WAR, POLITICS AND SUPERHEROES

Ethics and Propaganda in Comics and Film

Marc DiPaolo
Frontispiece: The cover of the very first issue of Captain America. It was released by Timely Comics in December of 1940, a year before the U.S. officially entered World War II. The comic depicts Captain America—a creation of Jewish comic book creators Joe Simon and Jack Kirby—punching out Adolf Hitler.

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Gay Rights, Civil Rights, and Nazism in the X-Men Universe

Morality is simply the attitude we adopt towards people we personally dislike. — Mrs. Chevelley, from Oscar Wilde’s An Ideal Husband

The [Marx] Brothers are egalitarian. In Monkey Business, Harpo kisses a line of people at the boat’s railing. These include several women and a man; however, after kissing the man, there is no double-take, no grimace. It’s not a joke based on homophobia; there’s an inclusiveness to Harpo’s inappropriate behavior. He invades the personal space of everyone. — Joseph Mills, A Century of the Marx Brothers (2007)

The X-Men, Gay Rights, and Reader Identification

Marvel comic books have long invited direct reader identification with Marvel heroes, who are designed to be as flawed and “human” as the reader. Consider the shallow and vain-gloryous Human Torch, the angry antihero known as the Incredible Hulk, and the recovering alcoholic Iron Man. All of these characters have a vulnerability that the more aristocratic paragons of virtue at DC Comics sometime seem to lack. However, as much as readers have enjoyed relating to characters such as Iron Man, the Hulk, and the Human Torch, they have, in recent decades, expressed a highly personal love for the enormous cast of “mutant” characters that comprises the universe of the X-Men.

Like other superheroes, mutants don’t exist in the real world, and yet the X-Men comic books and films that feature mutant characters are surprisingly popular across a broad demographic of readers. Presumably, the super-powered mutants allegorically represent real-world people; otherwise, they would not have resonance in a world in which superpowers don’t exist. The allegory is clearly there, but what makes it so compelling is that it is a flexible allegory. The story of the X-Men is the story of the oppressed and the disenfranchised striking back against their oppressors, so any reader who feels oppressed may relate to the X-Men, regardless of the nature of the oppression, or its level of severity. Another reason that the allegory is so flexible is the vast, multicultural cast of characters who comprise the mutant community enables readers of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, sexual orientations, genders, and religious beliefs to see themselves in the X-Men narratives and to see the X-Men “story” as being primarily about “their” particular life conflict.

Consider Tabitha Smith, the runaway “white trash” punk rocker called Boom Boom because she has the power to mentally create energy grenades. She fled from home when her father began beating her and has, effectively, been homeless ever since. Because she has
such an explosive personality she often does not stay long with one group of friends before moving on to another one (see Secret Wars II and X-Men: Inferno). In contrast, Sean Cassidy is a wealthy, middle-aged Irishman whose wife Maeva was killed in an IRA bombing. In his superhero life, he is known as Banshee thanks to his formidable sonic scream, but he vacillates between acting as an older mentor to the youthful X-Men and as a man who prefers a civilian life to a heroic one. Piotr Rasputin (Colossus) is a Détente-era Russian atheist with the physique of a professional wrestler, the metal skin of an android, and the soul of an artist. John and James Proudstar are brothers and Native American X-Men who are superhumanly strong, fast, and resistant to injury, and who are called by the somewhat politically incorrect names Thunderbird and Warpath. Each of these characters has the potential to speak to real-life readers who can relate to them due to their age, gender, culture, or personal story (see Marvel Masterworks: Uncanny X-Men Vol. 1–3).

German Americans and religious Roman Catholics weary of seeing their respective groups portrayed poorly in popular culture can take comfort in Nightcrawler. A furry blue demon-man with a forked tail and yellow eyes, Nightcrawler (a.k.a. Kurt Wagner) is a religious Roman Catholic German who was raised by gypsies and performed in the Munich Circus before joining the X-Men. Despite looking like a demon, Nightcrawler is amazingly well-adjusted, funny, and seems to spend much of his time acting like a brash, Errol-Flynn style swashbuckler and ladies’ man (see Excalibur Classics Vol. 1–5 and Excalibur Visionaries: Alan Davis Vol. 1 and 2). In contrast, the X-Men universe has not been particularly kind to Italians. Writer Scott Lobdell created Omerta (whose given name was Paul Provenzano) to be a homophobic U.S. army veteran who is recruited by the X-Men as a reserve member before he has completed his bid to take over the Brooklyn Mafia. He shows his true colors by tormenting gay X-Man Northstar, but it isn’t long before Omerta learns his lesson—Northstar soon saves his life. Fortunately, the television show Heroes, which is inspired in large part by the X-Men comic books, created famous, interesting, and three-dimensional Italian American superheroes, the brothers Peter and Nathan Petrelli, to make up somewhat for Omerta.

