American Dreams of Mutants:
The X-Men—“Pulp” Fiction, Science Fiction, and Superheroes

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Reviewing American contributions to popular culture of the twentieth century, the critic Martin Williams identifies “motion picture drama, jazz, a special kind of musical theater and its associated music and dance, the modern detective story, the comic strip, to name only the most obvious” (3). No less obvious, and a glaring omission from these claims, is science fiction, for “two genres acquired their recognizable form in [American “pulp” fiction magazines]: the detective noir and science fiction” (A. Boyer 92). Despite the European/Old World antecedents of H. G. Wells, who wrote scientific romances, and Jules Verne, who wrote merveilleux scientifique, the term “science fiction” was coined by Hugo Gernsback, editor of the American magazine Amazing Stories in the 1920s. From these pulp origins, science fiction moved “inexorably towards the center of American culture” (Franklin 3), a movement marked by the detonation of an atomic bomb at Hiroshima in 1945, when “thoughtful men and women recognized that [they] were living in a science fiction world” (Gunn 174). And, as Bukatman remarks, there can be “no overstating the importance of science fiction to . . . a moment that sees itself as science fiction” (Terminal Identity 3). Reviewing those opinions expressed by critics and commentators in the 1950s, Edward James found acceptance that science fiction was a serious literature—although privileging ideas over literary expression—concerned with mankind’s present plight and problematic future (“Before the Novum” 27).
The pulp fiction origins of science fiction and detective noir, James observes, were shared by American comic books: “The pulps indeed spawned the comic-strip heroes of the 1930s . . . the super-hero, in fact, was one of the most prominent creations of the pulp era” (Science Fiction 48).

The pulps of the 1930s featured such “men of mystery” as Doc Savage, “The Man of Bronze,” and his Fabulous Five (Doc Savage Magazine #1: March 1933), and “The Spider,” a caped vigilante (The Spider #1: October 1933), while the comics introduced Superman, “The Man of Steel” (Action Comics #1: June 1938), and Batman, “The Caped Crusader” (Detective Comics #27: May 1939). The debuts of Superman and Batman, the more successful and enduring superheroes, were followed by those of The Human Torch and Namor the Sub-mariner (Marvel Comics #1: October/November 1939) to establish a “golden age” of comics. These superhero stories—produced, Bukatman alleges, “largely by young males for somewhat younger males” (“X-bodies” 95)—have been considered to be science fiction albeit, as James contends, “shorn of all sophistication” (Science Fiction 83). But these stories are more properly fantasies; the superheroes retained the mysticism of their pulp predecessors (Lang and Trimble 165) and, although set in plausible worlds where even “the irrational or the strange is still explicable in quasi-scientific or everyday terms” (Abercrombie, Lash, and Longhurst 123), superhero stories used science as “an alibi for magic” (Reynolds 53). Both science fiction and fantasy are estranged genres—possessing an “imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical framework” (Suvin 60–61)—as opposed to naturalistic genres (Parrinder 37), but separated by the notion of cognition inherent in “the Gernsbackian idea of fiction with a scientific explanation” (Parrinder 37).

The 1920s and 1930s witnessed the rise of the American science fiction short story, but the 1940s saw the science fiction story honed by writers chosen by editor John W. Campbell for publication in Astounding Science Fiction. Science fiction began appearing in “mass-circulation magazines like Collier’s and the Saturday Evening Post” (P. Boyer 257), but many general readers continued to consider science fiction as escapist or unrealistic, which contributed to a “ghetto” mentality among fans. This “ghettoizing” of science fiction was not entirely imposed from without; many science fiction writers and readers regarded “the bulk of their own society as mistaken, ill-informed, and
probably ineducable” (Shippey 101). Nevertheless, the 1950s saw “the emergence of science fiction from its paraliterary ghetto” (A. Boyer 96) with the publication of socially conscious and critical stories and novels. Yet, this serious and sophisticated literature coexisted with unsophisticated paraliterature, such as articles and stories that encouraged a “cult of irrationality and UFOism” (Seed 9). These stories were published after the Second World War by Ray Palmer, who succeeded Gernsback as the editor of Amazing Stories. Serious science fiction survived the crash of science fiction magazines (which dwindled from forty to a mere six or seven in the late 1950s [Sadoul 217], due in part to the failure of the major magazine distributor American News Company), the decline of mass-circulation magazines such as Collier’s, and the rise of television.

