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# Queer Content in Science Fiction Allegory and Analogue: Is It In Disguise?

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**Queer Content in Science Fiction Allegory and Analogue:**

**Is It In Disguise?**

Anna Marburger

Submitted to Scripps College in Partial Fulfillment of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

Professor Jennifer Friedlander

Professor Thomas Koenigs

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## PROLOGUE: Too Strange For Fiction?

A commonly-held belief about the supernatural in fiction is that it can exercise contemporary anxieties in society. The belief is not unfounded, but it is an oversimplification. The same qualities that permit speculative genres to explore humanity and uncomfortable topics are also used to erase or pervert images of queer and/or POC identities. Imaginary worlds are not exempt from the racist and heterocentrist forces that govern authors' perspectives.

The microculture of a recent fan controversy in a fantasy video game is an excellent example of the dire situation of queer and POC representation in the macroculture of science fiction and fantasy. *Dragon Age* is a video game series that takes place in a medieval high fantasy setting, a magical world entirely different from our own. In this franchise, players can choose a male or female protagonist and embark on a quest to save the world, making decisions along the way that earn favor with different characters and ultimately affect the outcome of the story. The protagonist can usually romance any of the love interests regardless of gender, which almost always culminates in sex. With the recent anticipation of the new Bioware video game, *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (the third installment in the series), there were several disputes amongst fans surrounding the possible love interests in the upcoming game.

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*Age: Inquisition* (the third installment in the series), there were several fan controversies around the possible love interests in the upcoming game.

One of the most debated subjects was the introduction of a new human character, Vivienne, a powerful black female mage and shrewd politician. As a black woman who promised to be a very interesting character, many fans were excited by this opportunity. Bioware teased her as an official love interest for months. After months of anticipation—Bioware even taunted the fandom with a Vivienne valentine—fans were disappointed to find out she could not be romanced at all (defira85).

Many suggested that she could not be romanced because the ambitious Madame de Fer (“Iron Lady”, Vivienne’s nickname at court) simply had no room in her life for love or sex. “I’m upset that the dark skinned black woman is already being written off as too ambitious to love, too manipulative to love, too busy to love- the first person to call Viv a ‘strong independent black woman who don’t need no man’ is going to be force fed their own teeth,” a gamer argued in a tumblr post reblogged by hundreds of fans (defira85). She also pointed out that fans who decided Vivienne was asexual were also behaving hypocritically because many of the same fans were opposed to a white male human character, Blackwall, being asexual (defira85). These fans found it appropriate to de-sexualize a black woman whom they also considered to be traitorous, power-hungry, and coldhearted. From these fans’ perspective, asexuality would be repugnant in a white man.



Figure 1: Vivienne<sup>1</sup>.

Figure 2: Blackwall.

Figure 3: Sera.

Vivienne was a common topic in other controversies surrounding race and sexuality in the upcoming *Dragon Age* love interests. In one situation, many straight male fans were upset that Sera, a feisty elven archer, was announced as a female-only love interest. Before Vivienne was officially announced as unromanceable, some gamers in the Bioware website forums voiced fear or even outrage that the sole hetero romance option in the game might be *her*. “I can’t make the rest of my comment not sound racist or sexist, so I’ll just stay quiet,” one of the forum comments said (baratheon). Some screenshots of the most objectionable complaints from the forums were passed around for ridicule amongst fans on tumblr. After viewing the collection of circulated complaints, one tumblr gamer noted the forum posts had an entitled and racist fixation with Sera’s attractiveness (firstoflavellan). According to her, the fixation was because Sera’s features exemplify white beauty standards (firstoflavellan). Because the male fans “were focusing on how Sera’s the only hot one (to them)” and complaining that Vivienne might be the heterosexual love interest, the implication was that they were averse to romancing a black woman (firstoflavellan).

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<sup>1</sup> In evaluating any image in this thesis, I invoke the fair use doctrine of the United States Copyright Act, 17 U.S.C. sec. 107.

There have been discussions in the Bioware forums about queer and racial representation as a whole in the franchise. Over the summer of 2014, one fan began a discussion thread about diversity, mostly in terms of race. The fan praised the racial and romantic diversity of companion characters in *Inquisition*, especially in light of more lesbian and asexual love interest options, but asked “why have we not seen more than the odd person of colour[sic] in a random dungeon?” (godModeAlpha, “The Other Dimension of Racial Diversity”). This sparked a discussion in the thread as to why most of the humans in the world of *Dragon Age* are white. Some argued that because this video game is a medieval European fantasy, of course everyone would be white. One person countered that historically there were Arab traders, Mongols, and Ethiopians in Europe, but “In any case, [the human-populated continent] isn't medieval Europe” (Han Shot First, “The Other Dimensions of Racial Diversity”). “It's a fictional world,” wrote another user, “there's no reason you can't have diversity” (Who Knows, “The Other Dimensions of Racial Diversity”).

None of the fan critiques or responses align with the in-world logic of *Dragon Age's* fictional universe. The setting in which the story happens is not Europe, not any real place. Vivienne's heritage is Rivaini, a fictional nationality that only exists in the *Dragon Age* universe. Her character's design and the fans' reaction to her, however, make it clear that she should be understood to have African heritage. Her fictional existence is not exempt from real-world politics of racial ideology and representation. If her existence is not exempt, neither is the video game's presentation of its universe absolved of participation in contemporary media politics, even if it is a fantasy world in which there is no conception of media studies or even whiteness. Fan discussions of romance options and visibility of nonwhite characters support the fact that despite in-world logic, *Dragon Age's* imaginary world is actually indistinct from our reality.

The claim made in the forum posts that all the characters should be white places a possessive priority on whiteness. Making such a claim on the basis of medieval Europe's history is a feeble and hypocritical excuse. The argument intentionally ignores the fact dragons did not exist in medieval Europe ("The Other Dimensions of Racial Diversity"). Perhaps one might argue that dragons were part of European mythology, thus they belong. Why, then, is the inclusion of the qunari, a race of gray-skinned people whom Bioware writers invented, utterly undebated ("Qunari")? An imaginary race of gray-skinned horned people is unquestioned, but including humans with natural yet non-Anglo Saxon physical traits is debatable to these fans. This visibility issue is, however, not isolated to a pocket of fans. The game reflects the ethnocentric perspective of the people who make *Dragon Age*.

The argument against dramatically increasing people of color in *Dragon Age* erases history. It tries to expunge the various ethnicities and skin tones that existed in medieval Europe from our cultural memory. The argument projects onto history an underlying contemporary sentiment that Anglo Saxon is neutral, even superior in comparison to other ethnicities. It is a claim on history that has an effect on contemporary racial politics. Regardless of the time period the game is supposedly set in, it is a modern-day media text and therefore participates in representation politics. Fans who support *Dragon Age*'s racial status quo are trying to preserve their ethnocentrically-motivated idea of what a fantasy world, even an ideal world, should look like.

Beneath its fantastic presentation, speculative fiction is actually *intended* to be indistinct from our reality. Strange, supernatural worlds, full of freak aliens or mystic dragons can be enjoyed as escapism, though the genre's purpose is not restricted to escapism. Science fiction and fantasy are both referred to as "speculative fiction" because in these genres, where the

impossible is possible, humanity performs a self-critique. “And that’s the trick,” says cult horror film actor and *Star Trek: The Next Generation* regular Jeffrey Combs, “that way, they are removed from us, [...] the best of sci fi is holding a mirror up to who we are or the best of what we can be” (Combs, 2004). The underlying commentary exists alongside the face value of the story. Vampire films, for example, “follow patterns of conformity and loss of identity, and therefore they connect with patterns that all of us experience from time to time [...] A vampire movie is certainly ‘about’ vampires, but at the formal level it is also about some of the patterns we confront in life” (Brummett, 4). William Earnest explains that science fiction affords a more flexible distance to examine the controversial in our society: “Because they can be sensitive, complex subjects, often the best way—sometimes the only way—for them to enter the public’s imagination is to do so in disguise [...]” (Earnest, 232). If visibility politics are applied to this claim, should science fiction and fantasy therefore be hailed as a bridge between a reticent audience and the media visibility that underrepresented peoples are so starved for? The *Dragon Age* example indicates not. *Dragon Age* examines human morality, privilege, religious extremism, and other questions about our civilization. Because the story is written about our reality, any fan or author who might use the fantastic setting as an excuse not to include underrepresented peoples is intentionally behaving hypocritically.

Even from the supposedly more palatable distance of speculative fiction, images of marginalized identities are too controversial, apparently. For instance, Gene Roddenberry created a television show in the 1960s that featured a Japanese-American man and an African-American woman in the main cast (Greven, 1-3). He used his science fiction program to portray issues surrounding racial tensions in America at the time (Greven 1-3). Yet in spite of his efforts for decades before his death in 1991, the *Star Trek* franchise never saw a recurring openly gay

character (Greven 1-3). A few years after his passing, Ellen Morgan became the first openly gay lead character on American primetime television by finally coming out in season 4 of the situation comedy *Ellen* (Tropiano, viii, 247). The historic moment in television was marred by the show's cancellation after one more season (Tropiano, 248-251) (Gross, 162-3). Not long after *Ellen's* cancellation, Elyce Rae Helford published an essay on what the queer subtext in another show from the era, *Xena: Warrior Princess*, meant for lesbian media representation. "If we read the trajectory of *Ellen* as a case study in the best that television can presently do with homosexuality, there may be no surprise in acknowledging that more subtle representations can fare better" (Helford, 141). The subtlety referred to is the flexible distance that speculative fiction is supposed to offer when it comes to "uncomfortable" subjects or identities. The queer possibilities of Xena and Gabriella's relationship are teased, but never fully realized. Helford expressed a hope that queer identities "may be projected into a more tolerant science fictional future [...] Yet, even in other worlds, such directness is rare" (Helford, 141). In the ongoing battle for queer representation in media, openly MOGAI<sup>2</sup> characters are still unwelcome even in universes that are supposed to be separate from our reality.

Besides being used to passively erase queer people and people of color's existence, the distance speculative fiction employs can be directly destructive. Just as the genre's illusion of separation from our reality is used to create a palatable space to discuss uncomfortable subjects, twisted racial imagery is naturalized through the distance. In Irvine's "Gangster Puppets and Underclass Cars: How Non-Human Characters Signify Race in Contemporary Film", she writes that "non-human characters [...] serve as a site for projection of human fantasies,

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<sup>2</sup> Marginalized Orientations, Gender Identities, And Intersex. This thesis prefers the term as more inclusive than LGBTQ.



characterizations, stories, and human races and ideologies without the tempering effects of ‘political correctness’” (Irvine, 8). She uses *The Little Mermaid* as an example.



Figure 3: Irvine’s example of projecting stereotypical traits on a nonhuman character.



Figure 4: A science fiction example of projecting stereotypical traits on a non-human character: Watto, displaying anti-Semitic imagery, but as an alien.

“On Sebastian, this face has been normalized and therefore does not appear overly startling or racially problematic. However, when this face [...] is transferred onto Ariel and Eric, suddenly the faces look grotesque” (Irvine, 60-1). A science fiction example of non-human characters as sites for grotesque portrayals is the character Watto from *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace*. He is depicted as a dirty, greedy, double-dealing scoundrel with a gravelly accent, beady eyes, and a big nose—obviously anti-Semitic tropes. His portrayal is acceptable enough to appear in *Phantom Menace* and its sequel without tempting politically correct sensibilities because Watto is not human; he is a winged, blue-skinned alien.

Watto is an example of coding, which is one of several types of representation in science fiction. Coding draws on culturally agreed-upon signifiers that an audience recognizes to mean a specific identity. Watto does not mention he is Jewish or go to a synagogue, for example. There is nothing that directly marks him as a Jewish character. Instead, the *Star Wars* filmmakers designed him with traits that we in western culture recognize to mean “Jewish”, and connote that

identity with negative characteristics. Because he is an alien and the story takes place on the planet of Tatooine, the audience can accept his portrayal at surface value and ignore the demeaning image of a marginalized group. Of course, coding exists outside of speculative fiction and non-human characters, but because of the “distance” created, stereotypical imagery in this genre is allowed to be even more grotesque.

Coding has a distinct history with gay and lesbian America. The 1933 Hays film production code lasted for decades in Hollywood (Russo, 40). The code had many stipulations, including a ban on portraying homosexuality onscreen (Russo, 40). Filmmakers still made stories with gay or lesbian characters, but disguised them in order to get past the censors (Russo, 42-43). As a result, movies used culturally agreed-upon signifiers for homosexuality or winking bits of dialogue that insinuated queerness (Russo, 43). One coded stereotype that thrived was the sissy, a coded gay character that has persisted in contemporary media (Russo, 43). The sissy is a flighty, innocuous man who behaves very boisterously and effeminately (Russo, 6). He may never identify himself as gay or flirt with another man, but we as a western audience read him as gay.

Queer representation in the speculative fiction genre is the core of this thesis. Coding aside, the other types of representation in speculative fiction are: allegory, worldbuilding analogue, and direct representation. Worldbuilding is the “rules” that govern an imaginary world: what political/economic systems might look like, how technology works, what creatures reside where, geography, and so on. For example, in the Transformers universe as envisioned by the *More Than Meets the Eye* comic series, the planet of Cybertron is populated by sentient robots that transform their bodies into vehicles. The essence of their being can be reduced to three body parts, known as Rossum’s Trinity: their spark, their brain module, and their

transformation cog, though some religious sects voluntarily remove their own cogs. When Cybertronians die, their corpses undergo a process called *rigor morphis*, in which the body reverts to its vehicular form. Historically, a caste system emerged in their culture that designated each Cybertronian's career and social standing solely based on their vehicular form.

Worldbuilding makes a speculative setting palpable.

Allegory, coding, and analogue are all inseparable from worldbuilding in science fiction representation, but there are distinctions that differentiate each type from the other. Coding is a cultural agreement on the connotations of signs and signifiers like neatness, thinness, or vanity. An allegory is a metaphorical representation of one subject under the guise of another, but it is a thematic representation instead of a more literal representation. One example is Octavia Butler's *Patternmaster*, which uses a futuristic society of telepaths as a metaphor for construction of racial and gendered hierarchy (Hampton, 52). A worldbuilding analogue, unlike an allegory, assigns *actual* queer traits to something *unreal*, a nonhuman character. Some examples of realistic queer characteristics include: a lack of sexual attraction, an alternate gender identity, an ambiguous variation in biological sex characteristics, a same-gender romantic relationship, or perhaps all of the above. In *More Than Meets the Eye*, the alien robots Chromedome and Rewind are married to each other and they are the same gender. The queerness in the text is more apparent than an abstract metaphor. Therefore, Chromedome and Rewind are not an allegorical representation of queerness, but a worldbuilding analogue to queerness. Allegory and coding exist in other genres, but worldbuilding analogue is unique to speculative fiction.

Direct representation is the fourth type of representation in speculative fiction. It is surface-level, self-identified, open and un-implied representation. The character is a human who

openly distinguishes his/her/zir/theirself<sup>3</sup> as queer. LaFayette Reynolds, a black gay man in the vampire series *True Blood* is an example of direct queer POC representation (“LaFayette Reynolds”). Another example is Moira, a lesbian character in *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Atwood). Surface-level queer/POC representation is rare in science fiction and fantasy. Even in space-age futures or dreamlike fantasies, human characters are often white, cisgender, and straight.

The reason why there is so little direct representation in for-profit American speculative fiction media is because, regardless of genre, capitalism informally censors. Gloria Steinem explains how the system works in her *Ms.* article, “Sex, Lies, and Advertising.” Because sponsors pay to have their ads included in media, the publication becomes cheap enough for the intended audience to consume it. Many advertisers will not want to work with a publication if it is perceived as too political or controversial. One example from Steinem’s experience: *Ms.* lost a sponsor because the magazine published an article featuring lesbians (Steinem). Various demographics’ responses to “image” will govern representation of marginalized groups. Steinem describes the Lionel Toy Company’s sexist reluctance to feature a little girl on a toy box, fearing it alienated young boys. In Steinem’s example, the mere presence of a white little girl was too risky for the company. Lionel preferred to attract the demographic they deemed most profitable: little white boys. Sponsors invest in how ideal markets will react to something, which determines content and representation in a text.

“If the producers wish to maintain a wide audience base, they need to play to feminists, antifeminists, and the merely indifferent” write Matthews and Mendlesohn on the mixed messages about gender in television (Matthews, Mendlesohn, 43). Catering to the lowest common denominator leaves audiences with something safe, bland, and informally censored.

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<sup>3</sup> Ze/zir and they/themself are single-subject queer pronouns.

Once Ellen Morgan finally kissed another woman, “the ABC network, fearing audience and sponsor alienation, decided that future *Ellen* episodes representing any physical affection between same-sex characters would feature an on-screen advisory [...]” (Helford, 140). Queer content—especially sexuality—is a very uncomfortable concept for many audiences and sponsors alike. “GLBT narratives are only aired on television after significant compromises and concessions have been made—concessions intended to coddle a still reticent public, to render queer sexualities safe, invisible, or agreeable” (Keller, Stratyner, 4). Gay and lesbian sex is often invisible or only implied on television. Historically, queer weddings on American television shows have culminated in a hug between spouses (Tropiano, 125, 135). Kisses have been framed a certain way by the camera so that the audience only sees the back of someone’s head (Tropiano 124-125).