As these more obscure X-Men characters demonstrate, there are, indeed, enough mutants in X-Men for virtually every conceivable reader to relate to. On the other hand, most of these secondary mutant characters, such as Boom Boom and Omerta, are unimportant in the grand scheme of the X-Men. Hence their absence from the films, and the frequency with which they, and characters like them, are written out of the comic book, killed, or suddenly (and often inexplicably) turned into villains. Indeed, given the personal backgrounds of the men who have written X-Men, and the subtexts of X-Men’s most famous adventures, it is fair to say that the fans who read X-Men as being primarily about the fight for gay rights, the oppression of Jews, the black power movement, and the feminist movement are those who have the most textual evidence to support their claims.

Despite the varied cultural background of the supporting character mutants, the principal characters form a fairly select group representing very specific peoples. Two of the most important characters in the narrative are Jewish (Magneto and Shadowcat), both the time-traveling Bishop and the X-Men team leader Storm are African American, and the vast majority of famous X-Men are women (Storm, Rogue, Shadowcat, Mystique, Jean Grey, Jubilee, Psylocke, Emma Frost, and Dazzler). Northstar is gay in the comic book and the X-Men films suggest symbolically that Angel and Magneto are gay. In addition, the film X2: X-Men United features a centerpiece scene in which heterosexual character Bobby Drake has to “come out” to his parents as a mutant and his mother asks him if he can “just... stop being a mutant?”
The basic X-Men narrative is deceptively simple, and somewhat similar to the narrative of the Harry Potter adventures. Teenage humans who suddenly demonstrate a seemingly magical ability at the onset of puberty frighten their families with their newfound powers. They are summoned to a special school by a friendly headmaster who seeks to teach them how to control—and to love—their unique gifts. However, an evil magician who hates humans for being prejudiced against his kind hopes to wipe them out and establish wizard kind as the dominant life form on Earth. The wise-but-imperfect headmaster agrees that humans are prejudiced, but stands against the evil wizard’s plan for genocide. As powerful as the headmaster is, he sends his young students to fight the evil wizard in his stead while he watches from the sidelines. The headmaster, then, as much shelters his students from the dangerous world as turns them into a paramilitary unit, whether it is called Dumbledore’s Army or, in the case of the Marvel universe, the X-Men (and their various subordinate groups).

This barebones plot summary describes both Harry Potter and X-Men equally well. The Harry Potter saga has been interpreted by critics and fans as, alternatively, an allegory about World War II, the British class system, absent fathers, and what it is like to come-of-age in the British public school system. Regardless of what themes individual X-Men storytellers develop in the adventures they craft, critics and fans of the films, cartoons, and comics have their own reasons for embracing the X-universe. Some fans see the X-Men story as being generically and universally about the emotional scars of puberty, while others are more interested in what X-Men says about immigration, terrorism, gay rights, and race relations.

Many of the writers and artists most associated with crafting the comic books have been Jewish—Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, Chris Claremont, Brian Michael Bendis, Peter David, Jeph Loeb, Adam Kubert, and Andy Kubert—so the comic book understandably often focuses on issues of anti-Semitism and frequently includes flashbacks to the Holocaust. Horrific, recurring conflicts include a series of pogroms and ethnic cleansing campaigns against mutants in the modern day, often led by white supremacists and Christian fanatics.

Aside from Magneto, the most significant Jewish character in the comic book is Kitty Pryde, a teen from suburban Illinois introduced in Uncanny X-Men #129 (1980) by John Byrne. She has a mutant power known as “phasing,” which allows her to turn intangible and walk through solid objects like a ghost, and has been known by the superhero names Sprite, Ariel, and Shadowcat. Drawn to resemble a young Sigourney Weaver, Kitty has served as an accessible, audience viewpoint character in the mold of Robin, only she soon became more popular than the Boy Wonder ever was.

