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# Racial Constructions and Activism Within Graphic Literature. An Analysis of Hank McCoy, The Beast

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

RACIAL CONSTRUCTIONS AND ACTIVISM WITHIN GRAPHIC LITERATURE:

AN ANALYSIS OF HANK MCCOY, THE BEAST

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

ENGLISH

by

Juan D. Alfonso

2018

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
College of Arts, Sciences and Education

This thesis, written by Juan D. Alfonso, and entitled Racial Constructions and Activism Within Graphic Literature: An Analysis of Hank McCoy, The Beast, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

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Date of Defense: June 13, 2018

The thesis of Juan D. Alfonso is approved.

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Dean Michael R. Heithaus  
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Florida International University, 2018

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS  
RACIAL CONSTRUCTIONS AND ACTIVISM WITHIN GRAPHIC LITERATURE:  
AN ANALYSIS OF HANK MCCOY, THE BEAST

by

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Florida International University, 2018

Miami, Florida

Professor Ana Luszczynska, Major Professor

Through a post-modern lens, I will primarily focus on comics books published by Marvel Comics to demonstrate the myriad of ways in which graphic literature is used as a subversive tool of sociopolitical discourse. I will demonstrate this by deconstructing and redefining the role of myth as a means of transferring ethical practices through societies and the ways in which graphic literature serves this function within the space of a modern and increasingly atheistic society. The thesis first demonstrates how the American Civil Rights Movement was metaphorically translated and depicted to the pages of Marvel's X-Men comics to expose its primarily white/ male readership to the plight of discriminated Black Americans through the juxtaposition of depicting white super heroes who represented the segregated experiences of othered or unwanted communities. Secondly, the X-Man Beast is closely analyzed to demonstrate the ways in which the rhetoric and depictions of graphic literature are altered through decades of publication to adapt its messages of social tolerance and peaceful coexistence to its contemporary audiences.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER	PAGE
Racial Constructions and Activism Within Graphic Literature: An Analysis of Hank McCoy, The Beast.....	1
References .....	29

## Racial Constructions and Activism Within Graphic Literature:

### An Analysis of Hank McCoy, The Beast

Throughout the ages, graphic art has served as a means to inform society and future generations of the fears, hopes and politics of the peoples who created them. In this regard, one of the most popular recent examples of the artistic legacy are comic books, which have historically been regarded as a trivial form of entertainment. The medium has endured the harsh criticisms of scholars, such as Fredrick Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent*, who argued that comic books are an inherently dangerous force in society and correlated the violent behaviors portrayed in graphic literature to what he perceived as a mass increase in juvenile delinquency, homosexuality and murder. However, upon deeper reflection, the merging of graphics with prose is no trivial matter. It was the seemingly inevitable next step in an artistic tradition that sought to reflect society's discourse through the combination of two unexpected and imaginative mediums. While the first instance of what modern Americans would characterize as a comic book occurred in 1842, *The Adventures of Mr. Obadiah Oldbuck*, as I will support in the rest of the thesis, the mainstream comic books that still reflect the social tensions of today's society, such as Marvel and Detective Comics, DC, began in the early-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Modern graphic literature reveals a series of mythological narratives that, unlike previous incarnations of graphic art, has sought to influence American society in a manner that promotes social justice in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, culture or nationalism. One of the most deeply layered examples of graphic literature's desire to open its audience to the experiences of the other, as in those who do not belong

to one's own aforementioned identifiers, is Marvel's Hank McCoy, also known as Beast. Beneath the blue-furred-clawed-gargantuan character lies a fictional history dating back to 1963, (*The X-Men #1*), and with it a slew of changes to the rhetoric and appearance of the character representing the evolving views of American society in relation to progressive movements.

## CRITICAL THEORY

Before diving into the theories of other academics or analyzing the character, Beast, I first want to clearly express what is meant by comic books as a mythological narrative. The very concept of a myth is often inextricably attached to a function of theology, or, to be more precise, a myth is commonly understood as untrue stories that were once, or still, believed by members of an "othered" faith, and synonymous with the notion of folklore. According to Robert Graves, author of *The Greek Myths*, "a religion's traditional stories are myths if and only if one does not belong to the religion in question," (Graves 18). The relationship between the word *myth* and the religious tradition it belongs to is implicit within Western society and demonstrated by the covers of anthropological texts often stating the name of a non-western culture or faith, followed by the word myth, not religion. Such a word choice implies an objective/ existential truth within the dominant Western faiths, or the faith one belongs to/ associates with the most. This ethnocentric relationship with the word is problematic because it implies that the tales of one's own faith are fact, while the tales of another are fiction. The Western definition of myth is polarizing and 'others' the foreign, but when stripped of the

religious and mono-cultural considerations, the line which separates myth from other forms of fictional literature fades or disappears entirely.