Mass media is not only controlled by sponsors’ concern for audience reception, but also by the specific, privileged perspective that generates mainstream media. Irvine writes: “[...] the media companies that produce mainstream cinematic images are largely controlled for by white male figures, meaning most mainstream American media comes from this particular framework” (Irvine, 69). Openly queer characters are usually white, and their queerness is portrayed from a straight perspective and for a straight audience (Tropiano, 5, 119). Alternative narratives exist in American media, but they are pushed from the mainstream. As Irvine puts it:

Many filmmakers who are people of color or independent filmmakers have created works that actively deconstruct the racial common sense of their time and challenge simplistic representations. However, when we look to the mainstream cinematic productions, a much more limited set of narratives is used over and over, many of which rely on oversimplified racializations to tell a story (Irvine, 13).

The problem of erasure is not isolated to television or film. Jewelle Gomez’s *The Gilda Stories*, a vampire novel whose heroine is a queer black woman, was published by an

independent, feminist company (Gianniny, 57-8). “Economics and politics shape both what gets considered for publication and what we write. Publishing is a business above everything else,” the author wrote (Gomez, ‘Recasting’ 89-90).

Gomez managed to publish her speculative fiction novel with direct queer and black representation a decade before Ellen Morgan came out. Could *The Gilda Stories* be a mainstream bestseller if it came out in 2015 instead, especially since it takes place in a fantasy universe? Is the crisis of visibility different in a post-*Ellen*, even post-*Glee* world?

One image on tumblr that was reblogged hundreds of times was an image of Vivienne next to an image of two crossed fingers. “Please don’t be straight,” the post pleaded. This post does not just speak to Vivienne’s appeal to queer gamers who might play as a female protagonist. It speaks to the starvation for images of queer black women, even in the supposedly flexible genre of speculative fiction. It speaks to what *The Gilda Stories*’ fate would be if the novel were released in a post-*Glee* world. It speaks to the dire situation of representation politics even in modern American speculative genres. In practice, the distance in science fiction and fantasy is not flexible. Regardless of genre, media images are controlled by a heterosexist, racist society.

## A BRIEF LITERATURE REVIEW:

### **The Intent and Limitations of This Thesis as an In-Depth Textual Analysis**

This thesis will conduct an in-depth textual analysis of Bryan Singer's X-Men movies and James Roberts' Transformers comic series, *More Than Meets the Eye*. Both are for-profit texts. Genre plays an integral role in the queer content of both; the first depicts a queer theme, the second is a queer analogue. This thesis singles out X-Men films directed by Bryan Singer both because peering at movies by the same author offers a more consistent message to critique, and also because of a practical desire to make the chapter concise. The films, as a text, are a point of intrigue for MOGAI content in science fiction because though the director is out himself, and has also been public about the films' allegory, there are no openly queer characters in the films. The message in the allegory is potentially groundbreaking for mainstream summer action movies, yet it reaffirms the status quo in many ways. The other text, *More Than Meets the Eye*, was chosen because of the unique analogues of gender identity and attraction in the cast, which is composed entirely of alien robots. This thesis will examine the progressive and inclusive politics of the text, as well as how this comic series simultaneously upholds white, queerphobic ideology.

As a science fiction series that has been analyzed for its queer and racial allegories, *Star Trek* and the academic critiques it has attracted are useful in examining X-Men's allegory. David Greven's *Gender and Sexuality in Star Trek: Allegories of Desire in the Television Series and Films* has examples of invented races in *Star Trek* that allow the show, which never managed to have an openly queer human character, to portray queer identities and issues without being too confrontational. Greven's work recognizes that even though the worldbuilding offers

different ideas about gender, sex, and desire, it is portrayed from a point of view that does not recognize these opportunities. These aspects are helpful when tackling an academically untouched text like *More Than Meets the Eye*, though the series displays a higher level of self-awareness about the queer possibilities in its worldbuilding. Greven also recognizes the role Eurocentrism plays in *Star Trek*'s narrative. Non-white bodies on *Star Trek*, even in western science fiction overall, are often depicted as modified or distorted. He notices that many of *Star Trek*'s didactic messages favor a white, male, liberal agenda. His critique of the middlebrow ideology implicit in *Trek*'s allegories is useful for analyzing X-Men's metaphor and political agenda.

Most of Greven's book, however, is about alternative readings of the text. This thesis instead engages with subject-position and worldbuilding. The authors of both X-Men and *More Than Meets the Eye* have publicly confirmed their texts' queer content. In each text, there is enormous potential not only for queer readers to enjoy a validating experience, but for the content to be more accessible to straight, cis, or allo readers. This thesis explores the execution and, ultimately, limitations of Singer's allegory and Roberts' analogue.

Alternate readings that intentionally, even oppositionally, decode media to implant queer content have a meaningful history with queer America. For instance, Julie D'Acci describes how, in spite of the producers' aggressive efforts to dispel Sapphic vibes from the program, lesbian followers of *Cagney and Lacey* deliberately ignored the heterosexual subject-position to celebrate and explore the relationship the two leads could share as a couple. Alexander Doty's *Making Things Perfectly Queer* is about the necessity of making queer readings of mass culture even if it means disregarding hetero subject-position. In his afterword, he inquires:



[...] we queers have become locked into ways of seeing ourselves in relation to mass culture that perpetuate our status as subcultural, parasitic, self-oppressive hangers-on: alienated, yet grabbing for crumbs or crusts and wishfully making this into a whole meal. Have we been, and are we now, little better than collaborators in our own continued invisibility, oppression, and marginalization, if in no other ways than by financially supporting capitalistic entertainment enterprises and then keeping our queer interpretations of mass culture to ourselves? (Doty, 104)

Doty concludes his book by arguing that continued queer discourse surrounding readings of media texts challenges the meaning of mainstream versus subculture, and thereby challenges heterocentrism itself. Alternative, queer readings of texts serve a crucial role in media politics.

This thesis' critique favors, however, engaging with intentionally-implanted queer content in a critical way that holds authors accountable for the queerness they selectively insert in their texts. Alternate readings have the potential to enrich a text with nigh-infinite possible meanings and analyses. Often invisible, marginalized experiences become visible and validated by oppositional readers asserting their relevance to the text. In texts where queerness is canonically present, however, the nature of its portrayal, as well as conspicuously absent queer content, must be interrogated. Whereas alternative interpretations create an agenda based on the intent of the reader, analyzing subject-position *reveals* agenda, as well as its consequences. The author becomes responsible for their choices. From there, critique can examine the tension between palatability, inclusivity, and the effect such tension has on representation politics.

Terminology is evolving and contested. "Queer" and "MOGAI" are immensely useful for verbalizing a type of marginalization that is often based on attraction or gender identity, which is the lens of this thesis' critique. "Allo" is an effective term for differentiating one spectrum of attraction that is distinct from asexuality and the gray spectrum. Therefore, though potentially problematic, the three terms are employed.

Too many queer analyses of texts are from a white, cisgender, allo, gay perspective. Race is often reduced to categories of “whiteness” and “blackness.” Queerness is often reduced to “gay” and “lesbian.” Alternate gender identities, multi-attracted identities, and alternate frequencies of sexual or romantic attraction are generally absent from scholarship on queer content in speculative fiction. For example, in William Earnest’s “Making Gay Sense of X-Men”, he probes the X-Men films for queer content. Unfortunately, the only mention in his essay of a non-gay attraction identity is Earnest’s problematic suggestion that Mystique’s shapeshifting is a metaphor for bisexuality. Additionally, the essay handles queerness and race as though the two are mutually exclusive, or as though racial strife parallels queerphobic strife instead of operating in tandem with it. Queer critique and race critique should overlap in an analysis. Guy Mark Foster’s “Desire and the ‘Big Black Sex Cop’: Race and the Politics of Sexual Intimacy in HBO’s *Six Feet Under*” is a model of denaturalizing white gay male perspective. Foster points out many issues that are never acknowledged in white gay portrayals of gay black men, and race is only addressed if it forwards a post-1990 self-congratulatory white liberal agenda. Race is not the main focus of this thesis, but it will not be overlooked. The naturalization of whiteness in *More Than Meets the Eye*, as well as the limitation, if not erasure, of POC perspectives in X-Men’s white liberal agenda will be addressed, using Foster’s critique as a guide.

Gender and attraction diversity are essential lenses in unpacking *More Than Meets the Eye* in particular. Of course, humans are impressively complicated and wonderfully diverse. Attraction and gender variety contain a lot of nuance and fluidity, varying by time period and culture. Additionally, contemporary western identity politics should be considered opt-in, not prescribed. The identity politics approach of this analysis recognizes attraction variance and

queer gender variety politics, though the analysis is still limited. This thesis supports conversations about how any queer identities not acknowledged in this thesis might relate to these pieces of media.

This thesis will attempt a rudimentary intersectional analysis that incorporates queer and racial media representation and western identity politics. The resulting chapters will no doubt have missing pieces, which the author attributes to her privileged viewpoint and the limitations of a yearlong thesis as a full-time student. This thesis supports conversations about these texts that incorporate even more marginalized perspectives. For example, critiquing these texts through a disabled feminist lens would be very rewarding. This thesis, however, aims to denaturalize hegemonic conceptions of race, gender, and attraction in both series.

Being a for-profit text can affect the extent of a queer text's transgressive nature by placing restrictions on challenging content. At the same time, being a for-profit text increases distribution and consumption of its content, which thereby magnifies its ability to affect lives (theoretically, at least). Any queer for-profit text that exists in a cisallohetero capitalistic society automatically possesses some degree of transgression. Genre is also an important influence on content. By interrogating reality through the masquerade of an impossible universe, science fiction also affects how subversive a text can be. How does imagining another version of our society challenge the status quo and yet simultaneously reinforce it? What messages are encoded when authors designate the natural and the unnatural in a strange universe? Science fiction's relationship to representation politics through otherworldly queer analogues, as well as the consequences of that relationship, will be interrogated in James Roberts' *More Than Meets the Eye* and Bryan Singer's X-Men films.

## GLOSSARY

**Allegory:**

A metaphorical representation of one subject under the guise of another.

**Alternate reading:**

A reading in which the interpretation a reader makes does not match the meanings the creators intend.

**Anglocentrism:**

Naturalizing an Anglo Saxon perspective, establishing white racial traits as neutral.

**Anthropomorphization:**

Attribution of human characteristics to something that is not human.

**Coding:**

Assigning traits which draw on widely-held notions in a culture to connote meanings into an image.

**Decoding:**

What audiences read from a text, which may or may not be the intended meaning.

**Direct representation:**

Explicitly named, clear representation of an identity.

**Encoding:**

Meaning that creators try to implant in a text.

**Ethnocentrism:**

Judging another culture solely by the values and standards of one's own culture.

**Eurocentrism:**

Assuming a western European cultural perspective.

**Exnomination:**

Giving something power by not drawing attention to it, taking it for granted.

**Hegemony:**

Power gained through consent to take meanings for granted.

**Identity Politics:**

Opt-in claim as recognition as a type of person, usually by adopting a pre-ordained label, such as "Chicana", "lesbian", "disabled", and so on.

**Intersectionality:**

Recognition that identities are not mutually exclusive. Acknowledgment of the role various privileges play in intersecting matrices of oppression that operate at both person-to-person as well as institutional levels.

**Marking:**

Drawing attention to something, which therefore notes it is not considered normal.

**Oppositional reading:**

An interpretation of the text in which the reader consciously and actively undermines the encoded meaning.

**Subject-Position:**

The position taken when reading a text that allows it to make the most sense, the reading aligns with the meanings intentionally encoded into it; not performing an alternate or oppositional reading.

**Worldbuilding**

The rules and backstory that govern an imaginary universe.

**Worldbuilding Analogue:**

More literal than allegory, a depiction that clearly resembles a known queer identity but is structured differently, existing only in the in-world logic of a supernatural universe.

**A Sample of Queer Identity Terminology**

**Agender:**

Not having gender or gender identity.

**Allo spectrum:**

A spectrum of frequently experiencing attraction as well as a desire to act on it. If alloromantic, the frequently-experienced desire is romantic. If allosexual, the frequently-experienced desire is sexual.

**Aromantic:**

Not experiencing romantic attraction.

**Asexual:**

Not experiencing sexual attraction.

**Boston Marriage<sup>4</sup>:**

Sometimes called “Wellesley marriage”, 19<sup>th</sup> century middle-class white term for an ambiguous yet deep, lifelong bond between two women.

**Cisgender:**

Agreement with the gender assigned at birth.

**Demi:**

Rarely experiencing attraction or wanting to act on it, or only experiencing attraction under certain conditions. If demiromantic, the rarely-experienced desire is romantic. If demisexual, the rarely-experienced desire is sexual.

**Gender:**

Self-conception of social identity.

**Gender binary:**

A map of gender that only establishes two polarized genders: man and woman.

**Genderfluid:**

A sense of gender that oscillates under certain circumstances or fluctuates over time.

**Genderqueer:**

A gender that is not exclusively male or female. Perhaps it is between, perhaps a combination, perhaps it is neither.

**Gray spectrum:**

A spectrum of rarely/almost never experiencing attraction or wanting to act on it. Depending on the context, may refer to gray-aromantic and/or gray-asexual.

**MOGAI:**

Marginalized Orientations, Gender Alignments and Intersex.

**Queerplatonic:**

A deep, intimate bond distinct from both friendship and romantic partnership.

**Romantic attraction:**

The desire to be in an emotionally intimate and affectionate relationship with someone in a manner distinct from friendship.

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<sup>4</sup> This term is included to imply that understanding of gender, attraction, and relationships vary across culture and time period.

**Sex:**

Assemblage of internal and external biological traits. Primary sexual characteristics include gonads, hormones, etc. Secondary sexual characteristics include body hair, breasts, and so on. Sexual characteristics do not necessarily align in a mutually exclusive manner and may vary from person-to-person.

**Sexual attraction:**

The desire to engage in sexual activity with someone.

**Transgender**

Non-agreement with gender assigned at birth.

## CHAPTER ONE: Singer's *X-Men* and The Politics of Assimilation

### Part One: Queer Theme, No Queer Representation

“America was going to be the land of tolerance,” Magneto (Sir Ian McKellan) preaches, “There is no land of tolerance” (“X-Men”). Instead, “whole families [were] destroyed because they were different from those in power” (“X-Men”).

Based on the Marvel comic books, the X-Men films are set in an alternate present in which evolution has caused some unknown percentage of humans in the world to develop supernatural powers such as telekinesis, sometimes accompanied by an unusual appearance like blue skin. These mutants are misunderstood and feared by humans. The X-Men are elite mutants who, by day, teach or study at Charles Xavier's School of Gifted Youngsters, a safe place for young mutants to nurture and control their gifts. By night, the X-Men are superheroes. All of the films are action movies, but the story of the mutants' struggle for human rights is central to the film franchise, especially in the movies that Bryan Singer directs.

Bryan Singer directed the first adaptation, *X-Men* (2000); the sequel *X-Men: United* (2003); and the fifth in the main film canon, *X-Men: Days of Future Past* (2014). In the first movie, the ferroknetic Magneto's militant Mutant Brotherhood constructs a machine that can incite mutant powers in humans. Ignoring the fatal effects of the machine in favor of his agenda, Magneto tries to use the machine on New York City during a special UN assembly, but Charles Xavier's X-Men thwart him in time. In the next film, Colonel William Stryker (Brian Cox), a military scientist, stages an assassination attempt on the President to make it appear coordinated by radical mutants. He uses the ensuing fear to push an anti-mutant agenda that greenlights a black ops mission, headed by himself, to capture the telepathic Charles Xavier (Sir Patrick

Stewart), infiltrate his school, and from there, kidnap as many mutants as possible. Using his mutant son's power of illusion, Stryker nearly succeeds in manipulating Xavier into exterminating every mutant on earth using Cerebro, a machine which can magnify telepathy into the ability to track anyone on the planet. The X-Men and the Mutant Brotherhood team up to save the day. Finally, in *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, the world has become a Holocaust-like nightmare of extermination camps and "M" brands burned into foreheads. Magneto and the surviving X-Men send Wolverine (Hugh Jackman) into 1973 to prevent the events that eventually cause their doomed present.

Queer themes pervade the films. The mutants experience political oppression, social rejection, fear of violence, risk of familial abuse, and a general sense of a separate community. Especially familiar to the queer experience, mutants undergo an awakening of their difference, and struggle between the temptation to safely "pass" as a non-mutant or to "come out" as mutant both to humans and each other. Bryan Singer, as an out director, has been very public about drawing on his personal experiences when creating the films' narratives of oppression and prejudice. The themes intentionally refer to alloromantic and allosexual queerness, not gray spectrum, intersex, trans, or non-gender-conforming identities. Therefore, this part of the chapter will engage with the cis allo queer viewpoint of the text, as well as Singer's execution of the allegory, and hold the filmmakers accountable for the text's selectivity. Academics and critics have analyzed the queer content and racial content of Singer's first two X-Men films, but rarely in tandem. This chapter will apply a more intersectional approach and interrogate the politics of the most recent film, *Days of Future Past*, as well as both early 2000s films.