In the comic book world, the sensitive mutant artist Colossus was Kitty’s first love. In the real world, many comic book readers found themselves developing their first crushes on the fictional Kitty. In fact, in the more than thirty years since Kitty’s creation, X-Men fans have written a steady stream of letters to the editor proclaiming their love for Shadowcat, wishing ardently that she were a real person. The nerdy girl next door, Kitty is a pretty—but-decidedly-normal-looking girl who wears reading glasses, is a computer geek, and enjoys making nerdy jokes about Star Trek. Gifted, funny, and neurotic about her physical appearance, Kitty prefigures the personality traits that would later find themselves in heroines such as Hermione Granger, Buffy Summers, and Juno MacGuff. The source of her appeal is obvious.

Notably, Wizard Magazine named her the greatest female comic book character of all time—handily beating Wonder Woman and Buffy the Vampire Slayer—and the 13th greatest comic book character of all time. She is also a personal favorite of writers Joss Whedon
and Chris Claremont, who consistently use her as a central character when they write *X-Men*. Her popularity has remained fixed, despite (or because of) the fact that she has adopted a purple dragon, Lockheed, as a pet, served with Captain Britain as defender of England and the Multiverse in the fantasy comic book *Excalibur*, and gotten a little sexier and more aggressive as she has grown older—to the point of even having a torrid affair with John Constantine (a.k.a. Pete Wisdom). The character had cameo appearances in the first two *X-Men* films and was a major supporting character in the third, *X-Men: The Last Stand* (2006) when she was played by Ellen Page. In 2005, writer Brian Michael Bendis introduced Kitty as a love interest for Peter Parker in *Ultimate Spider-Man* Annual #1 (2005), and the two have an on-again, off-again romance.

Kitty Pryde’s lack of centrality to the *X-Men* films is one of the factors that underscores the shift between the Jewish-centric focus of the comic books and the gay-theme focus of the films. The *X-Men* film franchise certainly includes Jewish themes, but is arguably more concerned with dramatizing the struggle for GLBTQ acceptance in America. At least two of the major creative figures behind the *X-Men* films are gay actor Ian McKellen and gay director Bryan Singer, who is also Jewish, which accounts for the films’ interest in gay rights.

In *X-Men*, a percentage of the human population unexpectedly begins developing superhuman powers at the onset of puberty. The powers range from the modest (the ability to leap far) to the extreme (the power to destroy an entire planet with but a mere thought). An almost preternaturally beautiful physique or a horrifyingly disfigured appearance sometimes accompanies these abilities. The causes of the sudden onset of these powers have changed over time. In the original 1960s era comic books, *X-Men* co-creators Stan Lee and Jack Kirby posited that the powers were a result of the mutation of children born in the nuclear age. These beings were called, respectively, “mutants,” “children of the atom,” and “x-men” because of the radioactive source of the powers, and because they have “eXtra power” than the average person. During the 1990s, the comic books began discussing the mysterious, recessive “mutant x gene,” which somehow coded the powers of the gods into the DNA of select offspring, which are proudly called *homo superior* by mutants rights activists. The initial trilogy of films based on the comic books (helmed by directors Bryan Singer and Brett Ratner, and written by Singer, Tom DeSanto, David Hayter, Simon Kinberg and Michael Dougherty, Dan Harris, and Zak Penn) suggest that the mutants are the next step in human evolution, and the rest of the human race, so-called “normal” *homo sapiens*, need to do real catching up.

Kitty Pryde, a Jewish teenager, has the mutant power to turn intangible and walk through walls. Sometimes known as Ariel or Sprite, Kitty wore this costume and adopted the codename Shadowcat when she joined the British superhero team *Excalibur* (1988–1998). Illustration by Dave Hoover (courtesy Dave Hoover).
In both the films and the comic books, "normal" people (the "Muggles" of Harry Potter's universe) are afraid of the mutants, partly because the mutants are different, but also because the mutants are powerful and the "normal"s fear their own subjugation and eventual extinction. Consequently, normal *homo sapiens* are perpetually trying to solve the "mutant problem," either by trying to mandate by law a mutant census called the Mutant Registration Act (an initiative spearheaded by Senator Robert Kelly, a Republican from Kansas), building giant robots called Sentinels to use as weapons against mutants, or developing a drug that will "cure" mutants of their powers and restore them to "normal" (in a storyline introduced by writer Joss Whedon). In response to these hostile moves on the part of humanity, two mutant leaders have emerged, the radical terrorist and mutants' rights activist Erik Lehnsherr, and the more moderate, philosophical teacher Charles Xavier.