According to scholars such as Robert Segal, professor of history and philosophy at the University of Aberdeen and author of *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*, the word *myth* is problematic in and of itself due to the complexity of its various and often conflicting definitions. However, if one accepts that, "the least problematic is the notion of story: a 'myth' is a narrative, a set of events structured into a sequence," (Segal 5), myths and the tales within comic books become interchangeable concepts due to the various similarities implicit within their intent. When stripped of religion, myths still serve a secular/ ethical or values teaching function, which has always been implicit within their place as a religious document, (Segal 61-63). The difference is whether one chooses to believe the moral of the tale or if it is forced under religious doctrine/ dogmatic adherence. For the purposes of my analysis, I wish to add to Segal's definition. Myth is a fictional story that imparts a moral or ethical lesson; Morality being defined as expressing the binary concept of good and evil, while ethics being understood as behaviors that lead to social cohesion, an increase in tolerance for others and a decrease in violence based on prejudices.

So how does graphic literature function as myth if it is not the byproduct of spiritual attempts at teaching morality? There are two key conventions within comic books as a craft that we must first understand. The first is its relationship to the fantastic. The Greeks performed tales of mighty gods representing the qualities their culture believed to be the most virtuous, or their most privileged, and monsters served as



metaphors for what they perceived as humanity's unwanted imperfections, such as greed or hubris. The most popular American comics books perform the same function using the superhero genre, presenting characters capable of extra-human feats, replacing gods and demi-gods, and the supervillain replacing fantastical monsters.

The second convention we must understand is the ethical function of myths, which simultaneously serves a didactic function while reflecting the values of the cultures that produced them. The authors of historical and religious works, or myths presented within comic books, produced these narratives with the intention of promoting cultural values they interpreted as positive or leading to a harmonious way of living within their communities. I would argue the didactic function of myths is the fundamental drive behind the comics book medium's growing readership since the 1960s.

To fully articulate this point, I must draw on my personal experiences. My childhood was bereft of any ethical, or values based, teachings. As a single parent, my mother lacked the time to provide me with moral guidance and was unsure as to her own relationship to any faith, which was the foundation of her understanding of moral and ethical behavior. Free of any religious doctrine to guide or force me into believing one system of values over another, my personal sense of morality and ethics were in fact shaped by comic books and the cartoons derived from them, and then broadened the language in which I existed. Iconic quotes, such as "with great power, comes great responsibility," (*Amazing Fantasy #15*), from the pages of Spider Man comics (as the wall crawling superhero received those words from his uncle imparting an ethical parable to its readership), became the foundation of my personal belief that it is the responsibility

of the capable to look after those who are not. Captain America taught me the importance of fighting against injustice and having a personal code of honor, but most importantly, Professor Xavier's dream of a future where all people of all backgrounds would be accepted for, not in spite of, their radical differences and treated equally inspired my desire for social justice as a lifelong and academic pursuit. It touched me on a personal level as a Hispanic man living in the United States.

Perhaps what has been most striking in my experience is that my personal relationship with the medium is not unique. Many friends and coworkers, who also enjoy reading comics, have told me similar stories over the years, even quoting iconic, and obscure lines alike, from comic books that have helped them through a personal struggle in the same manner a Christian might reference a bible passage during times of struggle. These points radically alter the interpretation of myth as a religious text and changes it to an ethical text. In this manner comic books do the work of societies' need to produce systems of values for the purpose of social cohesion, or more accurately it is the means by which communities articulate their values and their constructions of the world.

Graphic literature, as I will demonstrate, explores this idea of fluid identity in its ever-changing values and representations of familiar characters as changes in their rhetoric reflect the changing identities of the dominant culture of the time. Identity is a moving target subject to chaotic self-interpretation and contextually governed by external forces, which is paradoxical in that the constructs by which we judge our internal sense of being are influenced most by concepts we are given rather than those we construct on our own. It demonstrates that we are not at one with ourselves. For example, according to

Bradford W. Wright, an Associate Professor at the University of Maryland, in his book *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, the Captain American of the early 1940's, (*Captain America Comics #1*), was written in anticipation of what writers Jack Kirby and Joe Simon perceived to be America's inevitable involvement in the second world war. While the attack on Pearl Harbor, which led to America's involvement in the war, happened nine months after the publication of the first issue, Kirby and Simon's work already demonstrated the destruction and violence perpetuated by the Nazis in Europe, thus exposing Americans to the threat the fascist regime posed to America's way of life,

Simon explained that Captain America's origins were consciously political because, 'the opponents of the war were all quite organized. We wanted to have our say too.' Simon and Kirby used Captain America to wage a metaphorical war against Nazi oppression, (Wright 36).