"Those people down there..." Magneto tells Charles Xavier at the Capitol building, "they control our fate" ("X-Men"). This statement is true throughout the films as the US



government makes decisions on mutant issues, even though the government is entirely composed of humans (though perhaps some officials are closeted mutants). In the first film, the Senate is set to vote on the Mutant Registration Act. Supporters of the bill, such as Senator Robert Kelly (Bruce Davison), are reacting to fear of what the mutants can do to humans. In “Making Gay Sense of the X-Men”, Earnest notes that Kelly’s discourse recalls Anita Bryant, parents’ rights groups, and the notorious 1978 battle over the California Briggs Initiative to ban homosexual content or teachers in public schools (Earnest, 221-2). “I think the American people have the right to decide whether their children should be in school with mutants, to be taught by mutants!” the senator declares to thunderous applause at the Capitol (“X-Men”). Human protestors assemble in response to mutant issues. Senator Kelly’s limousine is surrounded by people angrily waving signs advocating for human rights (“X-Men”). News coverage of anti-mutant protests appears in *X-Men: United*. Mutants as a group find their civil rights to be a political issue that can be protested in an organized manner. American mutants, like queer Americans in reality, are controlled by a political body that is mostly comprised of privileged people. Queer oppression is transmuted onto a mutant template through the film’s use of science fiction.

As a marginalized group, adversity and bigotry are to be expected in mutant life. “Get out of my bar, freak,” barks the barkeep to Wolverine (“X-Men”). Magneto tells Senator Kelly he is “afraid of people like me” (“X-Men”). Cyclops smiles at a little boy. The mother ushers the child away (“X-Men”). Mystique sneers at Senator Kelly: “Because of people like you, I was afraid to go to school as a child” (“X-Men”). Once Magneto tests his mutation-inciting machine on him, he mocks the senator: “Where would you go? Who would take you in, now that you’re one of us?” (“X-Men”). Barely surviving the procedure, Senator Kelly escapes and seeks out Xavier’s school, explaining he was afraid to go to a hospital. Charles knowingly says Kelly was

afraid of being treated differently by the human doctors, discriminated against. The fact that students at Xavier's school are mostly runaways is also reminiscent of the rejection or abuse many queer youth have historically had to flee from ("X-Men"). "When a minor child or youth comes out to their family," writes the Center for American Progress, "they are at increased risk of homelessness due to family rejection, conflict, abuse, and neglect" (Quintana, 9).

The awakening many mutants undergo cements mutation as a metaphor for queerness. Early on in the first film, Rogue (Anna Paquin), unaware she is a mutant, hesitantly initiates her first kiss. This is the moment when her power manifests. The innocent moment escalates to horror as she accidentally drains almost all of the boy's life force. In his analysis of the queer themes of the first two X-Men films, Bartlett says the subtext of Rogue's first scene is "the fear of being consigned to freakdom at the first attempt at sexual overture" (Bartlett). In the scene just after Rogue's unfortunate first kiss, Jean Grey explains to Congress that mutant powers first manifest at puberty ("X-Men").

Bobby's coming out scene is even more blatant than Rogue's parallel to queer sexual awakening. Bobby Drake (Shawn Ashmore) has concealed his ice powers from his parents and convinced them Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters is a normal preparatory school. Earnest identifies this behavior as closeting (Earnest, 226), but eventually, Bobby informs his family he has something important to tell them about himself.

For the most part, the scene pokes fun at the obvious parallel, mostly at the expense of Mrs. Drake's unease. "When did you first know you were a...a..." his suburban mother trails off ("X-Men: United"). A moment later, she tells him: "We still love you, Bobby. It's just this mutant problem is a little..." and trails off again. Wolverine, also present, barks: "What mutant

‘problem?’” (“X-Men: United”). “...complicated,” Mrs. Drake mutters (“X-Men: United”). The rest of her dialogue is laugh lines: “This is all my fault” and “Have you tried...not being a mutant?” (“X-Men: United”). There are dramatic consequences to Bobby’s coming out, however. His brother storms out of the room. As he and the other X-Men leave the house, Bobby steals a glance back. His family is gathered around each other behind a window on the second floor. As a consequence of his choice to tell his parents who he really is, he has become alienated from his loved ones.

“Mutants who have come forward and revealed themselves publicly have been met with fear, hostility, even violence,” Jean Grey testifies at the Senate (“X-Men”). Negative family reactions can vary from the tension in the Drake household to the abuse that occurs between William Stryker and his mutant son, Jason. In the past, Stryker, “trying to solve the mutant ‘problem’”, sent Jason to Xavier’s school as a boy, but only because the colonel had misunderstood the purpose of the institution (“X-Men: United”). Xavier had tried to explain they could not “cure” his son because “mutation is not a disease” (“X-Men: United”). Obviously this parallels the long history of homophobic practices in psychology. The American Psychiatric Association had only begun to question the validity of conversion therapy just six years before *X-Men: United* was released (Eaklor, xxx). Frustrated that Xavier’s school did not function in the manner he had hoped, Stryker employed extreme medical measures to “correct” mutant son (“X-Men: United”). The film never clarifies what procedure was performed on Jason, but in the present, Charles Xavier is horrified to find him gaunt, dead-eyed, confined to a wheelchair, unable to speak, his skin like paper (“X-Men: United”). “My son is dead!” William Stryker declares (“X-Men: United”). The implication is Jason was lobotomized, a “castration of the brain” as the gay Harding in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* refers to it (Wasserman).

Obviously, one can understand why some mutants prefer to pass. Magneto and Mystique, some of the most outspokenly political characters in the films, are critical of the practice. In 1973, a younger Magneto (Michael Fassbender), holding the President at his mercy, violently commandeers a press conference at the White House. He turns the press cameras on himself and sends a message to all of the mutants that might be watching: “No more hiding,” he urges, perhaps echoing Harvey Milk, “You have lived in the shadows and shame for too long. Come out [...] Fight together in a brotherhood for tomorrow” (“X-Men: Days of Future Past”). Earlier in the same film, Magneto accuses the young Charles Xavier (James McAvoy) of “pretending to be something you’re not” (X-Men: Days of Future Past”). In 1973, Charles Xavier is able to walk without need of his wheelchair, so long as he suppresses his powers (“X-Men: Days of Future Past”). Though Xavier’s motivations for sacrificing his telepathy in favor of mobility are related to depression, not a desire to blend in with humans, Magneto finds the reversal to be passing all the same (“X-Men: Days of Future Past”). Forty years later, Nightcrawler (Alan Cumming) is astounded to meet Mystique (Rebecca Romijn), a blue-skinned mutant like himself, who has a shape-shifting ability but never uses it to conceal her true form (“X-Men: United”). “Why not stayed disguised all the time? Look like everyone else?” he asks her in a hushed voice (“X-Men: United”). “We shouldn’t have to,” she fervently replies (“X-Men: United”).

Mutants feel a separate sense of community, outside the mainstream experience. Wolverine tells Rogue: “There’s not many people who will understand what you’re going through” (“X-Men”). Mutant characters also use language to differentiate themselves as a group, using phrases like “people like me”/“people like us” (“X-Men”). Mystique, disguised as Bobby, sternly tells Rogue to never go against her own kind (“X-Men”). Dying in the medical bay,

Senator Kelly hesitantly asks Storm (Halle Berry) if she hates “normal people” (“X-Men”). She replies that when she does feel hatred towards them, it is probably because she is afraid (“X-Men”). She has more patience, however, than the bitter Wolverine: “World is full of people who hate you and you’re wasting your time protecting them,” he snaps at her in a later scene (“X-Men”). In such a world, Charles Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters is meant to be a space “where everyone can be safe” (“X-Men: United”).

The accessible science fiction allegory of the mutants’ difference and discrimination has attracted queer contributors to the text. Sir Ian McKellan was convinced to take on the role of Magneto because Singer pitched the films as an allegory for anti-gay prejudice (Earnest, 216). Ellen Page says she identifies strongly with the films as a lesbian (Page). Bryan Singer describes how, for example, if a teenaged girl or boy comes out as gay, “their parents aren’t gay necessarily, and their classmates aren’t, and they feel truly alone in the world and have to find, sometimes never find, a way to live” (Applebaum). He feels that he can use the films to exercise personal anxieties about being queer and Jewish (Applebaum). Therefore, the director is using a key function of science fiction: to examine and perform human anxieties about societal oppression.

The movies’ science fiction metaphor of mutation presents a lens through which the narrative can analyze the experience of being targeted of violence by one’s own society purely based on one’s difference and threat to the status quo. Genocide is the terrifying cultural anxiety that each film voices through the palatable distance of science fiction. The threat in the first film is the implementation of a mandatory registration act. In the next film, the government sanctions a strike team to invade a safe space and capture mutants. Soon after, the main antagonist of the movie nearly succeeds in mass extermination of every mutant on earth. Finally, in the latest

film, the threat is a government-sponsored program has already claimed millions of lives. X-Men voices the fear that hatred of difference will result in the wrong people using channels of power to carry out a mass extermination of innocent people. It presents this fear through the easily-consumable, nonthreatening distance of science fiction. It invents a universe with a conflict that feels sufficiently separate from our reality. The narrative then resolves the underlying anxiety by assigning the ultimate responsibility for this problem on a small group of bad guys. The story then employs heroes who can fight the bad guys, save the day, and teach the world that difference is not something to be hated or feared.

Images in media “constantly construct us through our fantasy relationship to the image in a way which implicates us in the meaning [...],” Stuart Hall argues (Hall). Speculative fiction’s function is to study humanity through our relationship to a fictional setting. In Heather Hicks’ analysis of the first film, she notes that the mutants are meant to be removed from humans, yet the films portray them as very human. The story “repeatedly encourages the audience to identify” with their struggle (Hicks). The science fiction allegory presents the opportunity for straight audiences to empathize with gay and lesbian Americans, as well as recognize that supporting a marginalized group means tackling “existing social norms” (Barlett).

To some extent, the metaphor embodies Stuart Hall’s description of an advertisement. “Advertising tries to construct a position of identification for the viewer in relation to what is depicted in the image,” Hall argues. In this way, the X-Men films are an advertisement, selling a message that is easy for straight audiences to digest. This is obviously problematic for queer politics. The narrative portrays “difference as desirable”, equipping the stand-in for the queer population with, frankly, cool powers (Bartlett). Marginalization, in this way, is accompanied

with excitement and intrigue. The benefits of this approach to generating empathy for queer American communities are obviously limited.

Additionally, the veil of spectacle makes it easy for heterosexual audiences to ignore the queer subtext. “Despite (or perhaps because of) this intentional framing”--that is, using an otherworldly genre--the gay filmmakers were able to equip “*X-Men* and *X-2* with the rhetorical stealth needed to fly below the gaydar of many critics and audience members” (Earnest, 216). The supernatural genre of the films is used to encrypt the uncomfortable aspects of the text so that the franchise can be readily consumed as escapist entertainment.

Though the film franchise draws on queer themes, is authored by queer people, and stars well-known queer actors, the films themselves are utterly devoid of direct queer representation. There are no out MOGAI characters. Such erasure to make the films more palatable to mainstream audiences participates in purposefully keeping queerness invisible in media. Implying that queerness can only exist as a subtextual allegory about mutation suggests queerness is not a valid, real identity. Using mutation, blue skin, telekinesis, etc. to represent queerness in a dichotomy against humans renders otherness to be “quite inescapably monstrous” (Greven, 99). Science fiction metaphors constructed in this manner, though created with good intent, have problematic shortcomings. David Greven makes a similar critique of *Star Trek*'s racial allegories, for example:

Ingenious and moving though *Trek*'s racial allegories have been from the outset, they have also blunted and obscured real-world racial conflicts by appearing to suggest that they are unrepresentable in any form *except* the allegorical. *Trek* seems to suggest, disturbingly, that racial conflict is a myth. (Greven, 99)

In the same way, the *X-Men* metaphor manages to erase both queerphobia *and* queer identity by not directly portraying them in the universe. Appropriating queer themes but excluding

queerness from the narrative erases queer history. It alienates the real-life source material from the narrative. The result: privileged audiences are treated to an underdog fantasy, identifying with characters (whom they read as straight) who have amazing powers. Because marginalization is romanticized into a science fiction adventure, straight audiences avoid confronting their privilege and ignore the notion that they are complicit in oppression. The queer allegory could exist alongside direct queer representation, but the filmmakers avoided making this choice and favored the veil of science fiction allegory.

The underdog fantasy is most obvious in casting an overwhelming majority of mutants as white people. According to Stuart Hall, advertisements are effective “when we identify with what is presented in the images” (Hall). The X-Men films’ *primary* function is not to be a persuasive text such as an advertisement or an essay, but nevertheless operates in a similar way to forward an agenda of tolerance for difference. Singer pitches this message to a mainstream audience who is presumably white and straight. Such an audience may feel uncomfortable or alienated if the images with which they are supposed to identify are mostly non-straight, non-white people. In the films, either mutation mostly occurs in white people’s genes or Xavier’s school has some very suspect admissions policies because there are less than ten students of color in the crowd scenes of all three movies. The X-Men and even the Mutant Brotherhood are predominantly white in all of the films. Therefore, mainstream audiences can most comfortably sympathize by identifying themselves with the fantasy version of a marginalized group. This ignores the common struggle of being queer and of color in America. Being oppressed due to difference is unjust, but nonetheless idealized for white, straight audiences who can choose to embark on this otherworldly fantasy, which, by the end of the runtime, always ends in triumph.



The only non-white character amongst Xavier's X-Men in the first two films feels very much like a token. Token characters' race is "not essential to the plot and they are often underdeveloped characters" (Irvine, 70). Even though Storm is one of the main superheroes, she has only 14 lines in *X-Men* and, having almost no discernable personality or vital significance to the plot, absolutely fits Irvine's description of token characters. Thankfully, in the sequel, she has a discernable character with a plethora of lines and admirable qualities, but she is never associated with any black institutions or communities. In *Days of Future Past*, she has a minor role with a few lines, though she displays the full brunt of her powers in an impressive action sequence. The same can be said for Sunspot, Blink, Bishop, and Warpath, the other nonwhite characters in the apocalyptic present. Their race or the prejudices they might experience as nonwhite and/or female mutants is never addressed. Why is this marginalized difference so absent from a narrative *about* difference?

Worse, *X-Men: United* portrays an obvious racial stereotype. Yuriko is a mutant, under Stryker's control, who serves as his assistant and bodyguard. She is basically a 21<sup>st</sup> century female OddJob, only with adamantium claws instead of a razor hat. She is very stoic, almost never speaking. She constantly cracks her knuckles. She is also very skilled at martial arts. She even wears a tight-fitting leather suit. It is hypocritical that, in a film franchise narrative centered around the message of dispelling prejudices, the only female Asian character in any of the Bryan Singer films is represented in a racially insensitive manner. Stereotypes present "a limited range of definitions of what people can be what they can do, what are their possibilities in life, what are the major constraints on them" (Hall). Images produce not only identification, as advertisements do, but images also produce knowledge (Hall). Yuriko's depiction contributes to a broader media culture that informs audiences what characteristics to associate with Asian women.

The message of combatting prejudice and the status quo is also undermined in the queerphobic images encoded in the films. Power intervenes in representation to fix meaning, with the intention that “the relationship between the image and a powerful definition of it” will become naturalized, so that “that is the only meaning it can possibly carry” (Hall). The result: an image is inherently associated with an impression. Seeing a person from a certain group will connote specific characteristics, which overall enforces a power structure (Hall). Hegemony hides the process of assigning qualities to an image through media, making connotation through representation feel naturalized. The queerphobic encoding in the Singer films demonizes specific characters by seamlessly associating them with Otherizing traits.

Most of queerphobic codes are embedded in Mystique, perhaps the queerest character in the films. The filmmakers assign her qualities to make the audience infer that she is twisted and untrustworthy. Her ability to change her form to another gender makes her suspicious and strange. This is best exemplified when she infiltrates Xavier’s school, disguised as Bobby. She breaks into Cerebro and, once the coast is clear, reverts to her default form from the neck down (“X-Men”). A male head is preserved on a nude cis woman’s body (“X-Men”). The image, blurring and perverting gender and sex, designates Mystique as a freak.

She is also associated with BDSM imagery, which is meant to signal to the audience that she is crooked, a villain. Kink has historically been associated with queerness as an indication that queerness is a dangerous, twilight world. Vito Russo observes that leather often appears in settings that filmmakers want to signal as gay spaces (Russo, 163, 216). In Mystique’s younger days, she is unaffiliated with either Magneto or Charles and portrayed as vulnerable, emotional, with no BDSM imagery attached to her. She only has qualities that signal her to be depraved when she is Magneto’s lieutenant in the present. She adopts Wolverine’s form in a fight, and in

the middle of the battle, she makes a kissy face and licks lips at him (“X-Men”). When they meet again in the sequel, she tells him “no one leaves a scar quite like you” (“X-Men: United”). Ascribing kinky and genderbending qualities meant to connote that Mystique is depraved is queerphobic, and infers that “good” mutants (and good gays) will behave in a manner more palatable to convention.

Kidnapping and “converting” Senator Kelly in the first film draws on gay panic fears of recruitment. Bad mutants take the human to their lair and turn him into one of their kind, similar to the vampire-like recruitment stereotype historically associated with gays and lesbians (Russo). The scene where Magneto uses his machine on the senator has a homoerotic subtext (Earnest, 223). Magneto exerts himself to release a white substance from his tower (“X-Men”). It washes over the senator, who moans (“X-Men”). In the rest of the films, Magneto’s face is never in such pained ecstasy as it is in this scene. Spent, Magneto breathlessly congratulates him on becoming one of them (“X-Men”). The scene draws on revulsion with male-on-male sexuality and a classic homophobic stereotype to make Magneto appear deviant.