Unsophisticated superhero comics, by contrast, flourished for the golden age before and during the Second World War. The Axis threat was countered by a roster of patriotic superheroes—including Captain America, the Eagle, the Shield, the Star-Spangled Kid and Stripesy, and Uncle Sam—who provided “fantasies of superhuman power [overcoming] the devastatingly dehumanizing forces associated with Fascism” (Schmitt 155). But this golden age ended in 1954 with the publication of Frederic Wertham’s Seduction of the Innocent, “397 impassioned pages detailing the pernicious effects” of comics (Ross 110). American comic books were subjected to a scare campaign, one of those “moral crusades of the McCarthy era” (Brown 18) that tapped “the general cultural paranoia of the period through the continual and effective use of the popular press” (Parsons 71). Although this “comic scare” undoubtly damaged the comic trade, television had contributed to the decline of comic sales by “siphoning off the comic book audience” (Parsons 72) with programs such as Captain Video (1949–53), Tom Corbett, Space Cadet (1950–54), and Space Patrol (1950–56). Comic book publishers, “to escape the witch hunts with what little audience they had left” (Brown 21), submitted to “a busybody review board and an insufferable code that amounted to the emasculation of comic books” (Richler 306).

However, Superman and Batman survived the 1950s, reconciling themselves to the requirements of the post-Wertham Comics Code. Superman was even translated successfully for television in The Adventures of Superman (1953–57). Further golden age superheroes were rehabilitated or reoriginated. The first was the Flash (Showcase #4: October 1956), from whose appearance the “silver age” of comics is
dated (McCue 35–38; Reynolds 9). But the revitalization of American comic books has been attributed to the debuts, in the early 1960s, of new heroes such as the Fantastic Four (Fantastic Four #1: November 1961), Spider-Man (Amazing Fantasy #15: August 1962) and the X-Men (The X-Men #1: September 1963). These were products of the Marvel Comics Group helmed by Stan Lee.²

Marvel of the Silver Age

Mordecai Richler observes that the golden age superheroes had constituted “invulnerable, all-conquering” champions for children, providing “revenge figures against what seemed a gratuitously cruel adult world” (306, 300). The relevance of these superheroes for children was epitomized by a young Billy Batson who, upon uttering the magic word “SHAZAM” (an acronym of Solomon, Hercules, Atlas, Zeus, Achilles, and Mercury), was transformed into the world’s mightiest mature mortal, Captain Marvel (Whiz Comics #2: February 1940), “an allegory of pubescent metamorphosis,” alleges Bukatman (“X-bodies” 100). Such golden age superheroes “were always adults, except when followed by a xeroxed sidekick” (McCue 41); Batman was followed by Robin (Detective Comics #38: April 1940) and The Human Torch by Toro (The Human Torch Comic #2: Fall 1940). These sidekicks had served “as a source of identification for young adolescents” (Brody 176). Marvel Comics’ innovation was to “pioneer comics for the adolescent” (Jacobs and Jones 129) that dealt with “titanic battles between [teenaged superheroes] and middle-aged supervillains” (Mondello 233).