As a result, the rhetoric of the character of the time was one of staunch and unyielding patriotism. The pathos of the character was pro-American and pro-government during a time when blind faith in America and its leadership was the dominant opinion, (The 1940s, and Law: Overview,) and as a result a modern readership could easily infer that the Captain America of the 1940s was written as equal parts war propaganda and social activism. However, comparing the earlier version of the fictional hero to his 21st century version demonstrates a radical shift in his portrayal in terms of sociopolitical nuance. The claim is based upon the events of the 2006-2007 Marvel Civil War event where Captain America refuses to side with the government after they introduce a superhuman

registration act, which would force all masked heroes to publicly register as government agents, (*Civil War #1*). The hero's anti-government position resulted from the fictional character's personal belief that it would put lives in danger and infringe on the first amendment rights of its citizens, which is thus implicitly valued. The 21st century/evolved version of the character redefines patriotism from one who is loyal to their government, to one who is loyal to the voices of its people. The change in Captain America's rhetoric represented a radical shift in the character's identity from one of a patriotic soldier, reflecting the sentiments of 1940s America, to someone more in line with the rhetoric of the modern social justice warrior. He now questions and is distrustful of the political motivations of his government in line with the Pew Research Center's findings regarding modern distrust in the underlying motivations of politicians, (Russel par 3-7).

One of the most problematic words when trying to perform this type of cultural, national or social deconstruction is the word *community*. Not surprisingly, the word, *community* is one that is privileged throughout various societies. It is synonymous with words such as *neighborhood* and *commonwealth*, while antonymous with disagreement and dissimilarity, if one subscribes to concrete linguistic binaries. The understood 'other' or opposing concept to community is a lack of harmony or cohesion between groups of people. Yet, the word community itself is problematic to that implied cohesion. Community, in practice, presents itself as nothing more than an extension of tribalism, and thus practices othering rather than inclusion . The etymology of the word demonstrates how community in the English language is an oxymoron in and of itself. John D. Caputo, a philosopher and professor at Syracuse and Villanova Universities,

describes the conflicting nature of the word in his book, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*,

*Communio* is a word for a military formation and a kissing cousin of the word "munitions"; to have a *communio* is to be fortified on all sides, to build a "common" (com) "defense" (munis), as when a wall is put up around the city to keep the stranger or the foreigner out." (Caputo 107-108).

The origin of the word carries with it the signification of mistrust in the other, which many groups, such as white supremacists, want to indicate when they use the word. It implies that one should guard one's traditions and culture from the other, or else lose a metaphysical notion that is continually changing and evolving regardless of its attempts to essentialize itself. *Community without community* is Philosopher Jacques Derrida's, best known for creating a form of semiotic analysis known as deconstruction, response to the entrenched difficulties of community as it is commonly understood. It is a concept in which one group does not bar the incoming of the other. It is a state of community in which the radical acceptance of all others is not merely tolerated, but welcomed and encouraged.

U.S. identity is a perfect example of how trying to affix a concrete and unchanging identity is an exercise in futility. During one of the 'darkest' eras in American history, slavery was a tradition in the American South and as such, was part of the U.S. identity. The assumption that slavery was a signifier of the U.S. identity is derived from the proposition that a tradition is any action that begins with one generation and is then passed down through families or communities. The state of slavery in the U.S.

was one where masters would inherit their family's slaves and bequeath them to subsequent generations until the practice was halted on Dec 18, 1865, (*Slavery abolished in America*). Thus, the passage of time, as one generation replaces an other, changes our cultural understating of what it means to be American due to the acceptance of slavery as a signifier of our identity one day, and its dis-inclusion post abolition. Furthermore, when attempting to find a single common point of agreement among a population of more than 300 million citizens, the result is that there is no universal vision of the American identity. Thus, there are an infinite number of existing and possible U.S. American identities. We are inextricably thrown back into questioning if there is a line in the sand separating one American identity from another, which reveals the arbitrary and paradoxically external nature of identifying in the first place,

*Justice* is the most difficult of the presented abstractions to understand, conceptualize and apprehend within the context of this analysis. It is less understood as what the word implies and, ironically, more understood by what it is not, (Caputo 126). Justice is not injustice. It is not oppression. It is not exclusion. Justice does not allow the privileged to cause harm to the disadvantaged other, which is presented as the underlying theme behind the vast majority of superhero narratives. It is openness to the radical alterity of the other, and responsibility toward the other. Yet what is called justice in the United States often punishes the disadvantaged for their blackness or not whiteness. Societies are filled with examples of what is not Justice, while claiming to strive for Justice. For example, Christopher Ingraham, a reporter with *The Washington Post* who specializes in data analysis reporting, in his article "Black Men Sentenced to More Time for Committing the Exact Same Crime as a White Person, Study Finds," states that a

2012 update to the United States Sentencing Commission’s Demographic Differences in Sentencing clearly demonstrates that, “Black men who commit the same crimes as white men receive federal prison sentences that are, on average, nearly 20 percent longer,” (Ingrahman par 1). What makes this act of injustice even more antithetical to what the term implies is that these sentences were made worse by legislation that passed since, not prior, to the turn of the century. According to a 2006 fact sheet published by the Department of Justice regarding the *United States v. Booker* case,

In 2003, Congress passed the PROTECT Act, which was an attempt to reassert the principles of consistency and fairness in federal sentencing policy, particularly in cases involving the sexual exploitation of children. The USSC data are troubling because they indicate that Congress’ statutory goals are being undermined as a result of Booker. After the Supreme Court’s decisions in *United States v. Blakely*, 542 U.S. 296 (2004), and *United States v. Booker*, 543 U.S. 220 (2005), which converted the mandatory sentencing regime that had been in place since 1984 to an advisory one, (Fact Sheet: The Impact of *United States V. Booker* on Federal Sentencing par 2).

