nationwide problem, modern in the sense that most human traffickers heavily rely on interstate travel. This focus removes the exceptional stigma from the South: this is a nationwide (and worldwide) problem, the South is part of the nation, ergo the South must find some way to grapple with it.

The first image in-series of human trafficking shows the horrors of the trade, using the public image of shipping containers via film and television, as Kaine first discovers the horrors of human trafficking when he rescues Aracely from a shipping container full of corpses. The use of the container as the series' first example of human trafficking instead of trucks or physically crossing the border is a deliberate and canny choice. The growth of human trafficking has

changed the shipping container from an image of American commerce to a symbol of international anonymity and danger. By using the shipping container, Yost confronts the reader with a familiar image of human trafficking—and one that the reader already knows the full danger and full horror of. Yost draws from images populated in popular culture, of shipping containers as secrecy and danger, such as *Contraband* (2012) and *The A-Team* (2010) where shipping containers are used to smuggle drugs or sums of money across international lines. The television show *Dexter* features a massacre in a shipping container, which the titular character witnesses as a young child. A less recent, but eerily parallel example is the opening episode of the second season of *The Wire,* titled "Ebb Tide" (2003), where Baltimore port officials find a shipping container containing the bodies of over a dozen dead women, all illegal immigrants.

Another important aspect is the age, sex, and ethnicity of the victim herself: Aracely is a teenage Mexican girl. Women are brought into the United States more often than men: about ninety-six percent of victims trafficked into the United States are women and female children. Sex trafficking has entered popular consciousness as the most visible form. Women and children are often sold into prostitution: around 200,000 trafficked children (domestically and internationally) are brought into the sex industry in America each year. Of these children, one in five girls is sexually exploited before she reaches adulthood. Legislation tends to focus on women and children trafficked for sexual purposes, to the extent that trafficking for domestic labor or hard labor is overlooked (Gozdziak 104-7). Likewise, virtually all research has been focused on women trafficked for sexual exploitation, partly due to the trafficking research springing out of research on the sex trade. This has made a young, teenage girl sold into sex slavery the de facto image of human trafficking.

With one exception, all the victims of human trafficking that Kaine encounters are being used for sex work. Kaine explicitly equates human trafficking with sex work as he muses on the fate of the Japanese immigrant: "Places like this, they bring in girls from any number of countries…human trafficking, girls forced into prostitution, in a kind of modern day slavery." (*SS* 12.1:6) In *Scarlet Spider,* Officer Layton and an unnamed police officer visit the scene of the crime, a shipping container containing corpses from which Aracely was rescued. The police officer remarks, "Had the women and children survived, they'd have been sold into prostitution." (*SS* 1:21) Though it is later revealed that Aracely is trafficked in order to be used as a test subject for Roxxon Oil, the flashback in which she is trafficked features Aracely, in a small white shift dress which shows most of her skin, struggling against two large men, who are about to force her into the truck that would take her across the border. Whether intentional or not, the scene is rife with sexual undertones. Aracely is also trafficked by the Lobo Cartel, a fictional in-text cartel, which mirrors the real-life fact that most transnational crimes of human trafficking are carried out by organized crime groups from less developed countries into their more developed neighbors (Ngwe 105, 111-12; Gozdziak 117).

Scarlet Spider continues its nuanced portrayal of this national epidemic by focusing on the criminal aspect of human trafficking over the experiences of the victims. In a study of three different newspapers, scholar M.R. Sobel outlined how the most common focus of human trafficking stories is sex trafficking: after the March 2007 launch of the UN Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking, 70.3% of human trafficking articles in the *New York Times* focused on sex trafficking—60.5% before the UN.GIFT launch. Policy change was suggested as the needed remedy and, worryingly, all the newspapers analyzed all omitted discussion on increased punishment for the trafficker. The study showed a focus on crime and policy changes over the

stories of the victims themselves. Voices of officials dominate the conversation over voices of the victims (Sobel 322-9). The language of various accords are dismissive, talk down to women, rely heavily on a narrative of female powerlessness, and overall do little to provide assistance to victims, instead, relying mostly on symbolic gestures (Gozdziak 119). Research and studies treat the victims as one-dimensional figures, their stories often simplified and condensed.