Even in the films’ queerest scenes, the potential queerness of the moment is restrained. Singer chooses a nonthreatening character for the coming-out scene. Bobby Drake is white, blond, blue-eyed, and conventionally masculine, therefore he is supposed to be likeable. Almost as if to apologize for the queerness of the scene, Singer chooses a character who has an unambiguous sexuality. Bobby Drake flirts with Rogue in the first film, and is officially her boyfriend in the sequel. Moments before his family comes home, as if to remind the audience that the character who is about to come out is heterosexual, there is a short romance scene between Bobby and Rogue. The two lament that they cannot touch because of his girlfriend’s

power, then Bobby surreptitiously steals a glance at Rogue changing her clothes. This sanitizes the gay implications of his coming out scene.

The filmmakers compensate for any potential homoeroticism in Wolverine's character. Wolverine is often shirtless, penetrating people with his claws. However, he has a gritty persona that dispels any effeminate aura about him. He attracts Rogue and Jean Grey in an "animal magnetism" sort of way that reaffirms a masculine identity. His deep romantic attraction to Jean Grey is reiterated in all of the films. Wolverine is depicted as macho and explicitly hetero in order to prevent the mainstream audience from reading him as gay.

Nevertheless, as Stuart Hall says, "Images have no fixed meanings. [An image] has, potentially, a wide range of meanings" (Hall). Though Singer and the other filmmakers may have crafted the theme to fly under some straight audience's "gaydar", as Earnest puts it, other readings are possible. Ellen Page's statement that she assumes millions of other people also identify with the films because of sexual or romantic difference (Page) indicates that the allegory is still accessible to queer audiences. One critic observes that Rogue's run away from home in the first film is connected to LGBT homelessness, and finds that Singer's rendition of Wolverine has a queer sensibility: he is a man, in search of an identity, who discovers "a community, a family" (Robinson). Robinson is convinced that Singer's inclusion of Bobby's coming out scene serves to remind the audience of everyday prejudices, not isolating marginalization to the "manically insidious" behavior of the main villains (Robinson). William Earnest argues the issue of mandatory mutant registration recalls 1980s supporters of mandatory HIV testing and quarantine of AIDS patients (Earnest, 231). Earnest and other critics also draw a parallel between Senator Kelly and the post-WWII Red Scare (Earnest, 231) (Bearden). Both they and

Singer seem unaware of the applicability of the concurrent Lavender Scare<sup>5</sup> to the films, which was a Cold War persecution specifically targeted at gays and lesbians.

“Media [...] exist for us to find our own meaning and value in it. Especially mutants, which are a super powerful and accessible metaphor for nearly anyone who has ever felt maligned for reasons beyond their control,” writes a well-circulated response to a tumblr user who insisted that the films do not have a queer metaphor (harlequinnade). Similarly, Robinson observes that while X-Men, whether iterated in film or comics, is never “a completely satisfying allegory,” it is regardless “a worthwhile outlet for these issues to be examined in popular culture” (Robinson). Robinson’s observation is especially relevant for *X-Men: United*, a film that criticized the government’s power over marginalized Americans and the consequent reactionary national mood after the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks (Bartlett). Additionally, the first two films “interrupted the post-racial landscape by thrusting persistent questions about inclusion and exclusion into the popular scene, and did so using blue people and mind-reading super heroes,” writes a *Colorlines* retrospective review (Wessler).

Nevertheless, other critics have called out the allegory’s limitations by restricting the content to persecution of white people. One blogger points out that the narrative places “the ‘pretty’ mutants” in Xavier’s elite “Academy”, while populating the Mutant Brotherhood with “ugly & deformed” characters (Heavy Armor). Overall, the allegory of the mutants is “parallel more with the stories of (White) Gays and Lesbians who struggle with their sexuality – and the response by (White, Christian) society to said sexuality” (Heavy Armor). Though the film preaches tolerance and draws on 1960s black civil rights imagery, the narrative erases or

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<sup>5</sup> The Lavender Scare, a result of anticommunist fervor and paranoia, was a sort of gay witch hunt in the federal government, on the grounds that homosexuality presented a security risk for blackmail (Eaklor, 87-99). Thousands were fired and blacklisted on the suspicion of being gay or lesbian (Eaklor, 87-99).

underwrites nonwhite perspectives/characters. Academic Neil Shyminsky has rightfully called this cultural appropriation. Therefore, the allegory of the films is still accessible to queer audiences, but is only affirming for privileged, white queer audiences.

Making the queerest characteristics of the films feel “straighter”, erasing nonwhite perspectives in the text, and drawing on queerphobic coding to write the villains comes from a broader context of queer palatability in straight culture. At the top of the imaginary palatability pyramid are white, cisgender, able-bodied, alloromantic, monogamous people with a very private, vanilla sex life. This is the image of queerness that the cishetero media is most comfortable with portraying. According to Alexander Doty, the limited visibility permitted queerness in mass culture “remains discursively, politically, and economically beneficial only to straights and straight culture, framed and understood as it still is largely through the languages, codes, and systems of capitalism, patriarchy, connotation, and heterocentrism” (Doty, 103-4).

One of the unfortunate consequences of what Doty describes is the intentional limitation of certain communities’ visibility. Queer identities marginalized by multiple matrices of oppression, such as racism, classism, or cisnormativity, find themselves swept aside for political compromise. *The New Queer Aesthetic* describes the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Stonewall as an example. The official Stonewall Anniversary Parade organizers refused to include radical or fringe groups that might damage their image in the eyes of Manhattan parade-goers (Keller and Straytner, 1). In response, ACT UP and Radical Fairies organized a counter-parade for the excluded groups (Keller and Straytner, 1). Another example: the Human Rights Campaign, an organization which still disproportionately prioritizes its same-gender marriage goals, finally added transgender issues to its agenda at the close of 1998 (Eaklor, 210). Famed black transgender feminist Janet Mock notes how in the mainstream, the agenda is often LG instead of

LGBT, or any other queer identities, and is limited to queer people with various racial and class privileges (Mock). The post-1990 upsurge in queer visibility in media has been a change for the better, but "there are ways in which this new visibility creates new forms of homophobia" (Walters, 10). There is a polarization of "the good marriage-loving, sexless gay vs. the bad, liberationist, promiscuous gay" (Walters, 10). This dichotomy is present in the portrayals of the good X-Men versus the perverse Mutant Brotherhood. Even though X-Men is indirect, encoded representation, such homophobic imagery "lends itself to a false and dangerous substitution of culture visibility for inclusive citizenship" (Walters, 10).

Intersections of race and orientation are often overlooked in media portrayals. In "Desire and the Big Black Sex Cop", Guy Foster explains that common factors in gay black experiences are utterly ignored in HBO's *Six Feet Under*, which only acknowledges its white gay character's perspective. The problem with the show's depiction of Keith, a gay black man, is similar to the problem with Storm in the X-Men films: "the show's tendency to isolate Keith from black institutions and individuals, as well as from black cultural references, [serves to] control and fix the meaning of blackness the show is willing to engage" (Foster, 110). Unlike Storm, however, Keith's racial difference is acknowledged in *Six Feet Under*, but only on occasions when it strengthens the character of his white boyfriend. The program never acknowledges a major issue: queer communities which may be comfortable for white queer people can be stiflingly racist to queer people of color. Black gay and lesbian people, for example, often retreat to predominantly heterosexual black communities because it is preferable to be in a less racist space than to be in a less homophobic space (Foster, 106). The program's portrayal of Keith signals its white middlebrow agenda: "ideological investments in the central tenets of a belief in color blindness [refuse] to acknowledge the importance of membership in cultural groups and the

extent to which such ties can exert influence (welcome and unwelcome) on individual choices” (Foster, 107-8).

Bryan Singer’s X-Men films are part of what Doty describes as the media’s white, “middle-class, middlebrow assimilationist” agenda (Doty, 103). One of the gay screenwriters for *X-Men* (2000) says the conflict in the comics was a race metaphor, but when writing the films, they decided the message worked better for a “hidden minority” (Earnest, 216). Must queerness and race be mutually exclusive? The middlebrow agenda is one that sees oppression as single-issue, not a network of matrices. It does not ask audiences to interrogate their own privileges and prejudices, or the broader balance of power. As a result, the message falls short in supposedly progressive texts. In *Star Trek*: “[...] when they do appear, non-white characters conform to a white, liberal standard” (Greven, 99). The media’s preferred concept of race or queerness “is exclusively manufactured for the benefit of its ideal viewers, individuals who are white, middle-class, and heterosexual and do not care to be implicated as racists” (Foster, 107-8). The assimilationist agenda asks for tolerance of difference, not a serious challenge or restructure of the balance of power (Irvine, 19). The intended audience already believes itself tolerant, so the audience rewards itself for being enlightened.

## **Part Two: Uncovering X-Men’s Politics of Assimilation**

Who is the antagonist of each X-Men film? Mutants are constantly vying for their human rights, pleading with the US government. The government, mostly non-mutant, is often manipulated into making major decisions concerning American mutants’ citizenship. In the first film, Congress considers a Mutant Registration Act. In the sequel, Colonel Stryker stages an assassination attempt, and as a result, military strike teams can legally enter mutant dwellings. In



*Days of Future Past*, the government actively hunts and murders mutants in response to actions taken by radicals like Mystique and Magneto. According to the subject-position of the texts, however, the ambivalent, if not hostile, government is not the nemesis. Bryan Singer says that Colonel William Stryker's actions in *X-Men: United* "don't represent the government's view. The President is on the fence", therefore Stryker has to manipulate him (Applebaum). President Nixon's initial response to Dr. Trask's proposal for an anti-mutant military program is that mutants are "a tenth of a tenth of a population" and they have been living peacefully, so the government should leave them alone ("*X-Men: Days of Future Past*"). Nixon's position on the issue changes once a battle between Magneto and Mystique makes international news ("*X-Men: Days of Future Past*"). The films portray the government as generally benign about mutants as a marginalized group, but devastatingly oppressive if threatened or manipulated.

According to the narrative, radicalism makes oppression come down harder. Most often, the main antagonist in the movie is the radical Magneto, whose actions make the US government feel compelled to encroach on mutant rights. Charles Xavier and his X-Men take a more compromising political approach which is most palatable to reticent humans. The accommodationist agenda is indivisible from the queer theme of the text. The message lacks critique of the white cisheteropatriarchy, as well as the role the government serves in queer oppression. Instead, the narrative celebrates nonthreatening, conventional people as the heroes, who are (allegorically speaking) the queer people with the right agenda and more tolerable existence. The narrative then condemns the angrier political queer people who dwell on the fringes of society.

Bryan Singer has publicly confirmed that he bases the political conflict between Charles Xavier and Magneto on that between Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X (Applebaum).

The result: the two powerful, complex historical figures and their ideologies are reduced to two-dimensional concepts. Singer states that “these were two men who had very strong, decent beliefs, but had taken different roads. And the irony of that, and the moral ambiguity” inspired him to create a story for the X-Men films that was “socio-political, and in that way exposed more truth” (Applebaum). In Hicks’ analysis of the films, however, she asserts that King and X’s activist styles come from a sophomoric, sanitized, white perspective. Magneto, assigned Malcolm X traits, is the dangerous, violent radical who vows he will win the war using “any means necessary” (“X-Men”). Conversely, regardless of what the real King preached, his message as portrayed through Charles Xavier is a nonviolent method that believes in patiently engaging with the government to enact social change. The narrative “simplistically polarizes the views of King and X, providing viewers with a stacked deck and the limited imaginative possibilities of assimilation or militant racial supremacism as solutions to the conflict concerning difference it presents” (Hicks).

Hicks mentions that “Magneto’s pronouncement that ‘We are the future, Charles, not them,’ echoes of controversial comments attributed to Malcolm X that it was blacks, not whites, who were the superior race” (Hicks). Magneto, a Holocaust survivor, says “I’ve heard these arguments before” in response to Senator Kelly’s well-received speech in support of the mandatory mutant registration bill (“X-Men”). “Mankind has evolved since then,” Xavier warmly replies (“X-Men”). Therefore, this conversation promotes a linear historical narrative that mankind becomes more and more progressive with time. A Holocaust cannot happen again, the film reasons, using Xavier as a mouthpiece<sup>6</sup>. Magneto could be portrayed as someone reacting to the mandatory registration bill from a valid historical experience of state-sponsored

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<sup>6</sup> This script was written over a decade before *Days of Future Past*, so it is unlikely the plot of the most recent film is critiquing Charles’ naïveté.

genocide. Instead, according to the filmmakers' narrative, he is overreacting. Charles Xavier's perspective, which places faith in the government, is the one the audience is supposed to side with.

It is reductive to designate queer activism politics to merely "assimilationist vs. separatist" or "moderate vs. liberationist" (Walters, 26), but the classification is useful to describe two different, broad approaches to change. Hicks' analysis of the first two films is an excellent tool for uncovering their pro-accommodationist message, but her essay only analyzes such a message from a race and class perspective, ignoring the queer context. In *Queer America: A People's GLBT History of the United States*, Vicki Eaklor describes the ongoing, historical clash between two general schools of thought in queer activism. "On the one side is an emphasis on how similar the group is to those in the 'mainstream'; their goals are political equality, economic opportunities, and 'tolerance' of any differences they embody" (Eaklor, 158). Xavier and his X-Men, who are the heroes of the story, are written to make the film audience most comfortable. They are mostly white, none of them are queer, and they exude an enlightened attitude. Xavier's association with a sanitized, mainstream conception of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. marks him as a character who the writers feel is politically progressive.

"On the other side are the nonassimilationists [...] who *may* have the same goals but believe that toleration is not enough—differences should be accepted or even celebrated" (Eaklor, 158). Magneto's association with Malcolm X, his distrust in the government, and Mystique's firm comment that she should not have to look less like a mutant: all signal that the Mutant Brotherhood represents liberationist politics. The narrative insinuates that radicals are violent and malevolent.

The assimilationist message is also reflected in a brief exchange between Nightcrawler and Storm. Nightcrawler's character is a devout Catholic in *X-Men: United*. He carries a rosary, he prays, he asks God for forgiveness. He hides himself from the world in a beautiful chapel and surrounds himself with religious statues. Nightcrawler tells Storm that he did not hate the humans who acted against him out of fear. Instead, "I pitied them [...] because those people will never know anything beyond what they see with their own eyes" ("*X-Men: United*"). Storm, who, in the previous film, confessed to the dying Senator Kelly she sometimes hates humans because she is afraid of them, is portrayed as in the wrong compared to the angelic Nightcrawler. "I gave up on pity a long time ago," she tells him, "Sometimes anger can help you survive" ("*X-Men: United*"). Nightcrawler responds: "So can faith" ("*X-Men: United*"). In this scene, the film advocates the idea that marginalized people should exhibit endless patience with people who cause them harm. The message does not recognize that such an approach is exhausting. It invalidates feelings of frustration or defensiveness by dismissing them as weak.

The narrative offers solutions to the overall sociopolitical conflict it is trying to address. After the attempted assassination of the President in *X-Men: United*, the possibility of a Mutant Registration Act resurfaces. The film ideology suggests the appropriate response is civil and public, showing a scene of Hank McCoy (aka Beast) in a talking heads discussion on television ("*X-Men: United*"). "Why stop there? Why not round up all the mutants?" he asks rhetorically ("*X-Men: United*"). At the end of *X-Men: United*, Charles and the other X-Men speak directly to the President in the oval office. "We can make the mistakes of the past or work together for a better future," Xavier tells him, "We're here to stay, Mr. President. The next move is yours" ("*X-Men: United*"). The film ends in a triumphant mood.

Contradictorily, the plot of the next Singer film might suggest that patiently explaining a marginalized people's cause to a political authority and asking them to "work together for a better future" does not work. In *Days of Future Past*, which begins many years after the events of *X-Men: United*, the US government approves a military program that plunges the world into a global anti-mutant genocide. Singer's narrative never addresses the discrepancy between what it advocates as the right path in *X-Men: United* and what happens in *Days of Future Past*. Instead, the message places the blame for hostile government action on provocative radicals like the Magneto, not the uncaring wielders of political power.

Magneto warns of "chains and a number burned into your forehead" in response to the Mutant Registration Act ("X-Men"). The bill is struck down at the end of the first film, but his warning, however, more-or-less predicts *Days of Future Past*. In the last scene of *X-Men*, he also cautions Charles that the government will come for "you and your children", which happens in the next movie ("X-Men") ("*X-Men: United*"). In spite of his distrust of the government and his accurate predictions of the atrocities it will commit, the denouement of *Days of Future Past* designates radicals as the problem. Dissuading Mystique and Magneto from their missions solves the 1973 conflict of *Days of Future Past*. At the very end, Wolverine finds himself in a new timeline, a new present in which the government no longer hunts mutants and all of his friends are alive. Therefore, the ultimate obstacle to overcome was not Dr. Trask's program or a dangerous government, but Magneto and Mystique attempting to assassinate anti-mutant government leaders.

To discredit Magneto's liberationist political beliefs, the writers depict him as a cunning intellectual with violent tendencies, blinded by both his pain as a Holocaust survivor and his own vanity. Magneto "grew angry and vengeful", therefore, according to the writers, the audience

should side with Xavier (“X-Men”). He is portrayed as a Machiavellian leader. “Still unwilling to make sacrifices,” he scornfully tells Xavier during a hostage situation (“X-Men”). In 1973, when he finds out Mystique’s actions will lead to a genocidal future, he tries to murder her. He is also narcissistically grandiose. In 1973, he storms the White House lawn, unearths the President’s underground bunker with his powers, then turns the news cameras on himself to tell the world they should be afraid of him (“X-Men: Days of Future Past”). “You are a god among insects,” he tells Pyro, “Don’t let anyone tell you different” (“X-Men: United”). This is obviously a belief he also has about himself, which makes him compelling, but unlikeable, especially in comparison to the gentle, approachable Charles Xavier.