The result of this new legislation has been that judges now have the authority to impose harsher judgments on those of color who prior to the 2003 ruling were legally bound to render the same punishment for the same crime regardless of socioeconomical circumstances or race. The effect has been one of greater injustices proposed and acted upon by a system that allegedly stands for justice.

## COMICS AND THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

When applying these concepts to comic books, an ideological narrative pertaining to social justice begins to emerge. The first merging of graphics and prose in the U.S. occurred in the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century as humorous political cartoons, meant to inform its American readership of difficult political happenings and decisions. By the mid 20<sup>th</sup> Century, such artists as Stan Lee, former President of Marvel Comics and longtime writer, editor and publisher for the company, began to incorporate science fiction, which replaced religious fantasticism with scientific theory as the underlying context, and horror into the medium. This gave rise to a plethora of characters popularly called superheroes. According to his autobiography *Excelsior!: The Amazing Life of Stan Lee*, Stanley Martin Lieber was born to Jewish immigrants, and thus a member of a historically marginalized group, and like so many other artists at the time Lee was touched by the efforts of young black men and women fighting for equality during the American Civil Rights Movement, (Lee and Mair 7-32).

The social tensions of the time inspired Lee and other writers to comment on these struggles in subversive forms in order to garner readership from a racially polarized nation. One of these subversive examples appeared in the first incarnation of the X-Men, a group of superheroes who were born with various extraordinary abilities and who struggled against racism to gain an equal place in the world (*The X-Men #1*). It was published less than a month after Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s iconic "I Have a Dream" speech in 1963 during the height of the civil rights movement. According to Lee during a 2017 interview with *AMC* titled *Stan Lee on the Idea for X-Men: Robert Kirkman's Secret*



*History of Comics*, "I've always tried to do our stories so that it didn't matter if you were of the white race, the black race, the brown race, or whatever, so social issues I try to get in the background or underlying the plot," (AMC 00:01:38-00:01:51). While the story of five white teenagers led by an old white man may seem disconnected from the plight of black Americans, each character in the now multi-billion dollar franchise was an allegorical representation of the black community and other historically oppressed minorities. Brian Hiatt, a writer with *Rolling Stones* magazine discussed and quoted Stan Lee in an article titled "The True Origins of 'X-Men'" stating,

The comic book debuted just after the March on Washington, and Professor Xavier, too, had a dream. In creating characters who faced prejudice because of inborn differences, Lee baked in an effectively malleable metaphor. "The main objective was to show that bigotry is a terrible thing," Lee says. "If you needed an objective for a superhero story!" (Hiatt par 5).

Openness and responsibility to the incoming of the other has always been a metaphorical component in the various incarnations of X-Men comics. Professor Charles Xavier, leader and mentor to the X-Men, and his primary antagonist, Magneto, served as a metaphorical representation of the various factions within the civil rights movement, (*The X-Men #1*). In addition to his fictional biography as a Jewish immigrant and Holocaust survivor, (*Uncanny X-Men #150*), Magneto and his militant/ supremacist Brotherhood of Mutants reflected public perception of the Black Panther movement as a violent group of radical separatists via the Brotherhood's goal of subjugating all baseline humans under the rule of Homo Superior, mutants. According to writer Paul Young in his

article “Real Life Inspirations Behind Some of the Best Comic Book Villains,” X-Men writer Chris Claremont confirmed that civil rights leader Malcom X served as the inspiration behind the franchise’s longstanding pseudo-villain, (Young par 10).

Magneto and his Brotherhood of Mutants continued to be a source of sociopolitical relevance throughout the decades of publication by adapting their stories and rhetoric to represent various militant ideologies long after the end of the Black Panther Movement. The most recent example presents itself in Marvel’s 2005 House of M event, (*House of M #1-8*), where Magneto’s magically-gifted-mutant daughter, the Scarlet Witch, inadvertently creates a world where her family becomes the ruling monarchs of the planet. The miniseries, which spawned a slew of spinoffs across Marvel’s numerous publications dealing with the effects of living within a racist society and fighting racial oppression, presented a restructured world where mutants ruled in an aristocratic fashion while humans toiled as the dredges of society. While the parallels to Medieval- European feudalism are quite evident throughout the limited series, with all baseline humans were treated as peasants with a rigidly enforced caste system in place, the subversive subtext of these comics more closely resembled the events of World War II where Magneto’s family enforced harsh labor conditions among the human populace with the intent of slowly eradicating this unwanted group of individuals (akin to the Nazi concentration camps and the post war Gulags of Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union). However, the moral or ethical imperative of the tale is expressed during the concluding events of the series when Scarlet Witch utters the words “No more mutants,” (*House of M #7 23*) resulting in the world returning to its original state but decimates the mutant population to less than one percent of their previous number and rendering mutants as an endangered

species. The decimation of the mutant species representing the decimation of Jewish population during the second world war.