Any aspects of human trafficking in the text feature little to no mention of the victims themselves. Aracely herself is oddly well adjusted for someone who suffered such a traumatic experience: being taken from her family as well as her time in a shipping container full of corpses. While Aracely occasionally flashes back and dreams about the experience, no mention is made about getting Aracely psychiatric help for her ordeal, despite the fact that one of the supporting cast is a doctor. Aracely herself seems to show no signs of intense trauma or PTSD from the experience and, most notably, she remains as trusting as ever, accepting Kaine, Meland, and Layton at their words that they will help keep her safe.

The focus on how an urban, nationwide problem affects Houston paints the South as modern and links the region in a national context. At the same time, the creative team treats the issue with respect—Scarlet Spider does not actually *win* against human trafficking, he simply slows the process and makes a few small victories. By focusing on this problem, the creative team emphasizes one major fact: the South of *Scarlet Spider* is not exceptional. This is not a South that is inherently designed for someone to learn something about himself or herself, like the South shown ten years ago in *Rogue* v.3. It is important that Aracely still does not know entirely who she is and how she is connected to Huitzilopochtli. The series does not offer tight endings or sweeping gestures where characters reconnect with their family and themselves. In fact, the series ends with the pseudo-family Kaine formed fractured, Layton hospitalized and

Annabelle terrified of Kaine's monstrous 'Other' form. The South is not exceptional and not a place of reconciliation. It is simply a place like many others, interacting and interplaying with issues on a national scale.

Kaine vs. the Southwest

While Kaine's fight against human trafficking seems new and inventive, other aspects of the comic alternate between modern and stereotyped takes on the region. On the modern end, we have a three-issue arc where Kaine takes on Roxxon Oil. A blatant rip-off of Exxon Oil, Roxxon most often serves as a foil for Iron Man (Tony Stark) as well as other big businesses focusing on alternative energy. In comics, film, and television, Roxxon has become Marvel's generic evil oil company. Scarlet Spider comes in conflict with Roxxon after he stops Zoe Walsh, daughter of Roxxon C.E.O. David Walsh, from blowing up Roxxon headquarters. Trying to figure out why Zoe did what she did, Scarlet Spider stumbles upon a dark secret: the explosion of a Roxxon oil rig a few months ago accidentally unleashed Mannon, a self-sustaining ancient energy source that literally burns through people, traveling from host body to host body. With the help of Southwestern superhero team the Rangers, Scarlet Spider traps Mannon in a vat of oil and burns the creature to death.

This heavy use of an oil company, albeit fictional, pulls directly from the modern day status of Houston. Since the early 1980s, Houston has been established as a center for the oil industry. The damage of New Orleans and Pascagoula, MS, incurred during Hurricane Katrina, only expedited the process, driving more shippers to Houston, an undamaged port. Many large companies made Houston their temporary home—and, according to Louis B. Cushman, chairman of a commercial real estate company, some of those temporary visitors decided to stay

permanently (Romero). Statistics show that almost 40% of Texas' oil and gas employees reside in the Houston metropolitan area, mostly executive leadership and technical talent instead of the drillers themselves (Reed). The industry continues to grow as ExxonMobil and Chevron Corp. have built new developments, office buildings, and housing for employees, some of which are in city limits. Houston's dependence on the oil industry is an in-text feature as well as a real world one: Layton remarks: "Roxxon has been the backbone of Houston for decades. Do you know how many jobs they provide?" (*SS* 7:13) While this is a prime example of a retcon (continuity retroactively added past the time it was supposed to happen), it at least is a retcon that is perfectly plausible and does not clash with any prior canon—mostly because Marvel never heavily developed the Marvel version of Houston to begin with. Mammon, as representative of the oil industry, is also literally feeding off of illegal immigrants. When Scarlet Spider and the Rangers infiltrate the oilrig where the explosion occurred, they find the corpses of numerous Central American indigenous workers. The next issue reveals that Roxxon has been trafficking illegal immigrants to serve as 'fuel' for Mammon, in an attempt to control the being.