The other members of the Mutant Brotherhood are given alien or animalistic traits, which Otherizes them (Hicks). Sabretooth, with his pointed teeth and claw-like fingernails, is more beast than man. Most of his dialogue is snarled. Green-skinned Toad eats a bird for a snack (“X-Men”). Finally, there is Mystique, the blue-skinned, yellow-eyed shapeshifter. Her appearance looks especially reptilian when Senator Kelly is brought to Magneto’s lair (“X-Men”). At first, it would seem that gentle Nightcrawler breaks this pattern because he has sharp teeth, a tail, and blue skin. The narrative seems to overcompensate for his beastlike, alien appearance by making him deeply religious, therefore more palatable. By characterizing the Mutant Brotherhood as Magneto’s creature-like henchmen, the narrative creates an inhuman enemy so that the X-Men, who have strange powers themselves, appear more human and sympathetic to the audience. Therefore, Xavier’s cause seems more legitimate.

Pyro, who eventually joins the Mutant Brotherhood and is therefore supposed to represent radically political youth, is also depicted as impulsive and immature. He always responds to harassment with violence, which always exacerbates the situation and forces the

hand of a more assimilationist mutant like Bobby or Rogue. Early on in *X-Men: United*, Rogue, Bobby, and Pyro are harassed by several humans, unaware the three are mutants on a field trip. Pyro displays his intentionally mischievous, reactionary attitude towards others by using his pyrokinesis on a bully's cigarette ("X-Men: United"). Bobby immediately extinguishes the fire with his powers, but the humans are alarmed and the X-Men must abandon the field trip ("X-Men: United"). Later, when the police arrive at the Drake residence under the impression the X-Men are keeping humans hostage, Pyro refuses to comply with the officers' instructions. "You know all those dangerous mutants you hear about on the news?" he asks, smugly, "I'm the worst one" ("X-Men: United"). His face is a mixture of anger and delight as he sets fire to all of the squad cars ("X-Men: United"). Rogue is forced to intervene by stealing Pyro's powers and dissipating the fires ("X-Men: United"). The narrative characterizes radical youth as obnoxious and riotous people who exacerbate conflict.

Magneto also exhibits a retaliatory attitude. Near the end of *X-Men: United*, he locates Charles, who is under Stryker's illusion and unaware he is using Cerebro to exterminate mutants. "Still fighting the good fight?" Magneto asks ("X-Men: United"). Xavier cannot hear him. "From here it looks like they're not playing by your rules. Maybe it's time to play by theirs," Magneto suggests, and then uses the illusion to change Xavier's target to humans ("X-Men: United"). Ascribing reactionary behavior to radical characters like Magneto and Pyro implies that non-assimilationist politics are violent and blinded by vengeance.

Hicks keenly observes that the characters associated with accommodationist politics are portrayed with favorable characteristics such as intelligence and upper class indicators. Charles Xavier is a forgiving, gentle patriarch who teaches physics and literature to the students at his institution. He is associated with Dr. King in the narrative by being "consistently positioned as a

passionate advocate of peace” (Hicks). The narrative, however, simultaneously associates Xavier with luxury and wealth. “Far from King's engagement with impoverished urban communities, the school where Xavier lives and over which he presides has a decidedly neo-colonial feel - all lustrous mahogany, rich carpets, and expanses of impeccable lawn” (Hicks). The imagery is supposed to make Xavier appear likeable and his cause more legitimate. His School for Gifted Youngsters is an institution for higher learning, which connotes that he and the X-Men are enlightened.

The other good guys' intelligence is also emphasized in the films. Storm's role as a teacher is very prominent in *X-Men: United*. A fair portion of her lines in the film are exposition or explanations of scientific concepts to the other characters. Jean Grey's first appearance in the films is her eloquent presentation on mutation, genetics, and evolution to Congress. She also successfully performs advanced medical procedures at the school. She and Charles have powers associated with the mind and intelligence, such as telepathy, telekinesis, and ESP, whereas most of the Mutant Brotherhood is bestial (Hicks).

Class coding also plays a role in characterizing the Mutant Brotherhood. While Xavier and his followers live in a lavish school, Magneto and his followers live in a cave (Hicks). The cave itself has elegant fixtures, such as a Newton's cradle, but these are clearly Magneto's possessions, signaling his intelligence and good taste. The fixtures do not reflect anything about his followers. In the scene that introduces the audience to Magneto's lair, Toad is welding something and he speaks with a cockney accent (“X-Men”). Both signal lower class and connote low intelligence. “While Magneto and his team must perennially steal their means of transportation, be it helicopter or boat, Xavier's X-Men have all manner of expensive vehicles,



from jet-propelled motorcycles to a private jet” (Hicks). Class coding relies on inherent prejudices to make the X-Men and their cause appear superior.

Overall, the allegory seeks to undermine radical queer politics. The Mutant Brotherhood appears juvenile, shortsighted, and vain. The narrative designates separationists as the aggravators responsible for state-sponsored violence. The films then redirect all sympathy and support towards an accommodationist, nonthreatening agenda. The subversive power of X-Men’s queer metaphor is weighed down by all of the biases written into the films.

### **Consequences of Assimilationist Message and Lack of Queer Representation**

“Films inform normality. They teach us cultural and social lessons about how to operate in our society, and we welcome them into our lives as entertainment” (Irvine, 6). Whether consciously intended or not, the assimilationist agenda in the X-Men films instructs audiences in which marginalized groups are acceptable and which political approaches to social change are valid. By limiting the number of characters of color in the films and never addressing their experiences with racism in a narrative about prejudice, the films uphold whiteness as default and imply oppression only matters if it happens to white people.

The X-Men films are meant to be blockbusters. Singer’s orientation is a major influence and he uses his experiences and beliefs for good storytelling. Besides, a largely unchallenging, assimilationist allegory sells best, therefore the filmmakers have no motivation to include critique of the middlebrow ideology put forward in the text. “[...] when wide-release films cost millions, the lower of the predictable is palpable and often offsets the possibility of gay centrality” (Walters, 28). The themes are queer, but the characters cannot be queer themselves. The MOGAI elements of the text work best as an allegory in a for-profit medium, using science

Marburger, 52

fiction for plausible deniability. As a result, queer people are erased from the narrative because they are too controversial. The main problem with the allegory can be summarized by Vito Russo's conclusion to *The Celluloid Closet*: "So long as Hollywood has one eye on the box office and the other on the lowest common denominator in the audience, it will always be chickenshit" (Russo, 326).

## CHAPTER TWO:

### ***More Than Meets the Eye: Queer Gender and Attraction Transmuted Onto Robots From Outer Space***

#### **Part One: Fan Influence and Gender Representation**

Unique to science fiction, one type of queer representation in media is a worldbuilding analogue, a depiction similar to a known queer identity but different because the depiction only exists in a supernatural universe. In a Transformers comic series, *More Than Meets the Eye*, giant, immortal asexual robots engage in various types of same-gender romantic attraction. The author of the series is also developing the robots' cultural construction of gender. None of these aspects of the text are used to designate queerness as alien or something that can only exist in science fiction. Instead of supporting the status quo through the series' science fiction genre, *More Than Meets the Eye* challenges hegemony. Because of the way the characters in the series are written, the queer representation in the text presents asexuality and same-gender romance as natural, which creates an affirming experience for queer readers. This text is an example of using science fiction analogue for productive queer representation, instead of contributing to queer erasure in media by conflating queerness with the unnatural or ignoring it altogether. Nevertheless, this chapter will reveal that queerphobia and hegemonic privilege still seep into the text.

Like the theme song says, Transformers are robots in disguise. The Transformers are sentient machines from the planet Cybertron. Typically, a Cybertronian has two forms: their

humanoid robot form and their “alt mode,” which they change their physical shape into, often a vehicle<sup>7</sup>. The original 1980s cartoon, *The Transformers*, was about a war between Optimus Prime’s noble Autobots and Megatron’s evil Decepticons. The program’s purpose was to sell a line of Hasbro toys to young boys. Hasbro’s Transformers franchise has grown since then, consisting of multiple subsequent television series, a film franchise directed by Michael Bay, the toys themselves, and various comic series.

Idea Design and Works, LLC (usually “IDW”, for short) has owned the Transformers comic publishing license since 2005 (“IDW And Hasbro Celebrate”). *More Than Meets the Eye*, an ongoing comic series which began in 2012, takes place just after the end of the four-million-year war between the Decepticons and the Autobots. As an official series in the Transformers franchise, it has made unprecedented strides in making the comics universe more inclusive in terms of representations of gender diversity and relationship variety.

“Bleak” would be an appropriate description of the Transformers’ gender diversity before *More Than Meets the Eye*. “Transformers has historically been a pretty regressive franchise, even for franchises that exist for the express purpose of selling toys to 8-11-year-old boys (and the occasional nostalgic dad)” writes Lindsey Ellis (Ellis). Due to the male target demographic, the characters in Transformers have been almost exclusively male in every rendition of the franchise. Because the characters are a race of alien robots, the lack of gender diversity is more acceptable. Even in the context of male-dominated western media, Transformers has had almost no female characters, and this has been upheld because the genre makes it permissible. Various iterations of Transformers have invented convenient worldbuilding rules to excuse the

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<sup>7</sup> There are endless possibilities for alt modes besides vehicles. An alt mode can be a device of some sort. Some are laser pointers, some are memory drives, and so on.

overwhelmingly male portrayals of the Cybertronian race. Early 2014, however, marked a major turning point in the IDW universe's construction of Cybertronian gender. During the *Dark Cybertron* crossover storyline, *Robots in Disguise* #25 and *More Than Meets the Eye* #26 introduced three new characters to the universe: Chromia, Nautica, and Windblade, all of whom were female.

Before 2014, Arcee was the uncomfortable exception to the all-male IDW Transformers universe. In the IDW version of her character, she was originally a male robot who was forcibly subjected to a mad scientist's experiment ("Human After All"). "Arcee gained lipstick and a slender form" and was "driven mad" by the experience ("Human After All"). Rachel Stevens notes that Arcee's IDW origin story "prevented new female Transformers from showing up for many years until a solution was devised" ("Human After All"). Arcee's backstory is an example of using science fiction to restrict diverse representation. Depicted as a tragic science experiment, her femininity and gender appear unnatural, even monstrous, compared to the neutral male default. IDW's new writers, however, do not wish to continue using Transformers worldbuilding to be hostile to marginalized groups. "Mercifully, the story has not been referred to directly" in either *More Than Meets the Eye* or its sister comic, *Robots in Disguise*, in which she is currently a series regular ("Human After All").



Arcee, the only pink Transformer depicted in the series so far. Note the definition of her lips, which resembles lipstick. (Artists: James Raiz, Livio Ramondelli, Antonio Rojo)

There are no human characters in *More Than Meets the Eye*, which places all representation scrutiny on the Cybertronians. If these are sentient machines from an alien planet, is it appropriate to read western human culture's genders onto them and speculate on what these characters mean for media representation of marginalized identities?

Cybertronian gender in *More Than Meets the Eye* is strongly influenced by a western cis binary. The gender anthropomorphization is obvious if one looks at character designs. A personal interview with an art student illuminated the cisgender and binary encoding in the character's designs. The student, who had never read these comics but had studied anatomy and illustration, accurately guessed the encoded gender of the alien robots shown to her (Dubis).



**Rewind (Left):** broad shoulders and chest area, bulky arms, thick fingers, straight lines for his waist, and no indent to hint at womanly hips (Dubis). (Artist: Milne)

**Chromedome (Middle):** Large on top through the chest and shoulders. The waist curves in slightly, but not enough to strongly indicate “female.” (Dubis). (Artist: Milne)

**Whirl (Right):** Though a victim of state-sponsored mutilation that replaced his face with an eye and his hands with claws, Whirl is still designed to be read as male. The top is broader and tapers down like a lightbulb shape. There is no clear 'hourglass' indent at the waist (Dubis). (Artist: Milne)

Any argument that insists Cybertronians do not have human gender or that readers should not analyze representation politics in Transformers because the characters are extraterrestrials is willfully ignoring the fact this series is written both by and about humans. The characters are utterly anthropomorphized. For example, Transformers have human features and expressions:



**Left:** Minimus Ambus is horrified to discover what the Functionist regime has done to his brother. (Artist: Alex Milne).

**Middle:** Rung expresses earnest friendliness. (Artist: Milne)

**Right:** Rodimus Prime pinches his brow in frustration. (Artist: Milne)

The speech bubbles are written in English and often use British English terminology like “proper” because though this is an American series, Roberts is a British writer (Issue #1, back cover). The characters are supposed to be speaking Neocybex, however, thus the dialogue is meant to be read as though translated (Issue#7, 3).

William Earnest writes on non-human characters in science fiction: “After all, we wrote them. We filmed them. At some level, they will always be about us” (Earnest, 231). Generally in western literature, robots and aliens are portrayed as unfeeling or distant from humanity in some way, whereas Cybertronians have complex experiences and a history that rings of similar themes in human history. Early on in the series, Cyclonus delivers a powerful speech to explain the war to Tailgate<sup>8</sup>, prefacing that ultimately, the winning side of the four-million year civil war depends on who is asked. His monologue establishes the series’ complex portrayal of war and politics:

“[...] both sides wanted change—they just disagreed over the nature, scale, and purpose. One side rose up against a corrupt senate and sought to emancipate the people. The other side, while superficially opposed to the ruling elite, were terrified of revolution. They wanted an orderly transition from one system of government to another—provided they remained in control, of course. One side swept across the planet, liberating province after province. The inhabitants were expected to help their liberators overthrow the old order. The other side saw this as an act of coercion and vowed to kill the uprising. The senate fell—but the war continued. The Autobots and the Decepticons. I wonder, Tailgate... If you’d been there at the time—if you’d heard the call to arms and watched the recruitment rallies and seen the training camps and the branding ceremonies...if you’d been there at the time...on which side would you have fought?”(Issue #3, 15)

*More Than Meets the Eye* engages with radical politics, assimilationist politics, prejudice, and moral ambiguity with far more attention to detail and complexity than Bryan Singer’s X-Men films. However, because skin color, gender, and attraction orientation are irrelevant to

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<sup>8</sup> Tailgate experienced an accident that left him trapped in an underground cavern for millions of years, thereby missing the entire war.



Cybertronian politics (whereas they were wholly relevant in X-Men's queer theme), this chapter will not analyze the text's take on that topic. Instead, this chapter will analyze and critique how the author of this science fiction text uses the analogue and otherworldliness of the series' genre to make inclusive changes in the universe's representations of gender, attraction, and relationships.

The series takes place as the Transformers try to build their post-war world anew. The quest of the Lost Light crew, captained by Rodimus Prime, is to search for the Knights of Cybertron, who may or may not exist, in the hopes of reconnecting with Cybertronian culture. Reading the series makes it clear: the story is not about the mission, but about the characters onboard. Central to the story, the characters are written with emotional complexity that mirrors human psychology. In fact, one of the main characters is a psychologist. Roberts has commented that the series explores a fictional universe through worldbuilding and a "look at big issues through new lenses", which, in his opinion, are the best aspects of science fiction (Caldwell). *More Than Meets the Eye* is a series that confronts deep questions of morality or the existence of a higher power, but also entertains day-to-day interactions amongst a variety of colorful characters. For example, Ratchet grumbles about Rodimus Prime's best friend, Drift: "Ever since his brush with death he's been determined to 'embrace the transcendental.' It just makes me want to punch him. How'd he get to be third-in-command, anyway? I mean, apart from telling Rodimus exactly what he wants to hear all the time" (Issue #2, 8). James Roberts, the author of *More Than Meets the Eye*, has commented:

While we make sure the stories are thrilling and action packed and full of hazard and jeopardy and incident, events always unfold through the prism of character frailty – that's frailty in the sense of people making poor decisions, or being susceptible to fear, anger, jealousy, irrationality... human frailty, but through Transformers (Whittaker, Part 1).

Therefore, Cybertronians are best understood as a speculative version of humanity that can live for millions of years.

The characters can also project hard light forms of themselves<sup>9</sup>, which manifest based on their psych evaluation. The result: several of the main characters in *More Than Meets the Eye* have been portrayed with human forms in the comics.



**Left to right:** Ratchet, Rewind, Swerve, Skids, and Rung. All cisgender male. As a robot, Rewind has male pronouns. His human form goes by “he” pronouns, looks cis male and has a conventionally male name, Joe. Rung worries that “the program is struggling with human gender” because his name is a western female name, Mary Sue. This chapter will also address the fact that they are all white.

Portraying the characters in-universe as human completes the anthropomorphization of their gender. Because these robots are anthropomorphized, they should therefore be analyzed for their impact on media representation.