Magneto is later presented as a beaten old man who recognizes the errors of his ways and attempts to live a peaceful coexistence with humans, (*House of M #8*). This change in the character's rhetoric resulted in his expulsion from the now dying Brotherhood of Mutants and paralleled the actions of his real-life inspiration, Malcom X,

Malcolm's assertion that President John F. Kennedy's assassination amounted to "the chickens coming home to roost" led to his suspension from the Black Muslims in December 1963. A few months later, he left the organization, traveled to Mecca, and discovered that orthodox Muslims preach equality of the races, which led him to abandon the argument that whites are devils, (Malcolm X).

Magneto's version of coming to Mecca, as a metaphor for the change in his real world counterpart's rhetoric, is represented by his witnessing the horrors of the world he had envisioned, and in a stroke of additional subversive context, the realization that the world he fought to create his entire life was no more than the oppressed becoming the oppressors because of his fictional Jewish background and his experiences as a holocaust survivor. This character arc demonstrates the impulse for graphic literature to represent the mistakes of the past in a manner that promotes social change and personal growth. In addition, it also signifies an ethical lesson regarding the possibility for redemption. Unlike the classical myths of our ancient ancestors, whose monsters were presented as evil and irredeemable, the complexity of Marvel's villains promotes the ideals of understanding one's foes rather than blatantly and simply judging them as evil/ unwanted

or to other them further. Also, it indicates the possibility that they can reinterpret their world and change, which more closely reflects how identity is a concept that is always in flux rather than concrete and unchanging.

Throughout the X-Men publications, Magneto's rhetoric is continuously shifted from villain, to anti-hero, hero and villain again as the character deals with the implications of his actions and the fictional world he inhabits. In this way, Magneto is representative of the very unfixed notion of identity, as witnessed by his evolution from a militant extremist, (*The X-Men #1*), to his eventual addition to the X-Men's roster, and finally to the various occasions when he takes the place of Xavier as the Dean of Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, (*Uncanny X-Men #200*), the fictional home and private academy of the X-Men, (after he is put on trial for crimes against humanity and learns the error of his ways).

Conversely Xavier's X-Men represented the desire for peaceful cohabitation, synonymous with Dr. King's vision for America's future and reinforced by references to "Xavier's Dream," which directly reflects the sentiment of MLK's iconic "I Have a Dream" speech.

When I was young, normal people feared me, distrusted me! I realized the human race is not yet ready to accept those with extra powers! So I decided to build a haven... a school for X-Men! Here we stay, unsuspected by normal humans, as we learn to use our powers for the benefit of mankind... to help those who would distrust us if they knew of our existence! (*The X-Men #1* 10)

Simultaneously, his nickname, Professor X, was a juxtaposed allegorical reference to Malcom X, and the tense friendship between the two fictional characters acknowledged that while Malcom X and Dr. King's views were radically different, both were fighting for the equal rights of a marginalized group representative of all communities. By replacing the language of blackness, Jewishness or other groups with the word mutant, the plight of being born differently from the majority of the population could be told subversively through the X-Men comics.

Following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King in 1968, Xavier has been killed and resurrected numerous times throughout his fictional history. Each time Xavier is killed, Marvel pays homage to King in the words of Xavier's students, representing the lessons of peaceful coexistence the real-life civil rights activists, MLK, imparted to the American people, and paying tribute to the legacy his words and martyrdom inspired. While his first fictional death predated King's assassination it is important to note that the character's dying words were one of imparting understanding rather than judgment or hatred to his students, "Grotesk was the last of his race... Radiation from underground atomic tests must have destroyed his whole race deformed his body and his mind," (*X-Men # 42* 15). His advice was clearly in line with the philosophy King preached,

Xavier's final words require a bit of context for the modern reader. Grotesk was a short-lived villain in the franchise, whose name was intended to inspire obviously negative connotations toward the character. Throughout his six-book run, he was depicted as a pale grotesque savage monster who would lay waste to anyone in his path. Xavier's mutant abilities as a telepath, capable of reading minds, allowed the character to

be one that was kind and continuously demonstrating patience and empathy toward many of the franchise's most dreadful and malevolent villains. Xavier's capacity for empathy was precisely because he was a being capable of total-transparent communication. One of the presuppositions of social or identity based analysis is that exact understanding between people is an impossible task. Miscommunication and misunderstanding is a common experience of the human condition. However, Xavier's fictional abilities allow the character to transcend these limitations and gave him the ability to perfectly understand precisely because, rather than trying to imagine being in another's shoes, he actually can inhabit the body and mind of another being.