The Roxxon mini-plot is interesting because it brings back previously established Southwestern superheroes the Rangers. Where the use of Roxxon is a wonderful example of Yost reworking a concept to fit the region, the Rangers remain underutilized and almost stereotypes. The Rangers consist of Firebird, Living Lightning, Fifty-One, Texas Twister, Shooting Star, and Red Wolf. Of the team, two are female (Firebird and Shooting Star), two Hispanic (Firebird and Living Lightning), one a Native American (Red Wolf), one gay (Living Lightning) and one a literal alien (Fifty-One). Unlike Scarlet Spider, who is specifically based out of a city, the Rangers are a more generically Southwestern superhero team and have been based everywhere from Texas to Arizona to New Mexico. On paper, the team looks like a gold

star in affirmative action. However, in practice, the team is a mishmash of various Southwestern stereotypes. The team's name, the Rangers, calls to mind the historical organization and the baseball team the Texas Rangers. Shooting Star has no superpowers, but fights crime using two pistols. Texas Twister can turn the lower half of his body into a tornado and, unironically, wears a ten-gallon hat as part of his costume. Firebird is heavily religious. In dialogue, she mentions that she "strive[s] to be a godly woman," describes Mammon as a "demon" and recites a prayer once she believes Kaine has died (*SS* 8:9, 9:18). Living Lightning barely has enough dialogue to establish a personality—readers would only know of his sexuality through previous issues of *West Coast Avengers* featuring him. The fact that he remains in a form comprised entirely of lightning also hides his Hispanic heritage, only revealed through a line of narrative that reveals his full name: Miguel Santos. But perhaps the most clichéd is Red Wolf. Aside from the fact that he used to work with a literal wolf (which died at some nebulous point before the series), his costume is massively stereotypical, as he wears a wolf's pelt on his head and shoulders as well as a loincloth, buckskins, and no shirt. Red Wolf also has the uninspired superpower of enhanced tracking a la Tonto from *The Lone Ranger.* He is able to track which way Scarlet Spider and Zoe went via Zoe's perfume, which he is able to still smell after the two have stolen a motorcycle.

The Rangers are not the only formerly established Southern characters to appear in *Scarlet Spider.* The Assassins Guild and their leader Belladonna Boudreaux appear multiple times over multiple issues.[32] Treatment of the Assassins Guild is rocky at best—the organization mostly serves as a generic antagonist. The Assassins Guild is based out of New Orleans and are mostly tied to Cajun X-Man Gambit. Prior depictions of the Guild are borderline stereotypical,

[32] This is the same Bella Donna Boudreaux that appeared in the *Rogue* miniseries. Her name has been rendered inconsistently (Bella Donna vs. Belladonna) ever since her creation. As her name is rendered 'Belladonna' in *Scarlet Spider,* I will use that spelling in this chapter.

with members named Fifolet, Gris Gris, and other members of the Boudreaux family. Those two names have real world connotations: gris-gris is a Voodoo amulet, often thought to bring bad luck, while the Fifolet is a ball of light, often leading travelers to their death in the swamp. Both Fifolet and Gris Gris were created for *Rogue* v.1. Prior depictions almost always have all members of the Assassins Guild speaking in a phonetic Cajun accent ranging from mild to near incomprehensible. Thankfully, the members created for *Scarlet Spider* have generic names such as Harvest, Smithy, and Flower. All members, including Belladonna, are written without an accent. The depiction of New Orleans is equally restrained, due to the fact that the entire fight takes place in one large stone cathedral that is being used as headquarters for the Assassins Guild. While the cathedral is unnamed, it apparently has a large enough empty stone space, function unknown, for Scarlet Spider, Wolverine, and the Assassins Guild to fight. Since Kaine did not have any history with the Assassins Guild prior to the series, it reads as Yost including the Assassins Guild simply because they live in the South.