Numbered among the Fantastic Four, who were exposed to cosmic rays in a near-earth orbiting spacecraft and transformed into superheroes, was a new Human Torch who could burst into flames without being consumed by fire. The Torch was an impulsive, literally hot-headed high school student with a penchant for hot-rods. The wisecracking Spider-Man, whose superhuman powers were acquired by the bite of a radioactive spider while visiting a science exhibition, was a high school bookworm who, Bukatman observes, had a certain “nerdy charm” (“X-bodies” 95) and lived with his widowed aunt. There was a mutual antagonism between the silver age Human Torch and Spider-Man, begun when Spider-Man crashed a party held by the Human
Torch’s girlfriend (*The Amazing Spider-Man* #8: January 1964). This contributed to the crossover sales of both comic book titles.

These mid-1960s superheroes were torn between a preference for self-gratification—the Torch was a girl-chaser and Spider-Man was “neurotically obsessed with status and worldly success” (Lang and Trimble 165)—and public service (Mondello 235; Skidmore and Skidmore 89). Often perceived as a menace to society, these teenaged superheroes consequently felt “ambivalence toward society and their place in it” (Lang and Trimble 167), an allegory of adolescent anomie.

The X-Men, however, were a different proposition. These teenagers were, as the comic book cover proclaimed, “The Strangest Super-Heroes of All.” Critic Kim Newman describes the X-Men as “‘children of the atom,’ the superfreak offspring of those exposed to radioactivity during the Manhattan Project” (*Millennium* 79). The original X-Men—Angel, Beast, Cyclops, Iceman, and Marvel Girl—had not been transformed or given powers by inadvertent exposure to cosmic rays or radioactivity. The X-Men were born different, as if the sins of the fathers had been visited upon the children. The genesis of the X-Men was, as Bukatman observes, “teenaged mutants, powerful but undisciplined,” who were mentored by a mutant telepath, Professor Xavier. He taught the teenagers enrolled in his academy “to control their powers in order to face the threat posed by ‘evil mutants’ bent (of course) on the domination of humanity” (“X-bodies” 95).

Whereas the silver age Human Torch and Spider-Man corresponded in part with golden age superheroes or “mystery men,” the X-Men traced a popular theme of science fiction in the 1940s in which “superior human mutants are persecuted and hunted” (Fitting 137). The X-Men bore similarities to “Children of the Atom” stories by Wilmar H. Shiras, beginning with “In Hiding” in *Astounding* (November 1948), collected as *Children of the Atom* (1953). These stories concerned a number of highly intelligent mutant children whose parents had died from radiation poisoning and who had been gathered and educated by a foundation, segregated from homo sapiens.

Major writers of serious science fiction literature—Olaf Stapledon, Stanley Weinbaum, and Philip Wylie—had depicted “homo superior as an unhappy outcast from the oppressive society of homo sapiens” (Berger 160). Thereafter, such mutant abilities as extrasensory perception, telekinesis, precognition, and telepathy—termed “psionics” by
Campbell and writers who were published in *Astounding*—recurred in science fiction stories (Berger). Harlan Ellison’s novella “Deeper than the Darkness,” published in *Infinity* in April 1957, featured “psiod” types: telepathic Mindees, teleporter spaceship Drivers, and telekinetic Blasters and Pyrotics. These psiods were either accredited by the authorities they served or ostracized as strange-breed or “oddie.”

The X-Men, however, featured not only psiod mutants (the telepathic Professor Xavier and the telekinetic Marvel Girl) but also mutants with grotesque deformities. The Angel was endowed with avian wings, and the Beast had simian characteristics, including prehensile feet and enhanced agility and strength, despite such grotesquerie having become a cliché in sophisticated science fiction literature of the 1950s (Turney 127).

Notably, the bald telepathic Professor Xavier recalls the protagonists of Henry Kuttner’s “Baldy” stories—“started in 1945 before the detonation of the atomic bomb and collected as *Mutant* in 1953” (Seed 56)—who were “a demonstrably superior and easily identifiable species of telepaths living amidst ordinary humans and in the shadow of... their potential pogroms” (Berger 160).