Erik Lehnsherr, also known as Magneto, has responded violently to the prejudice of humans. A member of the World War II generation and a Jew, Magneto survived the Holocaust because he developed the power to control metal, which enabled him to escape from a Nazi concentration camp. Fearing that a new Holocaust is coming, perpetrated by *homo sapiens against homo superior*, Magneto wishes to strike first. He begins his war on humanity with a tactical strike against a U.S. army base, and soon starts actively recruiting embittered mutants into his Brotherhood of Mutants. In the first *X-Men* film (2000), Magneto posits that all prejudice will end if all of humanity finally evolves into mutantkind, and there is no longer a division between mutant and non-mutant. He believes that, inevitably, everyone on earth will become a mutant, but that something has gone wrong and the evolutionary process is going in fits and starts, and not everyone is evolving, neatly, at the same time. As Magneto puts it, "God works too slowly." He attempts to force the evolution of humanity, starting with the leaders of the world, who will become much more pro-mutant in their governmental policies once they themselves experience a mutation and understand how the other half lives. However, Magneto's machine does not work — it kills instead of mutates. Learning that the machine is deadly, Xavier sends his X-Men to destroy the machine and arrest Magneto.

A powerful mutant telepath the same age as Magneto, Xavier founded his School for Gifted Youngsters in Westchester, New York, specifically to teach frightened teenage mutants how to accept, adapt to, and use their newfound powers. He tracks down newborn mutants with a computer called Cerebro, and sees to the training of the most powerful (and most emotionally disturbed) mutants himself. The older students, who have already become experts at controlling their powers and who are, essentially, happy to be mutants, mentor the younger students. In addition to their roles as mentors, the older students comprise a military strike force called the X-Men. These X-Men confront and capture rogue mutants who endanger human/mutant relations through acts of selfish criminality or acts of terrorism against humans. In doing so, they protect *homin sapiens* lives from *homo superior* aggression, and create a more stable political environment from which Xavier can negotiate for mutant rights and improve the general public's perception of mutants. An adherent of Ghandi's philosophy of passive resistance, Xavier hopes that humans will respond to mutants with less fear and more acceptance when they see how nice and reasonable most law-abiding mutants are.

For his part, Magneto believes that Xavier is living in a fantasy world, and that "Professor X" and his X-Men are a group of misguided, "Uncle Tom" figures. "A Tale of Two Mutants," a 1999 story by Alan Davis and Joe Kelly featured in *X-Men* #85, features two parallel stories that illustrate well the difference between the two men, their philosophies,
and their expectations. In the first narrative, Xavier sends the X-Men to rescue patients
trapped in a burning hospital, especially the babies in the maternity ward. They succeed in
containing the fire and rescuing the children, but the police who arrive fear that the mutants
caused the fire in the first place and are holding the children hostage. The X-Men leader,
a black female mutant named Storm, steps forward, holding two swaddled infants and says
to the police, "Officers, we are the X-Men and we are here to save your children. Please
lower your weapons." The officer in charge, a human who also happens to be a black woman,
confronts Storm. After a tense moment, the officer orders her men to stand down and allow
the X-Men to continue their rescue and clean-up efforts. When all is done, the officer says
to Storm, "X-Men, huh? Never been this close to a real mutant before." Storm replies, "Get
closer, officer. We do not bite." Observing this moment from afar, Xavier thinks to himself,
"The greatest part of being a teacher is learning from one's students. The dream is alive.
Thank you, my X-Men."

Magneto's counter-narrative is far different in tone and climax. Dressing in a fine white
suit, he disguises himself as the board member of a corporation and approaches the foreman
of a construction site—a likeable man named Bill Jones who Magneto describes as being
of "average" intelligence, from an "average" family, living an "average" life who Magneto
admits he might even like personally, if Magneto didn't feel "instinctual loathing of his
kind." Magneto's goal is to determine the extent to which the foreman is mutant phobic.
The stakes of the test are high, as Magneto thinks, "Today Bill Jones determines whether
humanity lives or dies." Magneto tests Bill by suggesting there is concern among board
members that one of the construction workers is a mutant. Bill seems to pass the test,
appearing uncomfortable with the anti-mutant slurs Magneto slips into his speech and
objecting to the idea of starting a mutant witch-hunt on his construction site. As Magneto
continues to ask Bill blunt, probing questions to uncover Bill's true political views, Bill
balks and says, "If you want to figure somebody out with the question game you have to
be more subtle ... like ... if you could go back in time and kill Hitler as a baby, would you
do it? See? Not so easy when the answer's not black-and-white."