Unfortunately, this modern treatment of Houston does not last. After *Scarlet Spider*, Kaine and Aracely moved to the team book *New Warriors.* A few issues in, Kaine and Aracely leave Mexico to join the team, traveling to Wundagore Mountain in order to stop the High Evolutionary's attempts to kill off all the genetic deviants (mutants, Inhumans, etc.). The events of *Scarlet Spider* are mentioned, but rarely the focus of the book's plot. The New Warriors are less region-based than *Scarlet Spider*: most of Kaine and Aracely's interactions in Mexico take place on a beach. Wundagore Mountain is a fictional setting located in Eastern Europe; most of the New Warriors' interactions there take place inside the High Evolutionary's complex, not at all exploring the Eastern European surroundings. As soon as they leave Mexico, Kaine and

Aracely do not look back: the rest of the series takes place there or in New York. The unique regional setting is lost, branching into the generic superhero book *New Warriors.*

It is doubtful whether Aracely show up in continuity again. The problem with characters created for a particular series or by a particular writer is that more often than not, they vanish into the ether when the series is canceled or the writer leaves the book. The website *Comic Book Database* lists all of her appearances: aside from her appearance in an issue of *All New Invaders,* Chris Yost wrote them all. Likewise, the possibility that Annabelle, Meland, or Layton will show up again is slim to none. As for Kaine, he was killed in a crossover event titled *Spider-Verse,* when the supervillain Morlun killed him by ripping one of his arms of and impaling it through his skull. Comics being comics, Kaine will stay dead until someone wants to use him again. Whether he returns to Houston is still undecided. However, this does not lessen *Scarlet Spider's* impact. *Scarlet Spider* is a rare gem, a series set outside of New York and the Northeast that provides a complex view of a real world American city. One can only hope that later Marvel stories follow *Scarlet Spider's* example. And who knows: maybe some day readers will have a multifaceted view of the **entire** Marvel universe and not just a handful of cities.

VI. CONCLUSION

This thesis sprang from a visit to Universal Studios Orlando my family and I made in January 2015. The Marvel section of the theme park has actors and actresses playing superheroes set up at various stations around the attractions: for example, you can have your picture taken with Captain America or Spider-Man. Because I'm the sort of person who enjoys these things, I got my photograph made with nearly all the superheroes. There is always an opportunity for small talk before the pictures are taken or while Mom sets up the camera. During the small talk, the actress who portrayed Rogue asked me where I was from. When I answered Jackson, Mississippi, she responded something along the lines of how she was from Mississippi too. As far as I can remember, she was also the only superhero with a distinct accent.[33]

This interested me. The Marvel area of Universal Studios features a *lot* of superheroes: stores named after superheroes, rides named after superheroes, large superhero graphics adorning the side of buildings, actors portraying superheroes, etc. etc. Why was there only one of them who was decidedly Southern? My original plan was a large, all-encompassing project detailing the histories of Southern Marvel characters, seeing if their Southernness remained stagnant, was written out, or was enhanced as the years went on. Admittedly, I went into this project thinking that the results would be negative, that the state of the South in Marvel Comics from the 1960s to the present was relatively unchanged, despite the overarching changes the real South has gone

[33] Rogue was the only character in which our conversation about region lasted more than the cursory 'where are you from?' question, although Wolverine lightly teased me for my Ole Miss shirt; the trip to Universal Studios was only a few days after that year's Peach Bowl, where the Ole Miss Rebels played the TCU Horned Frogs, Ole Miss losing 42 to 3.

through, with regards to everything from ideologies to physical topography. However, as I continued reading and researching, I found myself pulled in various directions, examining small pockets of Southernness that popped up only to vanish soon after. It was in these limited series and relatively lesser known stories that I managed to find the representation.