The fact that Grotesk was written as an extra-terrestrial, and thus becomes a radical representation of all intrinsic otherness, much as the X-Men/ mutants do, a moral regarding understanding and accepting one's enemy, or the other, begins to emerge. Much like the various social tensions Americans faced at the time, and to this day, Xavier's explanation of the social conditions and consequences that resulted in their enemy parallels the real-world conditions that lead to criminality, poverty, abuse, generational trauma and loss of identity. These conditions cause society to prejudge as criminals or unwanted others who had no control over the circumstances of their birth. In essence, the use of the terms *alien*, as in space alien, and *mutant* within the Sci-Fi genre presents an argument about victimization via one's birth or the world they inhabit. These terms demonstrate the various ways in which the X-Men franchise sought to define and contextualize the underlying prejudices civil rights activists combated during the era.

Xavier's second death, more than two decades later, further expands on the idea of peaceful coexistence and pays a direct tribute to King's legacy in the form of Xavier's fictional legacy through the lives he touched and the ethical lessons he imparted to his students. Following his death by yet another extra-terrestrial foe, various members of the X-Men call for the death of the creature that violated and killed their beloved mentor. This particular storyline was far more impactful and the ethical lessons more implicit in my opinion. The short version of the story is that Xavier was infested with the larvae of an alien species, yet again representing radical otherness. The larvae take over their host body killing Xavier in the process. Being killed by a being that is so demonstrably not human, yet still a sentient being represents difference and radical alterity. In effect, it was a form of assassination due to the character being targeted as a result of his standing as the leader of the fictional civil rights movement. Rather than succumbing to the default violent and tribal behaviors observed throughout humanity's recorded history, Xavier's adopted son and leader of the X-Men, Scott Summers, also known as Cyclops, says, "So long as there is hope – no matter how slight – the X-Men fight to preserve life. To create, rather than destroy," (*Uncanny X-Men #167* 14). Cyclops', and by extension Xavier's, message is antithetical to the militant ideologies presented through the Brotherhood of mutants, and in line with King's vision of a future where humans could transcend their differences and choose peace in the face of overwhelming violence.

Xavier's many deaths are important to note for similar reasons as Magneto's coming to Mecca moments following the House of M series. Through these allegorical commentaries on historical events, comics perform one of the aforementioned roles of art in society. They serve as acts of active remembering by repackaging historical tales of

oppression within a context that is more readily understandable to a modern audience. Just as Magneto's systemic eradication of humans informs and warns future generations of the horrors of feudalism, the holocaust and the Gulags, the X-Men's cyclical reaffirmation of their desire for peaceful coexistence and equality serve as ethical lessons, in a traditional sense, which impart to the reader iconic narratives of our centuries of struggle against tyranny and oppression in the form of historical allegories promoting inclusion and acceptance through radical depictions of violent historical events.

Another example of radically reinterpreting and depicting historical events is through the franchise's fictional mutant nation of Genosha, (*Uncanny X-Men #1*). The nation is situated off the coast of Africa and adopts an immigration policy similar to Israeli policy, where if one is born a mutant, one is granted citizenship with ease. It mirrors Liberia's history as a nation formed by former slaves, and reflects the sentiments of Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa Movement due to Magneto's Brotherhood propagating the idea of separation from humans, in this case metaphors for white Americans, and joining their own kind on the island-nation, which was governed by Magneto, (*Uncanny X-Men #235-238*).

While Genosha and Magneto are obvious examples of the type of closed and militant *community* Caputo and Derrida critique, Xavier's X-Men promoted the idea of *community without community*, a concept of communities remaining open to the incoming of all others regardless of their differences. The X-Men demonstrate this idea throughout comic's more than 50 years of publication. The group, which originally stood for mutant rights, eventually accepts humans and all manner of non-mutant members into



its ranks without prejudice. The original X-Men may have had radically different abilities, representative of the perceived differences between constructed races, yet they were ultimately similar in terms of culture and nationalism, neither of which serve as unchanging ideologies, but as concepts that could evolve and accept one another, synonymous with the concept of *community without community*.

## ANALYZING THE BEAST

Of the original five X-Men, none served as a greater metaphor for black men than the character Hank McCoy, whose ape-like appearance and superhero moniker, Beast, was a reference to the white European racist belief that black men were evolutionarily closer to and appeared more like apes than human beings, (*The Ape Insult: A Short History of a Racist Idea* par 1-5). Despite his depiction as a white male, McCoy's state as a metaphor results from several factors that are atypical within the established canon of the X-Men comics. An accepted trope of the fictional mechanics of being a mutant within Marvel Comics is that mutant abilities and physical deformations manifest during adolescence as a result of some great emotional stress, which activates the fictional X-gene responsible for their abilities. While this was the case for all the original members of the superhero group, McCoy was an exception to the rule because he was born with abnormally large ape-like hands and feet, (Beast - Marvel Comics - X-Men - Henry McCoy - Character Profile #1 par 4). The representation of a noticeable difference that could be seen by all others, but was natural in the case of the character, presents a metaphorical tie to the noticeably black skin of a newborn of African descent. The

perceived difference signified an inescapable physical reality according to which the child would suffer a great deal of discrimination throughout his life because of something that was nothing more than a circumstance of birth. (A circumstance that would result in his being perceived as ‘less than’ by the human/white community into which he was born into).