But Bill has made a mistake evoking Hitler as a good example of a hypothetical evil,
as Magneto himself lived through the tyrant's reign. At that moment, he unMASKS himself
as Magneto, levitates himself above Bill's head, and shouts, "You're wrong, Mister Jones. It's
not a difficult question at all. The answer is yes. To save millions of lives I would track the
child down at his home and smother him where he lay. Then I would destroy his family,
his family's family. I would raze an entire city from the ground and scatter his ashes from the
earth!" Now revealed as a powerful, furious mutant, Magneto asks Bill, "Face your fear, my
friend. Face the truth. [Mutants] were meant to rule. Tell me, Bill, do you still want to
share coffee and a dirty joke?" Crying, Bill yells back, "No! I want you dead! Dead!"

Magneto looks down upon Bill silently for a long moment. Then he says, quietly,
"Thank you, Bill. Your honesty is appreciated. I have my answers. Even an everyman with
a kind heart becomes a rabid beast at the sight of that which he does not understand. It's
simply human nature."

Recovering a little, and absorbing the ramifications of what he himself has said, and
of Magneto's condemnation, Bill replies, "No.... It doesn't have to be like this ... you could
have ... if you had just said something instead of— I'm just a man! What choice did I have
after what you did? I was scared! Not because you were a mutant — but because you're a
monster! A sick and twisted monster!"

Magneto leaves abruptly without replying, and returns to his secret base of operations,
convinced of his own fundamental correctness. “Given the chance, they’d see our kind swept from the earth,” he says to himself. “I ... do not want to do this ... but they’ve forced my hand. There can never be peace.”

The story builds upon concepts introduced by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, but molded and developed by Chris Claremont and John Byrne during a fruitful period of collaboration on the comic book *Uncanny X-Men* in the early 1980s. Their work, more than Lee’s and Kirby’s, has influenced the shape of the *X-Men* films and cartoons, and the writers who have followed their examples in the ensuing decades. A Jewish writer, Claremont was the person who revealed Magneto’s Jewish background, as well as his tortured childhood as a victim of Nazi brutality, and he has consistently imbued Magneto with a tragic, often sympathetic quality. His stories with Magneto sometimes suggest that mutants are right to fear humans, especially since some time-traveling mutants have discovered possible futures in which there are, indeed, Holocausts for mutants (see the classic *Days of Future Past* storyline and its many sequels). Other stories are more critical of Magneto, citing him for hypocrisy and condemning him for becoming a mirror image of Adolf Hitler, a madman bent on genocide in the name of preventing genocide.

Directly tackling the contentious portrayal of Magneto as a vengeful Jew, Ami Eden observed in a 2003 article for *Forward: The Jewish Daily* that the conflict between Xavier and Magneto in the *X-Men* films paralleled the “post–Holocaust theological divide” between Rabbi Irving “Yitz” Greenberg and Rabbi Meir Kahane. Greenberg advocated a secularist, globalist, and pacificist future for the Jewish people, while Kahane argued that Jews should defy persecution — especially Islamic antagonism — by becoming devout, militarist, and isolationist. Eden argues that, in a post-9/11 world, Kahane’s worldview is particularly seductive, but that Greenberg’s approach is the only sane one, and the only one that will lead to a stable world.

In “Israel Invades Gaza,” liberal Jewish playwright, actor, and cultural critic Wallace Shawn (*My Dinner With Andre*) argues much the same thing, explaining that the emotional scars of World War II have made some Jewish militarists incapable of recognizing that the Palestinian people are not blindly anti-Semitic as Hitler was, but have a legitimate grievance against Israel and the United States. After all, Shawn argues, the Western powers that assuaged their guilt over the Holocaust by granting the Jews a homeland in an area that was already occupied was not, in the end, an act of kindness. He adds that the creation of Israel was clearly motivated, in part, by the West’s desire to place a friendly regime in an oil-rich region of the world (*Essays* 93–96).