When Marvel Comics portrays the South in a multi-issue capacity, it usually portrays the region with complexities, rejecting Southern stereotypes. Man-Thing in *Adventure in Fear* portrays the swamp as a primal, dangerous, and inhuman place, but also as a place in constant conflict with modernity, showing the reader that though the swamp can be dangerous, it is never too far from civilization. *God Loves, Man Kills* cements the South as a place of ideas. Whether the intolerance of televangelists or the radically different approaches of the Civil Rights Movement, important things are happening in the South, and on a scale large enough that Northern writers, critics, and fans feel the need to comment on them. 1990s Rogue fights against the stereotype of Southern women, while 2000s Rogue crafts a story interplaying with and reworking Southern media stereotypes of the time. *Scarlet Spider* portrays a global South, as Houston is in regular contact with Mexico, as characters leave the South, travel, and come back later. The South of *Scarlet Spider* is also diverse, fighting against Southern stereotypes of a black/white racial binary and massive intolerance by showing a South with diversity of races and sexualities. So yes, there will always be panels where superheroes wrestle alligators. And yes, there will always be single-issue detours to the swamp where the swamp is described as a dangerous land completely devoid of humanity. But with my thesis, I attempted to prove (and hopefully succeeded) at showing the cracks, finding those little places here and there where a nuanced view of the South shines through.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX 1: A BRIEF NOTE ON METHOD

The problem with writing about comics is that one can never talk about the entirety of a comics character. For example, take Spider-Man. If one wanted to write a paper about the role of class in Spider-Man comics, where to start? As of February 2016, there are five different Spider-Man themed series. If you wanted to focus on the main series, *Amazing Spider-Man,* his first ongoing series, it is currently on Volume Four, having been relaunched as part of the All New, All Different Marvel rebranding. For backstory, you might have to delve into the *Amazing Spider-Man* backlog: a backlog consisting of over seven hundred issues. And even if, by some miracle, you manage to read all those issues, a plot point or pertinent example could be found in one of the myriad other Spider-Man series from the 1960s to the present: *Web of Spider-Man, Spider-Man Unlimited, Peter Parker: The Spectacular Spider-Man, Spidey Super Stories, Spider-Man, Friendly Neighborhood Spider-Man,* or *Marvel Knights Spider-Man.* On top of that, there are also team books that Spider-Man was a part of including *Marvel Team-Up, New Avengers,* and *Captain America and the Mighty Avengers.*

Of course, Spider-Man is an extreme example. Not all comics characters have such a large and lengthy history. However, for lesser-known characters, trying to find their appearances can be frustrating. In the second chapter, I examined the origin story of the Spider-Man villain the Lizard. Finding a character's origin story is easy: Wikipedia, comics wiki sites, and comics forums can all provide the answer. Finding the character's next appearance is more of a challenge. Readers can find some iconic issues and notable storylines in trade paperback form, often at a bookstore and comic book store. Websites such as comicbookdb.com list (to the best of their ability) every single appearance of the character. However, websites like this do not specify the extent to which the character shows up. One of the issues listed for the Lizard's appearance is *Amazing Spider-Man* #621. However, when I read the issue, the character only shows up on the

last page, as a prelude to a later story arc beginning in *Amazing Spider-Man* #630. The page itself is pure set-up: Curt Connors (the Lizard's human identity) is working at a pharmaceutical company that is pushing him towards reckless choices.

I will admit that I am mostly detailing the process used to research comic books to show simply how labyrinthine it can be. Unlike authors such as Faulkner or Welty, who have a finite set of text, there are an infinite number of mainstream superhero comics. As long as there is money to be made and people still care about the format, Marvel will continue to release superhero comics in various forms by various writers. Superhero comics are a unique medium where the same fundamental character is explored and interpreted through various writers and artists over a period of fifty plus years. In this aspect, analyzing the heroes themselves is more along the lines of analyzing the portrayal of a popular fictional figure, such as Dracula or Victor Frankenstein, both figures that have been interpreted in radically different ways over visual and print media. And yet, this analogy still falls flat due to the nature of Marvel Comics continuity. Despite changes to the character in various ways, the Spider-Man of 2016 is the same Spider-Man of 1963. Current writers pull from and occasionally heavily reference past issues, reinforcing the narrative timeline. For comic books, everything that happened is true, except for when later text says it is not. This can lead to a giant tangle of narrative threads, where a character is resurrected off-panel with no explanation, on two separate teams at the same time, or is revealed to be a character pretending to be a character pretending to be a different character.[34] Going back to a prior example, examining comics can sometimes be like examining every single instance of Dracula in mass culture, but the character of Dracula across all films (ranging from