Although this theme corresponded both to “the ‘ghetto’ mentality of [science fiction] fans in the 1940s” (Fitting 137) and the “comic scare” witch hunt paranoia of the 1950s, the isolation of mutants and their alienation from “normal” society could be read as “a parable of the alienation of any minority” (Reynolds 79) in the 1960s.

Professor Xavier and his X-Men, who sought accommodation with homo sapiens, recalled moderate elements of the civil rights movement of the 1960s as exemplified by Martin Luther King, Jr. King, head of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, maintained during the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963 that “the Negro dream is rooted in the American dream.” Militant mutants such as Magneto (debut *The X-Men* #1: September 1963) and his Brotherhood of Evil Mutants (debut *The X-Men* #4, #5, and #6: March, May, and July 1964), who “disdained to cooperate with homo sapiens” (Reynolds 79), resembled increasingly radical elements. These included the Nation of Islam (or “Black Muslims”) whose best-known spokesperson, Malcolm X, advocated black nationalism, and the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee, latterly headed by Stokeley Carmichael who, in Canton, Mississippi, publicly proclaimed “Black Power” in 1966.
Such parallels are not far-fetched. Silver age comics had become overtly political, “even radical, insisting on a ‘relevance’ in which even the most escapist comics [involved] themselves with social issues” (Schmitt 155). And, “in an era demanding relevance, few magazines were more topical or current than Lee’s [comic books]” (Mondello 236). Lee’s Marvel Comics cultivated a literate readership by the introduction of letters pages to encourage this readership to voice their preferences, and Lee responded in an editorial column. “Stan’s Soapbox” was printed in each Marvel comic book, through which “the editor held forth on both comics and social issues” (Daniels 107). This cultivation of a literate comic fandom recalls the creation of a science fiction fandom credited to Gernsback, who published readers’ letters and responded in the editor’s column of Amazing Stories.

The X-Men adopted a liberal political stance, “stressing cooperation among individuals and minorities rather than conflict, moderation in politics rather than extremism, and the right of each American to social recognition and economic opportunity” (Mondello 238). This stance was consistent with that adopted by some contemporary science fiction literature, particularly Anne McCaffrey’s short stories “A Womanly Talent” and “A Bridle for Pegasus.” These were published in Analog (Astounding was retitled in October 1960) in February 1969 and July 1973, respectively. These stories concerned the foundation of the North American Center for Parapsychic Talents (NACPT) which, like Xavier’s academy, sought to recruit and train the gifted. The center sought Talents gifted in psionics, intending to license and register Talents and to provide this minority, by legislation, with professional immunity in the exercise of their powers. The NACPT, which was demonstrably multicultural, facilitated the resolution of violent inter-ethnic quarrels to secure the rights of minorities. But these benefits were achieved at a personal cost to the Talents, registered and resident at the NACPT, who were “policied” by the center and whose right to reproduce required approval by the center.

Yet, “despite having a lot going for it, The X-Men was not an immediate hit with readers” (Sassienie 89). The X-Men may have seemed juvenile to adolescent readers: “a class of super heroes in training,” all wearing “the same basic costume, as if it were a school uniform,” with “a teacher who ran them through tests . . . and graded them” (Sanderson 209). The class graduated (#7: September 1964), their uniforms were replaced with individual costumes (#39: December
1967), and their teacher was eliminated (#42: March 1968). But *The X-Men*, a title that privileged public service over self gratification, did not achieve the popularity of *The Amazing Spider-Man* or *Fantastic Four*.

*The X-Men* achieved sixty-six issues (#66: March 1970), then featured five years of reprints (#12 to #45) before closing in 1975 (#93: April). Marvel Comics may have continued to reprint *The X-Men*, but for a general decline in sales. This decline was not only because of distribution problems with conventional comics (newsstands and small grocery stores were reluctant to carry comic books because of the small profit margin [McCue 60; Parsons 75]) but also because of the countercultural “cottage industry of underground comics” (Brown 21). These comics, not bound by the Comic Code, “began making real inroads into . . . readership” (McCue 55). Instead of reprinting old issues, Marvel Comics published a radically revised X-Men, which attracted a new readership.