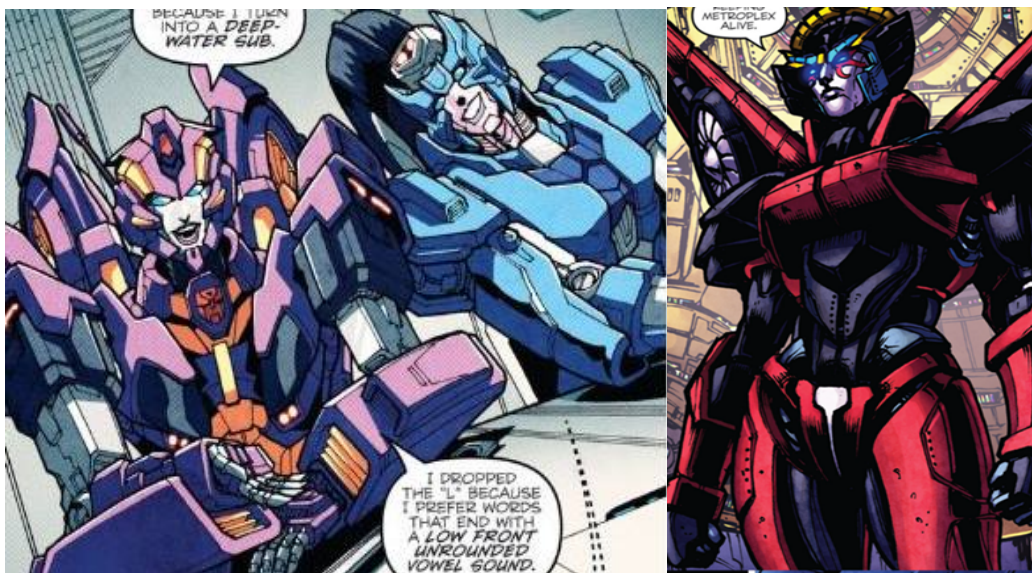
Because of fan interaction with the text, there are more female Cybertronians (often called “fembots”) in the comics. In 2013, Hasbro and IDW hosted a contest amongst fans to create and vote on a new character for the comics and toy line. The winner was Windblade, a female Autobot. James Roberts and John Barber, who were writing the *Dark Cybertron* storyline in which Windblade would debut, wanted Windblade’s gender to “make sense—and I

<sup>9</sup> The purpose of hard light forms is like a technological version of astral projection. Hard light forms allow Transformers to be somewhere where their usual bodies cannot go, whether because they are injured or because alien laws do not permit them on the premises.

stress—in the context of what had gone before,” says Roberts (Stevens). Confronted with the established restrictions on gender built into Transformers’ established universe, Barber and Roberts chose to add corollaries to the rules of the world and convey them in a way that felt natural. In order to make Windblade’s gender difference feel believable in the established universe, they “wanted there to be more than one ‘fembot’ and it couldn’t just be Windblade. We wanted to suggest there were others” (Stevens). Embracing Windblade as an official character opened up the opportunity for more female Cybertronians in the comics. Adjusting the universe opened up the opportunity for diverse representation in an overwhelmingly male text.

As they were planning the series, Barber and Roberts decided to add Chromia, one of the few female Transformers from the original 1980s television show (“Human After All”). This would have sufficed, but Roberts was told that once *Dark Cybertron* concluded, Chromia was supposed to become a regular in Windblade’s own IDW comic series (“Human After All”). Roberts, who had been hoping to make Chromia a series regular in *More Than Meets the Eye*, invented a new female character, Nautica (“Human After All”). By this point in the series, Roberts had already contributed three new characters to the Transformers universe through *More Than Meets the Eye*: Rung, Pharma, and Tyrest, all of whom were male. These were easy to add to the universe because the worldbuilding did not make male gender confusing or controversial. Once the universe was adjusted for Windblade and her presence imported Chromia and Nautica, Roberts also wrote a minor female character into a key scene later on in the series, a protestor featured on news coverage. Albeit indirectly, because of the fans creating and choosing Windblade, *More Than Meets the Eye* became more diverse (in terms of gender) than it had been before.

Roberts' original intention for the designs of Chromia and Nautica was for them to "[...] not immediately have that sort of 'female' design," but instead resemble "the default Cybertronian design" that the comics had used up until this point in the story (Stevens). He hoped "it would only be through their use of the personal pronouns that it would register that they were female" (Stevens). However, because he and Barber wanted to make it clear that their comics universe finally had female Cybertronians, the characters' designs had to immediately evoke "female", especially because their first appearance was part of a cliffhanger on the last page of Issue 25 (Stevens). Because Roberts and Barber felt they needed to make an important female representation debut in the IDW universe, the fembots' designs had to draw on conventional western traits to make the debut immediately understood.



**Left:** Nautica and Chromia. Their jawlines are soft and feminine instead of jagged or angular. Their eyes are almond-shaped and slanted, as if to hint at eye makeup. Their lips are full and emphasized. Their noses are small and pert instead of large and defined (Dubis). (Artist: Milne)  
**Right:** Windblade's debut. She has a small, less-pronounced jawline, a chest shape that indicates breasts, a feminine stance, swayed out hips, and an hourglass waist shape (Dubis). (Artists: Raiz, Ramondelli, Rojo)

One progressive characteristic of the designs is the fact they do not hypersexualize Chromia and Nautica. The same can be said for the female protestor character:



**The female protestor: defined lips, a slight nose, a narrow waist, and the armor's chest plate looks like it indicates breasts (Dubis) (Artist: Milne)**

The finalized, official portrayals of the female IDW Transformers encode them to be read as female from a cis and binary point of view. This approach is troubling from a trans or non-gender-conforming perspective. People who do not identify as female or cisfemale can have breasts, go by “she/her” pronouns, have hourglass figures, or wear makeup. Therefore, by deciding that nonhuman characters can only be understood to be female if depicted with hourglass hips and lipstick, the characters’ designs contribute to queer gender erasure and limit presentations of female identity.

There is ample opportunity to represent queer genders in *More Than Meets the Eye* in the future, however. Binary and cisgender terms are not the only questions of gender that Roberts has addressed. His comments on gender have not been restricted to hard light projections, either. *More Than Meets the Eye*, he has stated, has not definitively established that Cybertronian gender is binary or cis (“TFs and Gender. A Clarification”).

I absolutely think it's the case that there are male-coded TFs who self-identify as female and preferred to be called 'she', and female-coded TFs who self-identify as male and prefer to be called 'he'. I also think there's scope for a TF to adopt a different pronoun if they so choose [...] (“TFs and Gender. A Clarification.”)

He adds that choice of personal pronouns is an inalienable right and should be respected (“TFs and Gender. A Clarification”). As *More Than Meets the Eye* continues and the universe is further delved into, Roberts believes that “exploring binary gender or the equivalent or multiple genders and the idea of certain characters feeling that they’ve been miscategorized” is absolutely attainable in the text (Stevens). Ultimately, the author, conscious that he might “inadvertently shut off avenues of exploration” wants discovery of Cybertronian gender to be an organic, ongoing experience with *More Than Meets the Eye* readers (Stevens).

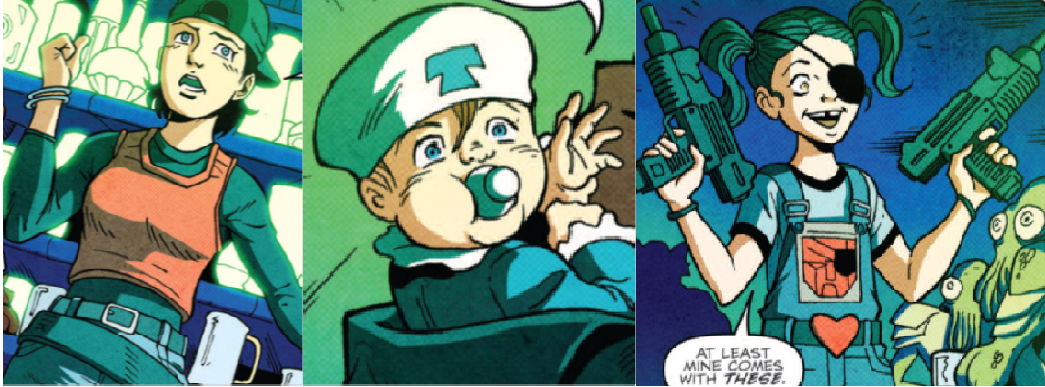
Queer genders are as yet unrepresented canonically, but by adding minor female characters to *More Than Meets the Eye*, Roberts has made gender variety in the universe feel more natural. “We’ve got some BIG stories coming up in 2015” he tweeted, promising “More female TFs!” among other developments in the story (29 December 2014). Roberts’ inclusion of this detail in his teasing tweet means that he recognizes gender representation is important and is taking steps to broaden gender diversity. Because developments in female representation only occurred in *More Than Meets the Eye* after Windblade appeared, however, the increase in diversity should be attributed both to the fans and to Roberts’ accommodating and conscientious response to Windblade’s addition. Roberts adjusts or invents the in-world logic to make the universe more inclusive. He implements these changes in dialogue with fans who will continue to consume and critique the series, making suggestions for how the worldbuilding could develop in favor of marginalized identities.

In the past, Transformers has almost exclusively populated Cybertron with males and written the characters just like humans, thereby establishing maleness as the neutral default. Right now, *More Than Meets the Eye* also reinforces our conception of what is natural by only portraying Anglo human forms of the characters. It is fair to speculate Windblade has added

female racial diversity to the universe as well. If her human form did appear in the text, it would help cement a reading of Windblade as a Japanese woman. As pictured earlier, her humanoid robot design is portrayed with “kumadori facepaint — the colors of heroes in kabuki theatre. She also wields a sword, and has a helmet based on the onna-bugeisha warrior women of the upper class in Japanese history” (“Human After All”). Only one other character in the series would probably have a nonwhite hard light form, if it appeared. Drift, who carries katanas as his primary weapons, and whose alt mode is a Japanese drift racecar, is a series regular in *More Than Meets the Eye* until Issue 13. He voluntarily exiles himself from the Lost Light after a decision, made in part by his leadership, ends in tragedy. As of Issue 38, the Lost Light has yet to hear from him, but evidence suggests Drift will probably be important in a future adventure. Though hard light forms are rarely used in *More Than Meets the Eye*, perhaps readers will witness his human form. Regardless, *More Than Meets the Eye*’s racial representation is very limited overall, which suggests the queer content of the text is most easily accessible to white readers.

Only one nonwhite hard light form has appeared in *More Than Meets the Eye* as of February 2015. Ultra Magnus’ human form is a Latina woman, though he chose his hard light form as homage to a human he once knew (“Human After All”) (Issue#13, 9). The choice is made in the story to develop Ultra Magnus’ character, not to make a distinct representation of an established woman of color or suggest the cast of *More Than Meets the Eye* has any racial diversity. Based on the complexions of all the other assigned forms, Ultra Magnus’ *designated* hard light form would presumably be white as well. The questions of gender representation in his hard light form are also minimized because the design is a tribute to a character who never appears in *More Than Meets the Eye*.





The only female hard light forms that have appeared in *More Than Meets the Eye*.

**Left:** Ultra Magnus pays tribute to his human friend, Verity Carlo.

**Middle:** Tailgate is assigned a white infant form based on his psych eval.

**Right:** Based on his psych eval, Whirl's hard light form is a young white girl.

Cybertronians are humanity through a speculative lens, but certain science fiction aspects of the series raise questions as to how to interpret the characters. All of the hard light forms appear in *More Than Meets the Eye* #13, which was published over a year before Nautica, Chromia, and Windblade appeared. In robot form, all of the male characters have “he/him” pronouns and are drawn with cisgender male traits. All of the characters are referred to by the same pronouns when projecting their hard light forms. Whirl's human form, however, is a little girl and the gender of Tailgate's human form, an infant, appears ambiguous. The alternate presentation of gender is only possible because the series is science fiction.

The range of queer possibilities of gender offered by the hard light forms is a missed opportunity; it is never addressed in the text. Roberts, however, has publicly responded to fans who have asked if, because of Whirl's hard light form, the character can be interpreted as female:

Going by what has thus far been presented on the page - because that's all we can go on - the characters in MTMTE who refer to themselves using male or female personal pronouns do so because whatever those pronouns connote in a TF context [...] complements their sense of self-identity. They are exercising a choice. They are using preferred pronouns (“TFs and Gender. A Clarification”)

His comments do not mean the interpretation of Whirl, or any other character, as female is false.



On the contrary, if fans choose to read the text in favor of gender diversity, Roberts supports it. He has commented that it is not “my place to police others' headcanon. If a reader for whatever reason wants to say to themselves ‘Because of/despite what's on the page, my take on the character is that they're 'male' or 'female',’ I can't stop that” (“TFs and Gender. A Clarification”).

Roberts has also embraced reader-prompted interpretations of the characters. He has stated that he has adopted the idea that Tailgate’s hard light form is a baby girl, and there is nothing to suggest the baby is not a girl (17 October 2013) (Stevens). Tailgate’s character has also attracted a female interpretation because Tailgate was labeled “The Ingénue” in season two promotional material (“Human After All”). “I loved it when I found out—[ingénue has a female connotation] —in fact, if anything it should be read as a female word,” Roberts encouraged (Stevens). He has also announced that, though it is “not in the comic, so maybe inadmissible as evidence” (17 October 2013), Cyclonus’ hard light form would look like “a stern, Victorian schoolmarm” (Stevens). This unfortunately implies that yet another human form is white. Nevertheless, one gets the impression that should Cyclonus’ hard light projection appear in canon, the design will look as Roberts has suggested. Because fans started a public conversation about gender and hard light forms, the author made public comments that not only support queer readings of the text, but suggest that Cybertronian gender could develop in a more inclusive manner.

Besides describing theoretical changes in the IDW universe, Roberts has already canonically changed rules to keep the universe from reiterating offensive gender-essentialist ideologies. He altered the designation of Nautica’s sparktype<sup>10</sup> in Issue 31, even though it had already been published. There are six known sparktypes in Roberts’ series, the names of which

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<sup>10</sup> In Transformers, a spark is the Cybertronian equivalent of a heart, though it is made of a hard, crystal material and is usually blue. A sparktype is the analogue of a human bloodtype.

allude to some sort of internal fuel chemistry in the mechanic beings: vitreous positive, vitreous negative, isomeric positive, isomeric negative, ferrum negative, and ferrum positive (Issue #31, 23). The sparktypes of twenty Lost Light crewmembers were listed in Issue 31, including Nautica's. In the original version of the issue, Nautica's sparktype was listed as "estriol" instead of the six established sparktypes (Issue #31, 23). If he gave her "a strikingly different spark," Roberts originally reasoned, "it'll be clear that she's the only one of that group with that spark and the implication will be it's to do with her femaleness" (Stevens). The choice troubled Roberts after the issue was published, however (Stevens). He has since stated: "I'm not gonna claim ignorance [...] in some quarters [of the fandom], it was unpopular, for reasons that I came to appreciate" (Stevens). Roberts admitted the detail was offensive, even if unintended, and had the editor change the issue to make Nautica's sparktype one of the six known types (9 November 2014) (Stevens). "It was hamfisted of me, I think, to sort of use a label that was inherently female. I don't know, I just think 'let's try and be a little smarter than that,'" he says (Stevens). He has also agreed with fan comments that, regardless of sparktype, "Nautica is still Nautica" and is still a female character (9 November 2014). James Roberts has been very responsive to fan concerns about gender representation in *More Than Meets the Eye*. He has corrected himself by changing the fictional characters' reality so that the text does not contribute to real-world politics of erasure.

In the main timeline of *More Than Meets the Eye*, "he/him" pronouns are assumed for everyone. Several members of the crew meet an unconscious Cybertronian, burned beyond recognition, and they immediately use "he" pronouns to refer to it (Issue #34, 12). Whirl encounters a member of another mechanical alien race, the Ammonites, and refers to the being as "he" automatically (*Robots in Disguise*, Issue #25, 20). Later, the characters first encounter the

fembots (*Robots in Disguise*, Issue #25, 27). While fleeing from attackers, Ratchet asks: “I don’t know if this is the right time, Chromia, but...back there. [...] You said ‘her’” (Issue #26, 8).

“And?” asks Chromia, to which Ratchet responds: “...doesn’t matter. Maybe now isn’t the right time after all” (Issue #26, 8). Several issues later, Rewind, the lone survivor of a massacre in a similar timeline, points to Nautica and asks: “And the ‘bot with Nightbeat, who’s he?” (Issue #33, 3). Skids politely corrects Rewind, who is bewildered in response (Issue #33, 3).

Science fiction presents alternate possibilities. When the series has ventured into other timelines, Roberts has also written perceptions of gender differently to reflect divergent constructions across various versions of the *More Than Meets the Eye* universe. Rewind’s presumption of Nautica’s pronouns in one timeline is a vast departure from the language another Rewind uses in yet another timeline. In the aforementioned scene that features an unnamed female protestor, the alternate version of Rewind refers to the character, whom he has never met, as a “she” and the other characters do not react (Issue #35, 12). The alternate construction of Cybertronian gender and pronoun assignment in the other timeline signals that Roberts, who is open to different avenues of worldbuilding gender, has intentionally created other universes with different types of gender in Transformers society. Creating multiple renditions of gender construction helps denaturalize the male-normative mindset that pervades the IDW Transformers universe.

Meanwhile, the female regular in the series, Nautica, has a unique portrayal that sets her apart from conventional female character tropes. Lindsey Ellis celebrates the fact that “there are female Transformers, but they don’t have to be in relationships, nor is it mandatory that they have boyfriends to be defined by” (Ellis). Nautica is an upbeat, bibliophilic quantum engineer (Issue #28, 12). These outlandish traits do not make Nautica an unrealistically accomplished or

idealized character. The Lost Light crew is populated by incredible talent. Ratchet is the greatest living Cybertronian doctor, Rodimus is the chosen Prime with an important but unclear destiny, Chromedome is an expert mnemosurgeon<sup>11</sup>, and Brainstorm is a staggeringly genius weapons engineer. Nautica's character is naïve, but no more so than Tailgate, Swerve, or Rung, and her lack of street smarts is attributed to hailing from an isolated Cybertronian colony (Issue #28). Nautica's characteristics make her "fit in" on a ship already filled with exceptionally gifted crewmembers and a vast array of unique personalities. Her portrayal indicates future non-male characters in *More Than Meets the Eye* will also be written with care.