Sentiments such as these are deeply controversial, and have been hotly contested by other thinkers, such as Alan Dershowitz, who believes that such views are sympathetic to terrorists and undermine the sovereignty and legitimacy of Israel as a nation. Notably, Jews who are politically in sympathy with Dershowitz might have a very different reading of the *X-Men* saga as a commentary on Jewish life. For example, a Jewish reader might interpret the mutant-killing Sentinels as symbolically representative of Muslim fundamentalist terrorists, or interpret the total annihilation of Genosha, the mutant homeland, as a possible apocalyptic future for Israel, and as a warning against taking a complacent view of anti-Israel sentiments in the Middle East. Interestingly, in the comic book, Magneto spends little or no time discussing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and confines himself with fighting Republican Senators, grassroots bigot organizations, and evil Christian televangelists. This is perhaps because the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is so fundamentally controversial that Marvel doesn’t want to go near it.
As valid, intriguing, and politically explosive as these divergent interpretations of the X-Men saga as Jewish narrative are, they are merely two examples of the many intelligent, deeply personal interpretations of a source material that is as malleable as it is politically provocative. Indeed, while Eden has a liberal reading of the X-Men, some X-Men fans, Jewish and non-Jewish alike, are politically conservative. Generally speaking, conservative X-Men fans tend to relate most strongly to a violent Canadian X-Man who “is the best there is at what he does, but what he does best isn’t very nice.”

Wolverine, the final major character in the X-Men saga, has sided with Xavier but has Magneto’s bitter, vengeful personality. He is also the most reluctant to discuss, at length, “the mutant cause,” and sometimes seems detached from the X-Men’s mission. Indeed, Wolverine sometimes boasts of his lack of devotion to the X-Men, but he is the one most likely to mentor its youngest, most vulnerable member (in the comic books, Shadowcat and Jubilee, in the movies, Rogue), and he seems to be in more X-Men adventures than any other mutant. He also has reasons to be militant, as the government has exploited him because of his mutant abilities. He has been experimented on by the Canadian military and greeted with fear by the general public, yet he has a reluctance to declare his allegiance to the X-Men similar to the reluctance Han Solo showed in joining the rebellion in Star Wars. His insistence that he is not a victim when he obviously is, his undisclosed past, and his too-cool-for-school attitude sometimes do more to limit him as a character, and distance him from the reader, than make him compelling.

Although he calls himself Logan, Wolverine is not sure what his real name is and most often goes by his apt code-name, which he shares with a small-but-tenacious-wild-animal. Wolverine is easy to wound, but his ability to heal almost instantly from multiple gunshot wounds makes him seem, at times, even more invincible than Superman on the battlefield. He has the gruff personality and tough-love values of Clint Eastwood’s “Man with No Name” character, Freddy Krueger’s knife hands growing out of his metal skeleton, and he consistently demonstrates a near-Punisher-level willingness to kill his enemies.

Wolverine is, in some ways, amazingly ancillary to the core plot — the conflict between Charles Xavier and Magneto — but he is also the mutant who is most beloved by the general X-Men readership. He is popular, perhaps, because he is in the mold of a Clint Eastwood or Charles Bronson action hero, so he appeals to conservative, macho readers who might not find the comic books’ otherwise liberal sensibilities palatable if he were not a cast member. Thematically, Wolverine is there to reassure the heterosexual male readership of their primacy — by being relentlessly “cool,” abrasive, and in lust with Jean Grey — even as the majority of the characters in the comic book are strong-willed women and gay rights activists. Dramatically, Wolverine proves his usefulness, and protects his centrality in the narrative, by often being the one to win victory for the X-Men on the battlefield, even though one might assume that Storm the weather witch, or Jean Grey the telepath, should be able to bring about a more conclusive victory more rapidly than a scrappy guy dressed in yellow with perpetual five-o’clock-shadow and knives for hands. However, as appealing as Wolverine can be (especially when he is portrayed on film by actor Hugh Jackman) and as much as he likes to try to steal the spotlight from the other mutants, whose stories are more complex, emotional, and thematically relevant, he cannot overshadow the power of the central story, which celebrates the rights of the individual, and the beautiful diversity of humanity in the face of prejudice, oppression, and the horrors of genocide, both within the American borders and abroad.

When writer and director Bryan Singer assumed the responsibility for adapting the X-Men comic books into a film franchise, he emphasized the political elements of the comic
books and minimized their more outlandish science fiction elements (surgically removing the cheesy robots and aliens) to help foreground the themes of tolerance versus prejudice, terrorism versus passive resistance, and the perpetration and prevention of genocide. Since Bryan Singer is both Jewish and gay, he had a vested interest in making the movies as serious and dramatically effective as possible, despite the film’s low budget and the public’s lack of knowledge of the X-Men comic books, which were famous only in comic book fan circles and to viewers of Saturday morning cartoons.