While his appearance may seem to reinforce prejudiced racial sentiments, the character’s moral qualities, or *identity*, subversively promoted the opposite. Once the reader accepts that McCoy’s illustration as a white man was intentionally constructed to bolster sales to Marvel’s primarily white, male, readership, his status as a symbol for black oppression comes into focus. The existence of activism within graphic literature and the tailoring of depictions of its characters for white male audiences are key points in Adam Schlesinger’s thesis “Holy Economic History of the Comic Book Industry, Batman!” Schlesinger argues,

Emboldened by greater creative freedom and greater royalty payments (see below,) writers began to tackle issues such as the Vietnam War, civil rights, feminism and environmentalism, and superheroes began questioning morality and authority... Publishers also attempted to ride the wave of multiculturalism and feminism, with Marvel publishing the blaxploitation influenced Luke Cage, Hero for Hire, the kung-fu inspired Master of Kung Fu featuring a Chinese hero named Shang-chi, and female character-headed books Shanna the She-Devil, Night Nurse and The Cat. However, none of these titles sold very well, and female audiences in particular remained elusive, and many of the publishers narrowed

their focus on catering to the (mostly white, mostly male) superhero fans that would purchase the same comic book titles every month, (Schlesinger 70-71)

The genre's early failures in attempting to diversify their audience forced Marvel and other comic book publishers to continue drawing primarily white-male heroes, yet this did not stop creators, such as Stan Lee, from weaving the plight of the other in their narratives.

Despite his name and appearance, Beast is depicted as a character with a genius-level intellect and is represented as anything other than a hypersexualized being. The character counters Robert Staples', an Emeritus Professor of Sociology with the University of California, San Francisco, observations regarding societal views of black masculinities in his book *Black Masculinity : The Black Male's Role in American Society*,

In the 1970's that image began to change due to the shift in socialization from the family to the mass media. [Prior to that period,] the image conveyed of black men on television can best be characterized as irresponsible, hypersexualized, hustlers and violent" (Staples 143)

Instead, McCoy is depicted as a shy and quiet gentleman, presenting an atypical view of the American black man as one capable of great intelligence and academic achievement (witnessed by the character's multiple degrees in the sciences).

Furthermore, there are several instances within the first issue of the X-Men where references to black communities were made concerning McCoy as the object of the conversation within the comics. For example, while training with his friend and

teammate, Iceman, the super-powered individuals are depicted throwing a heavy iron ball at each other. McCoy, with his massive strength and superior agility, begins to dribble and bounce it as if it was a basketball while saying, “Right in the ol’ pocket, kid! Maybe we’ll challenge the Harlem Globe Trotters someday,” (*The X-Men #1* 7). Both the dribbling of the ball and the reference to the all-Black basketball team lend themselves to subversive connotations, if not racist by modern standards, of blackness. However, these early pages also demonstrate various ways in which McCoy is used to counter the hypersexualized racial sentiments regarding black men. Much of the first issue’s plot deals with the introduction of Jean Grey, (*The X-Men #1* 9-12), with whom the entirety of the team find themselves smitten. While the rest of the X-Men are depicted making fools of themselves, McCoy, the most visually non-human of the group, conducts himself like a gentleman in her presence. While these examples may seem a stretch, one must consider why the decisions were made to present this rhetoric within the early pages of the fledgling publication. A multitude of other references could have been used in their place, but what other reason readily presents itself if not to subversively and ironically present the Beast as anything other than his namesake?

The character’s social subtext is actually heavily layered. Given that McCoy is of Irish descent, it can be argued that he also serves as a foil to the racial stereotypes applied to Irish immigrants prior to and during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Seamus O’Reilly, a journalist with *The Irish Times*, has demonstrated such prejudice specifically signaling out the long-standing history of Europeans portraying the Irish as ape-like idiots in his article *Apes, Psychos, Alcos: How British Cartoonists Depict The Irish*, “In a way, representations of the Irish long ago worked as a template for this kind of hatred, and the Daily Mail could

be merely returning to a legacy of dehumanising the papist rabble as feckless apes,” ( O’Reilly par 9). O’Reilly’s observation is important for two reasons. At first glance, given that the ape insult, and the hypersexualized/ unintelligent connotations it implies, were used as a racial stereotype against those of both African and Irish descent, the simpler explanation is that McCoy represents an Irish sentiment, not necessarily anti-black sentiment, would seem to be far more likely. However, I firmly argue McCoy represents both marginalized groups because of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century context and timeliness of the X-Men publication.

This discussion brings us to a rather forgotten concept within contemporary social discourses regarding the intertwined historical relationship between Irish and Black communities in America, which is the history of the Black Irish. David R. Roediger, a professor of American studies and history with the University of Kansas, tackles this issue in his book, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*. He defines Black Irish as a concept passed down through Irish communities signifying that at least one ancestor was the result of intermixing with shipwrecked slaves, despite the outward appearance of whiteness by the generations that followed, (Roediger 4). There are several variables that cannot be ignored when reading the comics; by the 1960s the Ape insult was more readily understood as a slur toward Black men. By this period a sense of pan-whiteness had become a staple of the white-American identity where the presence of skin other than what was considered white had become the primary visual indicator of belonging to a discriminated group. "White workers could, and did, define and accept their class positions by fashioning identities as 'not slaves' and as 'not Blacks,'" (Roediger 13).