**Resurrection: X-Men in the “Bronze Age”**

The silver age X-Men were revived, in the “Bronze Age” of the 1970s, ostensibly for one special issue, *Giant Size X-Men* (#1: Summer 1975), which proclaimed, “From the ashes of the past there grow the fires of the future. The grandeur and the glory begin anew with Second Genesis!”

This “second genesis” was caused by the capture of the original X-Men, requiring Professor Xavier to mount a rescue with new recruits, including former foes Banshee (*The X-Men* #28: January 1967) and Sunfire (*The X-Men* #64: January 1970). Other characters new to *The X-Men* were recruited: Wolverine, who had debuted in another Marvel Comics title (*The Incredible Hulk* #180 and #181: October and November 1974), and Colossus, Nightcrawler, Storm, and Thunderbird, who all debuted in *Giant Size X-Men*.

The original X-Men had been teenaged American superheroes, but the recruited X-Men were international and multicultural (Wright 263), and with greater individuality and maturity. Sunfire, Nightcrawler, and Colossus were, respectively, Japanese, German, and Russian youths; Thunderbird was a male Native American, and Storm an African American woman; and the Canadian Wolverine and Irish Banshee were middle-aged men.
The internationality and multiculturalism of the recruits were intended to enhance the foreign marketability of Marvel Comics (Daniels 158), while the greater maturity of certain recruits corresponded with an increasing maturity of comic readership. The reduction in convenient sales outlets (newsstands and grocery stores) and increased prices in the late 1960s had deprived comics of popular teenaged readership (Wright 238). Comic producers increasingly became dependent upon speciality shops and a direct distribution system that served a smaller, more particular audience of fans and collectors who were older on average (Parsons 76–78). This direct distribution system circumvented both review board and Comic Code, granting “freedom of expression . . . to explore more mature themes” (Brown 21) with a particular audience that “would care about good material and would notice bylines” of writers and artists (Pearson and Uricchio 27).

The greater individuality of the new X-Men coincided with a greater emphasis on self-realization. The 1960s had been an “age of commitment and cultural revolution,” but the 1970s had “soon gained a reputation for self-absorption and political retreat” (Lasch 237). Political assassinations, the war in Vietnam, and the disgrace of Watergate had led to a loss of faith, prompting former activists “not to inflict . . . certainties on others but to find a meaning in life” (Lasch xvi). Those activists of the 1960s who had pursued social reform and rights for “aggrieved groups—blacks, women, gays, welfare recipients, ethnic groups, the elderly, the handicapped” (Foner 303)—became advocates of the ideology of personal growth in the “me decade” of the 1970s. Correspondingly, the new X-Men retained their commitment to public service—despite being “outsiders who were feared and hated by the society that they fought to defend” (Wright 258)—but their triumphs often were achieved through personal growth. Wolverine, for instance, had been conditioned to be an intelligent weapon, with metal grafted onto his skeleton and retractable claws fitted in his hands, and had to curb his wilder impulses.

Rather than a liberal, Wolverine could be considered a libertarian who sought “to make personal choice . . . the basis for social behaviour” (Chafe 468–69) Although the remaining original X-Men, Professor Xavier and Cyclops, continued to endorse the right of a minority to social recognition and acceptance, the new X-Men became increasingly critical of the liberal political process and legislation. Wolverine was a rugged antihero whose beliefs echoed antigovernment attitudes
generated by the Vietnam War, Watergate, and the reaction against the
rights revolution of the 1960s as an assault on individualism. The
libertarian belief that “even well-intentioned government social pro-
grams did more harm than good” (Foner 317) was discernible in a two-
issue story, “Days of Future Past,” that began in the issue in which the
title changed from The X-Men to The Uncanny X-Men (#141: January
1981). 4

The story envisioned a bleak future in which the United States had
been subjugated by titanic Sentinel robots (debut The X-Men #14: April 1965) programmed to locate, capture, and neutralize mutants.
These Sentinels had been unleashed by the government after the as-
sassination, by the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, of Senator Robert
Kelly, who had proposed a Mutant Registration Act. The surviving
X-Men of this future were incarcerated in internment camps. Aided by
Wolverine, who had remained at liberty, the mind of one of these
X-Men, Shadowcat, was transferred to her earlier incarnation (a recent
recruit to the X-Men) to prevent the assassination that created this
bleak future.