In a pair of casting coups, Singer hired Ian McKellen—Best Actor Oscar nominee for playing legendary Bride of Frankenstein director and gay film icon James Whale in Gods and Monsters (1998)—as Magneto and Patrick Stewart—another Shakespearean actor who starred in I, Claudius and became famous in America playing Captain Jean-Luc Picard in Star Trek: The Next Generation—as Xavier. The then-unknown Hugh Jackman was perfectly cast as Wolverine, and two Oscar-winning actresses, Anna Paquin and Halle Berry, brought the characters of Rogue and Storm to life. The high quality of the writing, acting, and directing, coupled with the personal stake the actor’s felt in the political sensibilities of the film, conspired to make the first X-Men movie one of the best and most serious superhero movies. The 2000 film, and the two sequels that followed, took on prejudice of all kinds, but — thanks to the specific concerns of Bryan Singer and Ian McKellen — was particularly strong in its condemnation of anti-Semitism and homophobia.

In October of 2003, in a BBC interview with Stephen Applebaum, Bryan Singer revealed that he relates strongly to the X-Men as outsider figures because he is not only Jewish (like Shadowcat) and gay (like Northstar), but adopted; with little knowledge of his personal history (like Wolverine), he grew up feeling alienated at school because he was a poor student. Singer grew up with a dread of intolerance that caused him to become deeply obsessed with the Holocaust. This fascination and horror at man’s inhumanity to man inspired him to direct the X-Men films, as well as World War II–themed films Apt Pupil (1998) and Valkyrie (2008).³

Singer was particularly intent on exploring gay themes in the X-Men films because he saw homosexuals as the ultimate outsiders. According to Singer, a Jewish or African American child can still grow up within the comfort zone of a Jewish or African American family or community, whereas gay youths often lack that safe haven, discovering their sexual orientations as adolescents and finding themselves with the challenge of having to live amongst straight parents and classmates, sometimes never figuring out how to live their lives. In the
interview, Singer laughingly admitted that he was using the X-Men films as a vehicle to explore his own personal situation. "I could think of no better place to spill out one’s own personal problems and foist them onto the world" he said “than in a giant, action, summer event movie!"

Certainly, the seriousness of the political commentary in the film, and the earnest performances by a cast with an excellent acting pedigree, elevates the material. The films can be uneven at points, causing film critic Roger Ebert to observe that he preferred the dramatic and political segments to the action segments. He also raised the possibility that superhero narratives were not sophisticated enough to tackle serious issues such as genocide, and that attempting to comment on real-life atrocities in a glorified action story is arguably in bad taste. As he wrote, in his 2001 review of X-Men:

X-Men is at least not a manic editing frenzy for atrophied attention spans. It's restrained and introspective for a superhero epic, and fans of the comic books may like that. Graphic novels (as they sometimes deserve to be called) take themselves as seriously as the ones without pictures, and you can tell that here when the opening scene shows Jews being forced into death camps in Poland in 1944. One could argue that the Holocaust is not appropriate subject matter for an action movie based on a comic book, but having talked to some X-Men fans I believe that in their minds the medium is as deep and portentous as, say, Sophie's Choice.

By the time X-Men 3: The Last Stand is released in 2006, Ebert is more accustomed to X-Men's seemingly incongruous pairing of superhero battle scenes with political commentary, and has grown more thoughtful about the issue. He has made note of the same provocative themes that the notion of "curing" mutants raises, but believes that the film is only partial successful at treating these issues thoughtfully and honestly:

There are so many parallels here with current political and social issues that to list them is to define the next presidential campaign. Just writing the previous paragraph, I thought of abortion, gun control, stem cell research, the "gay gene" and the Minutemen. "Curing" mutants is obviously a form of genetic engineering and stirs thoughts of "cures" for many other conditions humans are born with, which could be loosely defined as anything that prevents you from being just like George or Georgette Clooney. The fact is, most people grow accustomed to the hands they've been dealt and rather resent the opportunity to become "normal." (Normal in this context is whatever makes you more like them and less like yourself.)

X-Men: The Last Stand raises all of these questions in embryonic form, but doesn't engage them in much detail, because it is often distracted by the need to be an action movie.