[34] All of these happened in X-Men*:* the c-list character Elixir has died twice (with no mention of how he was resurrected), Wolverine is regularly on three or more teams, and the character Xorn was revealed to be Magneto but was *then* later revealed to actually be Xorn (Xorn pretended to be Magneto pretending to be Xorn).

the Bela Lugosi *Dracula* to the animated film *Hotel Transylvania*) is the same Dracula and the films are his chronological history.

Because comics repeat and draw from a long period of continuity, this means that certain themes, ideas, and motifs are often repeated. For instance, one of the central conceits of the X-Men is that mutants have this fictional minority status. However, new mutant characters are introduced on a regular basis as the various plots demand. Therefore, every few years (or once editorial has determined there are too many mutants) large events happen that specifically target mutants, thinning the number in continuity and bringing them back to the concept of a minority: the Mutant Massacre in 1986, the Legacy Virus in 1993, House of M in 2005, and the Terrigan Bomb in 2015. With each of these events, mass numbers of mutants were depowered through viral, magical, or chemical means—or, in the case of the Mutant Massacre, they were simply murdered.

It is due to this tendency to maintain certain conceits that mainstream superheroes rarely venture out of their home cities, most often New York. As such, representation needs to be seen elsewhere. Only one of the issues that I analyzed actually set in the South was part of a major-selling ongoing series: *Amazing Spider-Man* #6. The rest of the text I analyzed consisted of a graphic novel set outside of continuity (*God Loves, Man Kills*), a limited series (both runs of *Rogue*), an anthology series (*Adventure into Fear*) and a spin-off ongoing series in danger of cancellation for most of its run (*Scarlet Spider*). Historically speaking, the more nuanced aspects of representation in Marvel Comics tend to be found in the lesser-known series. Team books such as *Runaways* and *Avengers Academy*, both with a count of less than forty issues, tackled the spectrum of teenage sexuality. The critically acclaimed limited series *Truth: Red, White, & Black* took an unflinching look at racism, forcing the reader to confront the harsh realities of the

United States's history of racism, through a fictionalized version of the Tuskeegee Experiments. While there are few ongoing series headlined by a woman character (and even fewer headlined by a woman character that started before 2013), female characters have starred in multiple limited series, ranging in tone from the striking, divisive, and critically acclaimed *Elektra: Assassin* to the goofy and fun *Patsy Walker: Hellcat.*

We find representations on the sidelines simply because the main series do a minimal job of addressing it. Soon after his debut, Curt Connors/the Lizard found himself in New York more often than not, due to various plot contrivances, before he moved there permanently. The Avengers will head to Florida or the Midwest for an issue before returning home to New York in time for the next major event. Crossover events or high-profile guest stars will often bring the character out of their regional environment and to New York, as is the case with Scarlet Spider. Occasionally, the portrayal of region in the mainstream series borders on stereotypical. In *Uncanny X-Men* #267, Gambit and Storm briefly visit New Orleans. There is a Mardi Gras parade and the two eat gumbo. Later issues of *X-Men* are set in New Orleans but in name only. *X-Men* #9 features the X-Men and Belladonna Boudreaux fighting the alien menace the Brood in a nondescript sewer that could be anywhere in the nation—only the caption informs the reader of its specific location. As such, mainstream comics have a hard time walking the line between all too stereotypical and just using the name of the place: there is rarely any synthesis of regional characteristics.

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