The recruitment of the younger and more innocent Shadowcat
served both to counter the bleakness of Wolverine (he even became her
unlikely mentor) and to reaffirm Professor Xavier’s mission to teach
young mutants to control their powers. A new intake of teenage
mutants to Xavier’s academy subsequently debuted in the title New
Mutants (#1: March 1983).

The original X-Men reformed as X-Factor (#1: February 1986), who
supposedly captured mutant “menaces” but actually trained their cap-
tives to control their powers. X-Factor became bleak with the trans-
formation of Angel; his avian wings were replaced with razor-sharp
prosthetics by Apocalypse, an immortal mutant intent on fomenting
conflict between homo sapiens and homo superior (debut #6: July
1986). Apocalypse intended Angel to personify Death in his mutant
team, the Four Horseman (#24 and #25: January and February 1988).
The teenage intake of New Mutants was transformed from students to
warriors under the tutelage of Cable (debut #87: May 1990), a cyborg
freedom fighter who had traveled in time from a distant future tyr-
annized by Apocalypse in order to prepare mutants for the coming
conflict (X-Force #1: June 1991).

The X-titles, including The Uncanny X-Men, X-Factor, and X-Force,
depicted a present plight and problematic future for both homo sapiens
and homo superior. Such stories as “Days of Future Past” earned praise for comics in the 1980s for “their speculation, their inferences, and their predictions” as seeming “closer to science fiction than to the Golden Age predecessors” (Skidmore and Skidmore 84). These X-titles drew upon contemporary sophisticated and unsophisticated science fiction materials. The titles traced themes that had become standard in science fiction stories of the 1950s and popularized through television in the 1960s. Temporal displacement, for instance, had become a staple of television series such as Irwin Allen’s *Time Tunnel* (1966–67). “Days of Future Past” had greater similarities to two episodes of Leslie Stevens’s television series *The Outer Limits* (1963–65): “Soldier” (1964) and “Demon with a Glass Hand” (1964), scripted by Harlan Ellison. The titles also traced contemporary science fiction cinema. For instance, the student Shadowcat, alone in Professor Xavier’s academy, singlehandedly defeats a predatory demon (*The Uncanny X-Men* #143: March 1981) in a pastiche of the film *Alien* (1979), particularly in the dénouement, when the demon is incinerated in the ignition thrust of a jet engine. However, the X-titles were merely *closer* to science fiction; the titles did not draw solely upon science fiction (rather than an alien, Shadowcat’s adversary was a demon), but also on fantasy materials.

**Extinction: X-Men into the Twenty-first Century**

The X-titles, in common with “cyberpunk” science fiction of the 1980s, became increasingly concerned with technological and scientific advances that could “imperil the very survival of the individual and the human” (Kellner 173): “prosthetic and cosmetic surgery, mind-altering drugs, information technology, virtual reality, artificial intelligence, biogenetics, holograms and surround-sound, miniaturised computer systems and ‘intelligent weaponry’” (Bailey 12).