James Roberts has made many efforts to write respectful gender variation in *More Than Meets the Eye*, but these changes in Transformer representation are not merely the result of his mindful, open attitude. The initiative of fans to create and vote for a female Transformers character incited Roberts' subsequent progressive choices for the text. All of the evidence presented so far in this chapter suggests the fans have a palpable influence in the series and will continue to do so. *More Than Meets the Eye*'s socially-conscious developments in worldbuilding are also the result of an author with near-absolute control over his text. Roberts refuses to use the series' otherworldliness to deny exploration of gender. He recognizes that *More Than Meets the Eye* exemplifies a key component of science fiction: critiquing human frailty and society, and therefore the politics of media representation are relevant and important in the text. The comic, which still only has one recurring non-male character as of Issue 38, remains a grossly male-dominated text, but this seems likely to change as the series continues. Hopefully, these other depictions of gender will challenge western gender by presenting it under a Cybertronian lens. The limited discourse on racializations of IDW characters, however, is not

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<sup>11</sup> A Roberts addition to the Transformers universe. Mnemosurgery is the practice of extracting and altering memories.

nearly as promising for future representations of other marginalized identities in the series. The hegemony of gender is in the process of being unpacked, but the hegemony of whiteness remains unchallenged.

## **Part Two: If There Is No Neocybex Word for “Queer”, Are There Queer Robots?**

### **Cybertronian Attraction and Relationship Diversity**

Whether it is the intent to become friends, the desire to form a lifelong romantic partnership, or the wish to form a whole other bond entirely, Cybertronians experience attraction to one another in *More Than Meets the Eye*. Roberts reasons that “it really is a simple argument – if they can hate each other (and a four million year long civil war is ample evidence of hate), they can experience the opposite emotion” (Whittaker, Part 2). Before *More Than Meets the Eye*, there were very few best friends in the Transformers franchise (Whittaker, Part 2). Roberts not only includes a variety of friendships in his series, but his comic includes the first gay couple in Transformers canon. Even beyond those types of attraction, *More Than Meets the Eye* contains ample amounts of companionship diversity that reflect the nuance and variety of human relationships, which is an important queer characteristic in the text.

Before this chapter delves into several examples of attraction variety in the text, the question will be addressed: Do Cybertronians have sex? In *More Than Meets the Eye*'s universe, they do not. The text may jest at sex: Rodimus observes that two other crewmates have “an interesting relationship” as Drift wraps his arms around him to help demonstrate a swordplay technique (Issue #13, 4). Megatron snarks to his psychiatrist: “Two hours listening to you tell me why I used to wear a giant weapon on my arm. I hate to disappoint you, Rung, but sometimes a fusion cannon is just a fusion cannon” (Issue #28, 7). The only indications of sex in

the text are jokes aimed squarely at the fourth wall, which reinforces the absence of sex within the universe. Sexuality is not an aspect of Cybertronian beings. All of the attraction they experience is from a position of asexuality, which places queerness at the baseline of relationships in *More Than Meets the Eye*.

By establishing the Cybertronian race as one that does not experience sexual attraction, *More Than Meets the Eye* creates an accessible and validating experience for asexual readers. These characters are alien robots, but they are not depicted to seem strange. We read them as humans. The series is incomprehensible without reading it as a portrait of humanity. It therefore helps naturalize queer identity by portraying it as a non-issue, the default. Establishing asexuality as the norm also helps distinguish romantic attraction from sexual attraction, which is especially important because the two are often conflated in contemporary western culture. The baseline of asexuality opens up appreciation for the variety of other attractions and relationships that humanity can experience, be it lifelong romantic partnership, unrequited love, friendship, or even best friends. Appreciation for such variety helps to dispel the notion in western society that sexual attraction is a key component of being well-adjusted or that it is necessary in a romantic partnership. Through a speculative fiction lens, *More Than Meets the Eye* presents an alternate version of our society in which sexuality is not mandated.

Roberts, ever an enthusiast for worldbuilding, invents several terms to describe Cybertronian partnerships. Nightbeat asks Nautica if her culture practices “any form of elective kinship” such as *Conjux Endura* or *Amica Endura* (Issue #32, 7). Outside the diegesis, both terms are rooted in Latin. *Amica Endura* means friends for life. *Conjux Endura* means life partner, or spouse. Nautica, in response to Nightbeat’s question about elective kinship, asks him

if he has ever had a sparkmate (Issue #32, 7). “Sparkmate” is a word that refers to a romantic partnership that may or may not be as “official” as Conjunx Endura.

Not all important bonds in *More Than Meets the Eye* need to be labeled. Before the war, Prowl and Chromedome, for example, shared a very strong but ambiguous relationship as partners on the police force. Whirl describes them before the war: “two stuck-up know-it-alls swan around Cybertron, following clues and pretending they don’t like each other” (Issue #12, 12). During a flashback to an unsanctioned mission to stop a bombing, Prowl urges Orion Pax to make Chromedome stay behind (Issue#11, 7). “Look, he’s good at his job—not that I’d ever tell him—but he’s going to throw it all away for the sake of this...escapade,” Prowl confides (Issue#11, 7). In an earlier flashback, Chromedome and Prowl discuss what they would do if war broke out. Prowl says he would abandon the planet (Issue #10, 17). Chromedome asks his partner in disbelief: “You’d leave Cybertron? Without me?” (Issue #10, 17). Prowl quietly replies that no, he had assumed Chromedome would come with him (Issue #10, 17). Their current relationship to each other, however, is quite hostile for reasons that have as yet only been alluded to.

Tailgate and Cyclonus share an ambiguous, close bond as well, which evolves throughout the series. Tailgate, who is of very short stature, manages to drag Cyclonus’ critically injured body off the battlefield and into the med bay (Issue #12, 18). He then offers a vial of his innermost energon<sup>12</sup> to Cyclonus (Issue #12, 18). Cybertronians offer innermost energon if someone they deeply care about is injured, a gesture similar to bringing a loved one flowers in the hospital, only with deeper meaning (Issue #12, 12). After Cyclonus recovers, he teaches him a song in Old Cybertronian (Issue#13, 20).

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<sup>12</sup> A Transformer’s innermost energon is the highly potent energon that surrounds their spark.

Their bond becomes even more intimate as the series continues. In the season one finale, Cyclonus uses his sword as a conduit to transfer the excess energy in his own spark to Tailgate, who is seconds from death (Issue #21, 22). In other words, Cyclonus uses his own heart to restart Tailgate's (Issue #21, 22). Much later in the series, Tailgate pulls a gun on Megatron, but Cyclonus disarms him, snapping that he could have gotten himself killed: "Don't ever do that to me again" (Issue #31, 12). During a dramatic moment in *Dark Cybertron*, Nightbeat barks at Cyclonus: "Oh, drop the deflections and admit you're worried about not seeing Tailpipe again" (Dark Cybertron Finale, 6). Cyclonus immediately corrects him that he means Tailgate (Dark Cybertron Finale, 6). Once the day is saved, Tailgate greets Cyclonus with a playful tackle (Issue #29, 1). Cyclonus, smiling, places both hands on Tailgate's shoulders and tenderly says he missed Tailgate "very much" (Issue #29, 3). They resume sharing the same quarters on the ship.

The two characters are tender with each other, make sacrifices for each other, and ultimately need each other. Perhaps their partnership is romantic, or perhaps queerplatonic. It could also be a connection that can only be understood by its depth, and not what it might be categorized as. Still lacking an official definition or name for it, Tailgate and Cyclonus' relationship in the series does not correspond to a western societal script of what a relationship should look like. It is nevertheless portrayed with complexity and treated as a valid, meaningful bond. Roberts, recognizing his science fiction series is about humanity, does not reduce relationships in *More Than Meets the Eye* to only those dictated acceptable by the status quo.

Not all attraction, romantic or otherwise, is reciprocated in *More Than Meets the Eye*. Swerve fabricates his friendship with Blurr, a famous athlete. He refers to Blurr and himself as "best friends from the get-go" (Issue#13, 7). His lie is not revealed until the end of Issue 13,



when a flashback reveals that millions of years ago, he was a rabid fan who pleaded with Blurr for his number (Issue #13, 21). Unbeknownst to him, Blurr wrote a fake number, which Swerve never removed from his hand in the millions of years since (Issue#13, 21). During the *Dark Cybertron* storyline, Blurr, who does not remember Swerve, visits his bar on the Lost Light.

Swerve, overcome with hero worship, completely loses composure:

Blurr: “Quart of Engex, please. Hot—smelting pool hot.”

Swerve: (incomprehensible babbling)

Blurr: “Or...a shot of nightmare fuel if you’re out of the pink stuff.”

Swerve: (high-pitched whine)

[...]

Swerve: (whispering) “I’m so excited I think my innermost energon just reached boiling point.”

Skids: “Piece of advice, Swervester—just play it cool” (Issue#27, 9)

The friendship is one-sided, based entirely on Swerve’s nonromantic infatuation with Blurr. It is another example of the different types of attraction that Cybertronians can experience. By placing this type of attraction in a version of humanity that can live for millions of years, Roberts demonstrates the innate human need for companionship without relegating it to a need for a romantic partner.

As evidenced by Brainstorm, Transformers are capable of deep, yet unreciprocated romantic love. After Chromedome’s Conjunx Endura passes away, Brainstorm tells him: “Your pain will change. It won’t go—of course not, course it won’t—but eventually it’ll turn into something else. Something you can live with. Take it from someone who knows” (Issue #16, 16). In season two, Brainstorm, an ingenious inventor, who had been working on a clandestine plan to achieve time travel for millions of years, secretly embarks on a journey through time in the hopes of killing Megatron. Once the Lost Light crew catches up and thwarts him in the season finale, he confesses the original plan was not an assassination attempt at all. He had initially planned to rescue Quark, a Transformer he had deeply cared for, who died a prolonged

death in a prison camp during the war (Issue #38, 12). Brainstorm's plan became more ambitious, however. Once the Conjunx Endura of his only friend, Chromedome, passed away and "Chromedome started collapsing, I thought—why settle for saving one life? [...] Why not save everyone?" (Issue #38, 12). Quark was not Brainstorm's Conjunx Endura; his love was unrequited. His time travel plan ultimately a failure, he consoles himself with the fact that he at least had the chance "to see that silly old sod one last time" (Issue #38, 12).



**Brainstorm, touched he can at least see Quark alive again.**

Once Brainstorm's motivations are revealed, it becomes clear the central conflict of season two was driven by both love for a desired partner and a deep affection for friends. In this series, Roberts writes different types of attraction, but each has the capacity to carry deep meaning and serve as a powerful motivators. Of course, writing attraction as non-hierarchical is absolutely possible in other genres of fiction. In this science fiction series, however, the power of different types of emotional connections is most tangible because it literally motivates characters to travel through time and try to change the past.

Asexuality is not used to Otherize Cybertronians. Roberts writes each character with human complexity and relatability in both themselves and their relationships. Western media culture prioritizes sexual entanglements because they are considered more interesting. It is

groundbreaking, therefore, that relatable, fascinating asexual characters drive the story of *More Than Meets the Eye*.

One limitation in the text's relationship diversity is the lack of any mention of non-monogamous bonds. There is no evidence as of Issue 38 as to whether polyamorous Conjunx Endura exist or are tolerated in Cybertronian society. Some Cybertronians have several Conjunx Endurae over the course of their lifetimes. Cumulatively, Rewind has had two Conjunx Endurae and Chromedome has had four Conjunx Endurae, but neither of them have had multiple spouses at the same time. Each new marriage began after a previous partner passed away. As for the other types of distinct partnerships in *More Than Meets the Eye*, there is no clear evidence as yet in the series that they can be polyamorous.

In this text, which otherwise naturalizes queerness, if certain queer bonds are not portrayed as natural, it contributes to stigma against non-monogamous relationships in our reality. Romantic attraction and elective kinship are not economic necessities on Cybertron, nor are they cornerstones that signal success in life. Romantic love is not portrayed as an emotion that qualifies Transformers as beings with meaningful existences, nor is romantic love placed at a higher value than other types of love. Non-romantic relationships and romantic relationships are equally important, but there is some degree of social pressure to form long-term partnerships. The Cybertronian government does not pressure Transformers participate in Conjunx Endura through legal means, such as tax breaks, for example. However, Brainstorm's line to Chromedome that "most people go through life without ever finding their Conjunx Endura" signals a belief held in Cybertronian culture, like our culture, that every person has a designated "soulmate." *More Than Meets the Eye* depicts a society free from obligatory

heteroromanticism<sup>13</sup>, as well as free from any obligation to evaluate one's success or inherent value based on whether they are "married" by a certain age. However, by furthering the "soulmate" myth, this text excludes aromantic or polyamorous people by making their orientation seem less natural.

This is a world in which attraction variety and relationship diversity are not as stigmatized as they are in our reality. However, it is a different construction of attraction. In the Cybertronian analogue, there is a vast departure from western orientation identity politics. It would require supposition that Transformers characters are homoromantic asexual, or any other sort of orientation. Cybertronian identity is not pre-categorized based on gender or partner preference. There is no stigma for gayness, but there is no Cybertronian word for "gay", nor is there a Cybertronian concept of "coming out". Surprisingly, this does not closet queerness in the text or preserve status quo. Heteroromanticism has yet to be witnessed in the series, whereas asexuality and same-gender attraction are present.

How does Roberts address the tension between real-world western politics of representation and a fictional society with such a dramatically different construction of attraction? "That's the beauty of writing about alien civilizations: sometimes, when it comes to relationships, there is no precise human equivalent," he writes ("THE JAMES ROBERTS Q&A!"). He has also made it clear, however, that Chromedome and Rewind should be read as gay (11 January 2015). "The reaction to the first Transformers gay couple was amazing – overwhelmingly positive," he has commented (Whittaker, Part 2).

Nevertheless, there was a sort of closeting in the beginning of series. The romantic nature of Chromedome and Rewind's relationship was not immediately obvious or named in *More Than Meets the Eye*. The evolution of language in the text indicates Roberts' hesitancy to

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<sup>13</sup> In fact, the series has yet to depict heteroromantic desire.

write a canonically gay couple, rather than a diegetic evolution in Chromedome and Rewind's partnership. There is a distinct before and after period. Issue 16, which contains the recently deceased Rewind's posthumous "I love you" message to Chromedome, is the turning point.

Before Issue 16, Chromedome and Rewind are often referred to as "best friends." In their introduction in Issue 1, Prowl refers to Rewind as Chromedome's "best friend" (Issue #1, 6). Perhaps this is a result of Prowl's jealousy of their relationship, which is not revealed until later in the series (Prowl calls Rewind "That skinny little friend of yours," Chromedome corrects: "His name is Rewind") (Issue#14, 16). The "best friend" language continues, however, in other scenes and with other characters before Issue 16. Tailgate asks Chromedome how he and Rewind met, a common question asked of couples (Issue #13, 13). It is immediately followed up with: "Come on—you didn't just bump into each other one day and decide to be best friends" (Issue #13, 13). "We're not best friends. Not really. I'm second on his list. A close second," Chromedome replies (Issue #13, 13). He is referring to Dominus Ambus, Rewind's previous Conjunx Endura, though at this point in the text Dominus has not been directly referred to as Rewind's Conjunx. In this scene, Chromedome's dialogue implies that Dominus Ambus is Rewind's true... "best friend." Even though, by this point in the story, the term Conjunx Endura has been introduced and defined as "significant other" (Issue #12, 9), the "friend" language used to describe it closets the meaning of Conjunx Endura and the political impact of a same-gender partnership.

When Roberts wrote the "I love you" scene for Issue 16, he was worried that he was "nailing certain colors to the mast" and was ready to defend his choice (Whittaker, Part 2) (Moonbase2). Both his editors and Hasbro were very supportive of the choice, to his relief, and so it was published (Whittaker, Part 2) (Moonbase2). This chapter speculates that Hasbro and

IDW's support of the declaration of love made Roberts more comfortable being explicit about the nature of Chromedome and Rewind's relationship from that point forward.

In Issue 16, there is a dramatic change in vocabulary: "I mean, I know 'friend' doesn't really describe you and Rewind," Skids tells Chromedome (Issue#16, 8). This occurs in the same issue as Rewind's declaration of love. After this point in the series, the narrative freely adopts overt language of love and marriage. Whirl addresses the couple as "loverbots!" (Issue #37, 13). Brainstorm refers to Chromedome as Rewind's "sparkmate" (Issue #38, 12).

Chromedome is described as "widowed" after Rewind dies (Issue #28, 16). After an image of Rewind mysteriously materializes, then vanishes in front of Chromedome, he and Nightbeat try to make sense of it. Chromedome confides: "I thought maybe, on some level, as farfetched as it sounds, I thought maybe I'd willed him back to life?" (Issue #29, 18). "With what," scoffs Nightbeat, "the power of love?" (Issue #29, 18). Once the Rewind from the massacre timeline<sup>14</sup> miraculously survives transition into the story's main timeline, Nightbeat jests: "I'm tempted to say it was the power of love..." (Issue #33, 20). After the publication of Issue 16, Chromedome and Rewind's relationship, as well as the meaning of Conjunx Endura, could not be clearer. Instead of being implied or shielded by the alien setting, the analogue becomes explicit.