Another variable that strongly reinforces the interpretation that McCoy is a signifier for blackness in a complex way is the timeliness of the X-Men publication during the American Civil Rights movement. It is for this reason that I argue McCoy is both timely in his metaphorical blackness and historical. His depiction and name sake functions as a tool for remembering societal missteps and demonstrating the arbitrary ways in which slurs are applied to whatever othered group is not wanted by the dominant members of a society during their time.

His full name, Henry Philip McCoy, can be interpreted as an amalgamation of the names of various Episcopal priests, (“Historical Directory of Episcopal Clergy in Philadelphia”) who have practiced a long-held belief that racism is a sin, (*The Religion of The Beast (Hank McCoy) of the X-Men* par 1), This implication is confirmed in *Ultimate X-men #45*, when an Episcopalian priest presides over the character’s funeral. The mismatch of depictions as both a scientist with degrees in genetics, chemistry and physics, and his status as a practicing theologian may seem unusual to the comic readership, but I argue that it serves various purposes in relation to common understandings of *identity*.

Just as McCoy can be interpreted as representing multiple marginalized races, his representation as both scientist and spiritualist pays homage to the conflicting views of modern Americans, more precisely the views of the religiously conservative right and the increasingly atheistic left, while simultaneously demonstrating that not all conservatives are religious and not all liberals are atheists. It is a demonstration of the conflicting and contradictory nature of human belief and thought, but also promotes the concept of

*community without community*. Beast's tolerance and acceptance of religious world views, despite his scientific background, is demonstrated through his closest friendships with fellow X-Men Kitty Pride, who is Jewish, and Night Crawler, who is Catholic. The religious affiliations of these three characters is quite overt as their faiths are central components of their fictional identities. Coupled with the portrayal of their close bonds, the demonstration of peaceful coexistence among a protestant, Jew and Catholic cements the concept of *community without community*. These members of differing and historically oppositional communities find commonality in their radical difference. There is an almost subversive irony in that the only point of commonality these three share is their fictional X-gene, which expresses itself in radically different ways. Pride can walk through walls, Night Crawler can teleport and Beast is incredibly strong. They are dissimilar in so many ways, yet they cohabitate and demonstrate genuine concern for each other's wellbeing. As a scientist, rather than stubbornly denying the existence of a being that cannot be proven or disproven, McCoy chooses to accept the views of nonscientific others without judgement, promoting a harmonious existence within what has historically been viewed as entrenched/ oppositional views of the world.

In addition to his allegorical relationship to black, Irish and religious discrimination, McCoy's ever evolving views and commentaries on the state of science, society and politics, as well as own physical changes to a blue haired ape, (*Amazing Adventures #15*), and later a massive cat-like animal, (*Astonishing X-Men #1*) is very performative as it pertains to the concept of *identity*. Identity is shaped and informed by experience. A concept that embraces *identity* as, not a fixed point, but rather as a phenomenon that is in a continual state of change and thereby incapable of being

essentialized. Thus, McCoy's physical changes throughout the character's publication serve as visual metaphors for an unfixed concept of identity. This is by far one of the most interesting aspects of graphic literature. Rather than a character being encapsulated in a single novel, the reappearance of characters throughout decades of publication allows the identity, both physical and rhetorical, of those characters to change over time in a manner that is far more genuine and descriptive of the human condition than is usually possible in traditional literature. In this sense graphic literature provides a road map to the wider changes in societal views and identities.

## CONCLUSION

Popular American graphic literature continues to promote equality, empathy and understanding for humanity in all of its wondrous variety outside of the race, social or religious ideologies presented. It promotes LGBT rights and interracial marriage through Jean-Paul Beaubier, Northstar, a gay mutant and X-Man who married his fictional partner in 2012, (*Astonishing X-Men* #51). It promotes Feminism through characters such as Wonder Woman, an Amazon whose beauty comes second only to her prowess as a warrior, tactician and ambassador, (*All Star Comics* #8). There are enough examples of the various ways that today's graphic literature seeks to promote justice for the other to fill the pages of several textbooks, but what truly demonstrates the value of these assertions is that these characters continue to survive the test of time. Their stories are still devoured by an American populace that is not only willing to spend a portion of their income to read these tales, but hungers for it to such a degree that the characters have



been transferred onto the big screen through multibillion-dollar-earning productions. At home viewers tune into the plethora of networks that have adapted these stories for a television audience that continues to engorge itself on characters whose most endearing qualities are their desire to usher in a world where all are accepted so that one day the differences that continue to ravage our reality will become nothing more than the memories of bygone eras. These eras will always be remembered through the fictional rendering of graphic literature produced today, so that society can look back at a time when community was a concept that separated and say, “never again.”

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