Both the X-titles and cyberpunk, particularly in stories and novels by William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, depicted society as the new Middle Ages, “a back-to-the-future model of the 21st century” (Slaughter 183). This future Middle Ages, as Umberto Eco has remarked, is shaped by the power of nation-states waning relative to the powers wielded by cartels, cliques, conspirators, and corporations (*Faith* 80). These new Middle Ages are roamed by bands of outcasts, mystics, and adventurers (*Faith* 80): Professor Xavier and his X-Men;
Magneto and his Brotherhood of Evil Mutants; Cable and his X-Force; and Apocalypse and his Four Horsemen. The bands of outcasts fragmented and X-titles proliferated in the early 1990s. The X-Men divided into two teams: Gold in *The Uncanny X-Men* and Blue in the revived *The X-Men* (Vol. 2/2nd Series #1: October 1991), and a further intake to Xavier’s academy made a debut in *Generation X* (#1: November 1994). This proliferation placed Marvel Comics in double jeopardy. First, X-titles became “a very detailed, intricate soap opera,” and, as such, inaccessible to new readers (McCue 82). Second, Marvel Comics gained a reputation for foisting X-titles and crossover stories on readers, while leaving critical acclaim to independent publishers (Haley 8). Independent titles were inclined to parody X-titles; for example, Image Comics’ Freak Force, operating as bounty hunters and superheroes-for-hire, parodied X-Factor and X-Force (*Freak Force* #1: December 1993).

The predicament of the X-titles became most evident in 1995 with the publication of a story, “The Age of Apocalypse,” that had parallels with “Days of Future Past” (*The X-Men* #141–142: January–February 1981). The eponymous “Age of Apocalypse” was a bleak alternate present created by the assassination of Professor Xavier prior to his foundation of the X-Men (*The X-Men* #41: February 1995). Repercussions of this assassination were the foundation of the X-Men by Magneto and the subjugation of the United States by Apocalypse. Homo superior slaughtered homo sapiens, with survivors either incarcerated in internment camps or evacuated by Sentinel robots to “United Europe.”

Consistent with this alternate present, each X-title was renamed for the duration of the story (March–June 1995). For example, *The Uncanny X-Men* became *The Astonishing X-Men* (#1: March 1995); *X-Factor* became *Factor X* (#1: March 1995); and *Generation X* became *Generation Next* (#1: March 1995). The core story occupied thirty-four issues of nine monthly or bimonthly X-titles before Apocalypse was overthrown by Magneto and his X-Men. Past events were rectified, and Professor Xavier was restored to lead his X-Men in the original X-titles.

The commercial merit of such X-title crossover stories was that Marvel was sustained when comic sales—which had been, in part, inflated by speculators buying comics in bulk for later resale to collectors—generally declined in the mid-1990s. When, in 1996, Marvel
launched a cull of titles, X-titles escaped largely unscathed. This cull was achieved by the depredations of an entity named “Onslaught” (debut *The X-Men* #53: June 1996), ending in a cataclysm that convulsed the Marvel Comic universe, attracting readership, resolving anomalies, and paring production.

X-titles, however, were not culled but overhauled. For instance, *The X-Men* was retitled *New X-Men* (#114: July 2001). This “new” referred not to the composition of the team—which reunited Professor Xavier and Cyclops with Beast, Marvel Girl, and Wolverine—but to a shift in orientation. *New X-Men* dispensed with the trappings of superheroism: superhero costumes were replaced with uniforms (not school but paramilitary) and secret identities were abandoned (*New X-Men* #116: September 2001). A new writer, Grant Morrison, maintains that the *New X-Men* was “not a story about super-heroes but about the ongoing evolutionary struggle between good/new and bad/old,” and a story that “kids will dig for their sheer gee-whiz, kinetic strut, which college kids will buy for the rebel irony and adults will love for the distraction . . . [a story] aimed at the mainstream, media-literate audience of kids, teenagers and adults with disposable income” (Morrison 2–3).

This reorientation of *New X-Men* from superhero soap-opera toward source science fiction also re-established the original theme of the X-Men insofar as homo superior was re-emphasised as the unhappy outcast from the oppressive society of homo sapiens. Xavier’s academy, revealed as an institution for the recruitment and training of mutants, was besieged by homo sapiens protesters bearing placards with such legends as “Protect the human race now,” “Genetic cleanliness begins at home,” “Have your babies tested now,” and “It’s not murder if it’s a mutant” (*New X-Men* #117: October 2001).