One of the reasons for the dynamic change in language is recognition of the political importance of Transformers' first canonically gay couple. Issue 19 published the following fan letter:

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<sup>14</sup> The timeline mentioned previously in this chapter, in which Rewind is the lone survivor of a gory attack on the Lost Light.

Dear Mr. Roberts,

Those three words at the end of issue #16—they meant a lot to me. I had been reading MTMTE from the start and I saw the bond you were developing between Rewind and Chromedome. In the back of my mind I was telling myself, there's something more here. Then you introduced conjunx endura. And in the previous issue, during the conversation right before Rewind sacrificed himself, he was telling Chromedome how upset he was with him and Chromedome responded by promising they would talk about it later. That was a slice of real-life dialog any couple would have during the middle of a fight.

We all know these are genderless, asexual, mechanical beings from outer space, but you used these characters to convey love and companionship in a very real way. And because these genderless characters have masculine traits, you gave your gay readers something very special. You gave us the chance to see ourselves in these characters in a very meaningful way. Even though gay characters are becoming more prevalent in comics and media in general, it is still a rare thing. It is even more rare when they appear and really reflect what we feel.

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart.

Luis Ramirez  
San Francisco, CA

Though it demonstrates the importance of representation, the fan letter voices disputable claims. Firstly, as established earlier in this chapter, the robots *do* have gender and Roberts has confirmed as such. Secondly, gender does not determine a being's capability of love, companionship, or attraction. Thirdly, asexuality and gayness need not be mutually exclusive, though the letter seems to imply Chromedome and Rewind's asexuality undermines the gay reading of their relationship. This third issue in some way reinforces a queer hierarchy that dismisses asexuality, which Roberts in some way upholds by publicly referring to Chromedome and Rewind as gay but never explicitly describing any or the characters as asexual or aromantic.

Nevertheless, the letter voices the political importance of Chromedome and Rewind's same-gender attraction. Ramirez indicates the heavily-implied romantic relationship caught gay readers' attention early on in the series and gave them some sense of hope or validation. Then, the language eventually became indisputable. The depiction of a canon queer couple, written with such complexity and humanity, stands out in a contemporary media culture still awash with alloheteronormativity. Roberts' response to the letter acknowledges the large portion of the fans who actively support Chromedome/Rewind's portrayal as a couple:

A screenshot of a social media post with a dark red background and white text. The text reads: "Thank you, Luis. Those of you who enjoyed seeing Chromedome and Rewind's relationship play out in these pages—and there are a lot of you, it seems—should enjoy issue #22's special flashback story. (James Roberts)"

The subsequent details and care he uses to portray their partnership in *More Than Meets the Eye* indicate that he does not believe their status as fictional alien characters should be used as an excuse to ignore Chromedome and Rewind's political significance.

As the fan letter mentions, Chromedome and Rewind's relationship is written with nuance and detail to make it feel real. They are always together, and when they are not, the other crewmembers take notice. They hold hands and hug. They are fond of stargazing and inventing constellations together. When he hears Rewind make distressed sounds in his sleep in another room, Chromedome, accustomed to sleeping next to Rewind, panics and smashes the door (Issue #35, 6). Chromedome: "[...] hearing you cry out and not being able to reach over, it's...it's bad is what it is" (Issue #35, 6). They get jealous of each other's previous close relationships. They have arguments, make promises, and give each other the silent treatment. They are the most important people in the world to each other, especially in a crisis. Rewind's death is wrenching, and his farewell message, comprised of archived footage spliced together, is heartbreaking:



I've always been terrified that you'd die before I did. Because you and me apart strikes me as intensely wrong. So promise me something. Be brave and strong. And keep going without me. And another thing: no more injecting. It will kill you. And remember you deserve to be happy. The New Institute was the old you. You're a better person now—stubborn and frustrating—but wonderful! And to think I will never see you again.... One more thing. One last thing—because I don't say it enough:...I love you. (Issue#16, 19-21)



**Top Left:** Chromedome's last words to Rewind before the escape pod containing Rewind and the compulsively murderous villain, Overlord, is ejected from the ship.

**Top Right:** Chromedome, after blowing up the pod to spare Rewind, collapses on the floor, alone, bleeding and armless from his initial attempts to rescue his Conjunx Endura.

**Bottom:** Chromedome watches the last clip of Rewind's message. These three words convince him not to perform mnemosurgery on himself to erase his memories.

The complex, intimate nature of Chromedome and Rewind's romantic partnership is not shyly brushed aside or left to implication. The bond between them is powerful, carefully written to leave an emotional impact on the readers equal to the other drama in *More Than Meets the Eye*.

Does Rewind's death, however, fall under the homophobic trope of killing gay characters? True, *More Than Meets the Eye* has a high body count overall, but was targeting the

first canon gay couple insensitive to the broader historical context of queerphobic tropes? Vito Russo explains the history of the trope: once direct gay representation was possible in American cinema, more characters appeared, but “gays dropped like flies” (Russo, 156). During this time period in cinema, gays and lesbians were either suicidal from self-hatred or psychos on a murderous rampage (and therefore destined for death by the end of the film) (Russo, 156). The trope, which endures to this day, exists to preserve the status quo (Russo, 156). Even if used to evoke a sympathetic reaction from the audience, the result is still the restored status quo and therefore the net result is anti-gay. Roberts’ intentions in killing off Rewind were clearly motivated by the need for a compelling story, not misguidedly pushing an agenda: “Putting couples through the ringer can make for good drama. It so happens that the only couple in MTMTE are gay” (11 January 2015). He tweeted that in response to a fan who was understandably upset about the death, and also suggested the fan read season two (11 January 2015). Issue 33, which was published in September 2014, officially returned Rewind to the series by rescuing an alternate version of him from the massacre timeline. Bringing Rewind back to *More Than Meets the Eye* broke the homophobic “body count” trope.

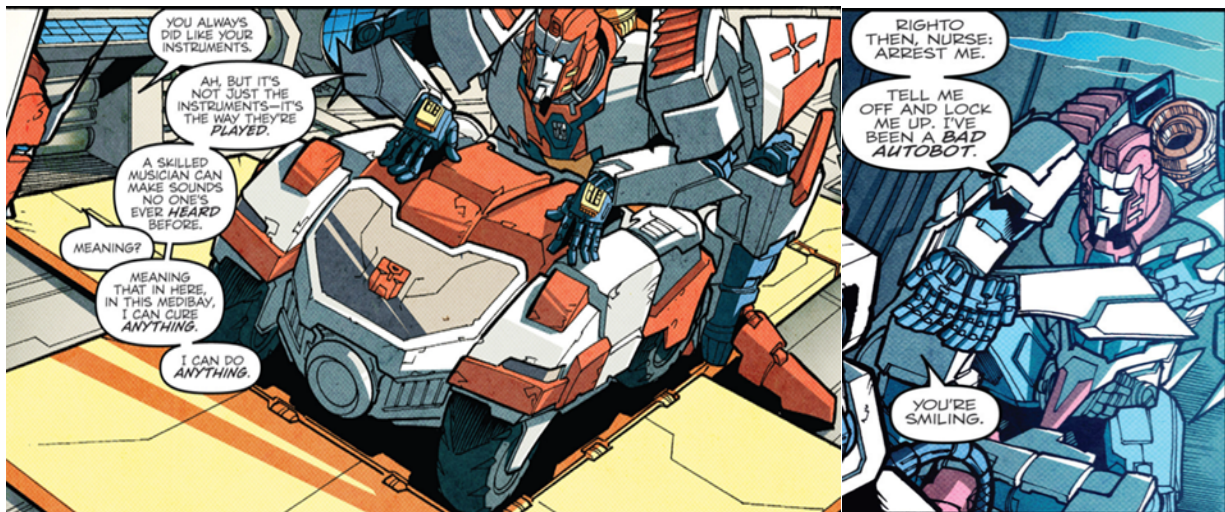
The series ascribes queerphobic tropes to some of its villains, however. Overlord is drawn with unusually large lips:



Overlord

Rodimus Prime and Rung, for comparison

Overlord has a prominent lower lip that is not matched by a similar-sized upper lip, which is usually seen in cis female character designs (Dubis). The oversized lips could be mistaken for female from a cis perspective, but his nose is the key gender-determining factor according to cisgender standards; comic artists usually do not draw outward slopes (Dubis). The oversized lips are meant to make him look snide (Dubis). The design also associates the homicidal Overlord with femininity and the perverse. His feminine lips, paired with his sadism, invoke the historical stereotype of the predatory psychopath homosexual, a trope which Vito Russo and Stephen Tropiano<sup>15</sup> have traced through history in their work on queer media representation. Similarly, another villain, Pharma, is depicted as sexually perverse:



**Left:** Pharma makes Ratchet's head (left) watch as he straddles the rest of Ratchet's body.

**Right:** Pharma's kinky response to First Aid (left) confronting him.

While Ratchet's head is helplessly detached from his body, Pharma leans his face in as closely as possible and gently strokes Ratchet's cheek with a scalpel (Issue #19, 11). First Aid, horrified, cannot fathom why Pharma can smile in spite of the endless string of murders he has committed (Issue #21, 8). "I know, I know," says Pharma foppishly, "I'm incorrigible" (Issue #21, 8). Cybertronians do not experience sexual attraction or participate in sexual activity, but, as already

<sup>15</sup> Author of *The Prime Time Closet*

established, Transformers are meant to be read with human qualities, therefore real-life media representation politics apply. Because BDSM and/or feminine characteristics are only assigned to the most sadistic characters in the series, these villains' portrayals are queerphobic. In spite of the queer inclusivity of *More Than Meets the Eye*, it still contributes in some ways to queerphobic media representation politics. As a rich, wonderfully creative text that challenges hegemony through an intricate world with an immense variety of queer representation, the series owes itself a more original and less problematic way to write villains.

### ***More Than Meets the Eye's* Queer Representation and Gender Diversity: The Power of Science Fiction**

"You gave us the chance to see these characters in a very real and meaningful way" says the fan letter (Issue #19, back cover).

The fans used the officially sanctioned contest platform to bring Windblade into existence. Hasbro and IDW's relaxed management style affords Roberts enormous creative control. Fan involvement and company-sanctioned authorial control create a climate for the author, who takes representation politics seriously, to write a comic that is impressively progressive. The otherworldly genre, in tandem with the ideologically hegemonic thirty-year heritage of the Transformers franchise, would have afforded Roberts an avenue of producing more status quo. Female Transformers representation could have stopped at Windblade's fan-initiated debut. Chromedome and Rewind's relationship could have been written as best friends. Roberts has demonstrated his awareness that his series explores and examines humanity as a work of science fiction, not in spite of its genre. He recognizes that the text has an effect on real-world marginalized representation politics. Therefore, instead of using worldbuilding as an

excuse not to intervene, Roberts asserts his role as science fiction author to rewrite the rules of the universe. As an author who knows the series does not exist in a vacuum outside of historical context, Roberts holds himself accountable for the content of *More Than Meets the Eye*. He respects his readers' input and concerns, so long as they are within reason.

A popular post on tumblr reads:

stories about facing heterosexism and cissexism, coming out, being young and finding your identity, etc, have their place and can be important, but at a certain point you're like. enough. you just start wanting to see LGBTQ characters battling in space ships or fighting dragons or being charismatic spies or any of the thousands of things straight cis people get to do in stories. (nutmegmczimms)

There is no dichotomy between "normal" humans and queer robots in this series. In Singer's X-Men films, he uses the metaphor of mutants and humans to examine prejudice. *More Than Meets the Eye* has a different agenda, therefore portrays queerness through completely different science fiction lens, which produces a whole other set of groundbreaking results. In the series' analogue to humanity, prejudice is examined through multiple facets, but queerness is never designated as controversial. James Roberts affords readers the freedom of an exciting adventure saturated with queer characters, without the constraints of modern western societal oppression, and all of its consequences, written into the universe.

The internal logic and worldbuilding are being written as the series continues, making the text excitingly dynamic as readers prevail over Roberts to intervene in the Transformers universe. *More Than Meets the Eye* still has major representational problems, most of which can and should change. Gender should not dictate the designs of the characters. The series is still male-normative and cis-normative. Roberts is open to Cybertronian gender variety, therefore he should depict it in canon. It is destructive to forward the social myth that every Transformer has a Conjunx somewhere in the universe that they might one day meet. Villains can be written as



sadistic, twisted, and controlling without incorporating feminine or BDSM traits in their portrayals. There is also no reason for most of the characters' hard light forms to be white. If the story calls for more hard light forms, their designs should be far more racially diverse. The genre of the series basically means anything is possible. *More Than Meets the Eye* is an impressively progressive series, but it could easily top its own standard of inclusivity and, as a work of contemporary media, it has a responsibility to do so.

## CONCLUSION

Science fiction is a genre of exploration, both of the unknown and of ourselves as human beings. The genre often uses a lens that could not possibly exist in order to perform a new critique of humanity. James Roberts applies this aspect of speculative fiction heavily in *More Than Meets the Eye*, endlessly interrogating the human experience through an immortal robot civilization. In the X-Men films, mutation separates a misunderstood, marginalized demographic from privileged Americans. Singer and his screenwriters use the science fiction apparatus of X-Men's allegory to examine sociopolitical oppression.

The prologue of this thesis began with a question: why is it so difficult to include real-life identities in fantastic universes? The answer is that fantastic universes do not exist in an ahistorical, acultural vacuum; our reality imagined them. In our prejudiced, capitalistic society, marginalized identities are erased because they are seen as too controversial and less profitable. The unreality of speculative fiction is often used as an excuse to exclude queer and/or POC people from sci fi stories.

There are several types of queer representation in science fiction: direct representation, metaphor, coding, and worldbuilding analogue. A worldbuilding analogue is a more literal version of a metaphor; it is something unreal that closely resembles something that exists in our universe. The queer content in X-Men and *More Than Meets the Eye* is only witnessed through otherworldly allegory, analogue, and coding. Are the representations in these texts therefore detrimental to queer media politics? It is complicated. Using super-powered mutants or alien robots, both the X-Men universe and the *More Than Meets the Eye* universe are written to

intentionally portray queerness through an imaginary construct. Both *X-Men* and *More Than Meets the Eye* have almost no people of color in their stories, reducing the conversation to a white queer perspective. Additionally, both texts draw on historically insensitive encoding to depict their villains, often using imagery that implies people who practice BDSM are deranged and devious. None of these problems can be ignored, but both texts are nevertheless rich with queer content. The important role that genre serves in these representations demands recognition. It is too dismissive to avoid analyzing these texts on the basis that their indirect portrayals of queerness are an ugly use of science fiction to make “controversial” identities more palatable.

The *X-Men* films add a gay sensibility to summer blockbuster action films. They critique governmental authority, petition privileged audiences for sympathy, and offer a validating movie-going experience for queer audiences, especially young people. It is easy, however, for mainstream audiences to overlook the allegory. The metaphor of the films is used as a mask instead of a lens, reducing queerness to a subtextual theme. The construction of the allegory also compliments the racial status quo. When the narrative does not underwrite people of color, it erases them, making the sympathetic group almost exclusively white people. The films also intentionally discredit radical queer politics by depicting the Mutant Brotherhood as vengeful, impulsive, and malignantly narcissistic. In spite of the genocidal actions of the government in all three films, radicalism is designated as the ultimate antagonist. Demonizing leftist ideology polarizes queer politics and distracts from institutional oppression. Inspired, politically-conscious fans could re-sculpt the allegory by using the films as a creative foundation for non-profit works.



Though rich and valuable in their own right, fan works would not get the same widespread release and media attention as the canon text, which is why Roberts' dialogue with fans of *More Than Meets the Eye* is so important. Entering a franchise noted for its hostility to non-privileged groups, Roberts uses science fiction to make repairs in IDW Transformers. He creates in-world logic that compliments real-world politics instead of willfully ignoring them. Roberts, encouraged by his readers, has made incredible departures from the status quo of the franchise. Instead of using genre as a gatekeeping tool, he has decided to explore Cybertronian gender construction and variety. He has extensively queered the text by writing relationship diversity and same-gender attraction into the series. His use of science fiction in the series imagines a rich world where queerness is naturalized. He nevertheless recognizes the limitations of his privileged perspective. The canon is still certainly lacking in gender and racial representation, but the world of *More Than Meets the Eye* will continue to change and grow because of Roberts' responses to readers' input.

Considering X-Men and *More Than Meets the Eye* are for-profit texts, to what degree is capitalism an influence? X-Men's ultimately unchallenging narrative and its relegation of its subversive elements to subtext make it clear: it is designed to appeal to mainstream, privileged audiences. *More Than Meets the Eye* began under the burden of impressively regressive source material. As a part of that franchise, it is designed to sell toys, yet the comic itself is permitted ample amounts of creative liberty. In both texts, capitalism serves, either in the past or the present of the creative process, as a limitation.

Visibility is power. This is true for all media, but there is a distinct relationship between representation and the science fiction genre. Science fiction only feigns separation from the reality it critiques. The genre allows authors to rewrite the rules of reality, opening up

extraordinary possibilities for storytelling. Such stories, though fiction, still exist in real-world political contexts of visibility. Science fiction constructs a way of thinking about our reality. Authors can use fiction to imagine inclusive realities, even reimagine a whole new society. Conversely, they can destructively reinforce the socioeconomic status quo by framing it as ideal, or even under attack and in urgent need of protection. To whatever extent authors have agency in a for-profit industry, they should hold themselves accountable for the choices they make in a narrative and be sensitive to the impact their text has on marginalized people.

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