Consistent with this reorientation toward science fiction, the X-Men discovered an “E” gene, “a genetic trigger for extinction buried deep in the human genome,” which “turns on when an entire species is about to be turned off.” Homo sapiens “is at an end [and] within three, maybe four generations . . . [will] be replaced by [homo superior] or something even stranger” (*New X-Men* #116: September 2001). A similar premise was provided by Greg Bear’s *Darwin’s Radio* (1999) in which extinction of homo sapiens and evolution of homo superior are triggered by SHEVA (a Scattered Human retroVirus Activation buried in human DNA), which reproduces by transcribing RNA genetic material into DNA for insertion into a host cell. The America of *Darwin’s*
Radio was less liberal than that of McCaffrey’s Talents, envisaging registration and internment reminiscent of “Days of Future Past.”

Whether comics with such reorientation emerge from the paraliterary ghetto remains to be seen. Eco has noted reservations that comic readers “are prevented by ‘easy’ messages from having access to other more nourishing experiences” and denunciations of comics as “an impoverishment of the educational possibilities which would be otherwise realised by books” (“On Chinese” 159). Nevertheless, increasingly sophisticated superhero comics are providing an introduction to—or distraction from—serious science fiction which, whether in magazines or novels, has become “more literary, more obscure and self-referential” (James and Mendlesohn 4). Unlike serious science fiction, the emergence of comics cannot be facilitated by publication in such mass circulation magazines as Collier’s, nor by publication as novels, although some graphic novels have “attracted the critical radar of [American periodicals] Nation, Time and Newsweek” (Thompson 25). Any emergence will be due to the translation of comics into motion picture drama. Bryan Singer, the director of the film X-Men released in 2000, emphasized that “the comic book was a science fiction idea that happened to be done graphically” (Salisbury 7). Notably, the reorientation of the New X-Men as science fiction coincided with the release and critical success of X-Men. Critic Kim Newman expresses the hope that “the satisfying, straight-ahead vision of [the] film will filter back into the . . . comics” (“Homo superior” 28). But the film envisions a liberal mutant dream rooted in the American dream of the 1960s, featuring a moderate Professor Xavier (and his X-Men), a militant Magneto (and his Brotherhood of Mutants), and a McCarthyesque Senator Kelly (with a Mutant Registration Bill). The reoriented comic emulates contemporary science fiction by envisioning “a present which perceives itself as both technological and apocalyptic” (Hollinger 217) in which the possibilities of Americanness have begun to unravel (Hughes 16). The American state, increasingly, has engaged in power sharing, including political, social, and security roles, with international organizations, transnational and multinational corporations, and a multitude of citizens groups promoting every conceivable cause (Mathews 50–53). While remaining “sworn to protect a world that hates and fears them” (New X-Men #134: January 2003), the X-Men have become both “highly-trained volunteers . . . who’ve elected to monitor and resolve mutant emergency situations” (New X-Men #123:
April 2002) and paramilitary activists for a mutant rights charter (New X-Men #122: March 2002).

NOTES

1. Doc Savage and his Fabulous Five were created by Kenneth Robeson (the pen-name of Lester Dent), while The Spider was developed by Grant Stockbridge (the pen-name of Norvell Page).
2. Formerly "Timely Comics," the product line was retitled "Marvel Comics" in May 1963.
3. Anne McCaffrey, "A Womanly Talent" and "A Bridle for Pegasus" were collected in To Ride Pegasus (London: Dent, 1974).
4. Written by Chris Claremont and illustrated by John Byrne, these issues were published as a graphic novel, X-Men: Days of Future Past (New York: Marvel Comics, 1989).
5. Tom DeFalco, editor-in-chief at Marvel Comics, in interview.

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