Although the incongruous mix of action and politics might not appeal to a sophisticated filmgoer like Ebert, who has seen far more art and independent films than the average multiplex attendee, it is arguably the perfect mix of action and activism to win over a mainstream audience and awaken an interest in politics in an adolescent viewer. While there are some viewers who are not attuned enough to social issues to even catch some of the political references, and others who choose to ignore the liberal propaganda and focus on how cool it is when Wolverine disembowels someone, there are other viewers who are drawn to X-Men precisely because it is sensitive to issues of prejudice and challenges racism, xenophobia, and homophobia.

The X-Men films are remarkable in that they are far more overtly pro-gay than most superhero stories, which market themselves to a straight audience. This is surprising because Frederic Wertham condemned comic books for their gay themes, and fans have often speculated that certain heroes are secretly gay, such as Batman, Wonder Woman, and the Doctor, but those speculations usually happen outside of the comic books themselves. Certainly, there have been jokes along these lines. When Dr. Strange was reunited with "the girl next
door," Amanda Payne, the two were instantly attracted to one another, but Payne worried that "y'know, with those clothes and that beard ... living in Greenwich Village and all — are you gay?" When asked this, Dr. Strange laughed heartily. In *Mark of Zorro* (1940), Don Diego Vega (Tyrone Power) poses as gay to convince the evil overlords of Southern California that he couldn't possibly be the people's hero Zorro that has been bedeviling them. The sensitive Bruce Banner of the Hulk has been often regarded as gay, and the Hulk the manifestation of the anger that General "Thunderbolt" Ross' homophobia created (or, alternatively, rage at Ross' anti-Semitic reaction to a "nice Jewish boy" courting his daughter Betty, and not a Protestant, John Wayne-type like himself). Tony Stark (Iron Man) has also been read as gay. When a war wound forced Tony to live out his life with artificial body parts imbedded in his chest and around his heart, his former womanizing days came to an end. He then spent years playing the part of the playboy, but not acting on it, nursing a secret shame — and an inability to consummate sexual love with a woman — that made him seem like one of Rock Hudson's closeted lotharios.

In J. Michael Straczynski's "Interlude," Aunt May discovers that her nephew, Peter, is Spider-Man. She is angry with him for hiding his secret identity from her for years, but admits that she knew he was keeping some kind of secret from her. "On top of that, you were quiet and sensitive, you didn't like sports, you were awkward around girls, and ... to tell you the truth, Peter, for a while I thought maybe you were gay, which I was prepared to accept either way, because you were still you. I mean, I knew something was in the closet. Could've been chiffon. Who knew it was a costume?" While this kind of humor might not appeal to everyone, Aunt May is a model of tolerance and acceptance that is truly moving.

Peter Parker did spend twenty years (our time, not his) married to Mary Jane Watson in the comic books, but he also spent ten years (our time) living a celibate life after the death of Gwen Stacy, vowing never to endanger another woman again by being involved with her. Slate commentator Chris Suellentrop described Spider-Man's celibacy as a "superhero calling" and "a voluntary priesthood" that comments symbolically on celibacy in the Catholic Church, and speaks directly to its pedophilia scandals. According to Suellentrop, the message of Spider-Man's celibacy is: "Only superheroes are fit for lives of celibacy, and as we've learned, not all priests are superheroes."

Playwright Rona Munro wrote the final episode of the original *Doctor Who* series, "Survival" (1989), which explored a lesbian relationship between the Doctor's traveling companion, Ace, and the warrior Karra of the Cheetah People. The story also condemned the human tendency to give into animal instincts and "fight or flight" responses instead of negotiating disputes like properly evolved beings and resolving problems peacefully. Indeed, one of the villains of the tale is a bully of a self-defense instructor who teaches troubled teens that social Darwinism is the law of the land and only the strong triumph. In "Survival"'s climactic moment, the Doctor engages in a fight to the death with his archenemy, the Master. When the Doctor gets the upper hand, and has the opportunity to bash the Master's skull in with a rock, he feels himself literally devolving into a wild animal. He drops the rock, offering the Master a truce, and proclaims, "If we fight like animals, we die like animals!" The lesbian love depicted between Ace and Karra is another possible redemptive force in the story, offering a loving existence as an alternative to a kill-or-be-killed one.

Since major franchises such as *Star Trek* are also not known for consistently advocating gay causes or featuring gay and lesbian characters, it leaves gays in the position of having to rewrite the established narrative — either in their imaginations or through slash fiction — to imagine Kirk and Spock, for example, in a gay relationship. The television series *Xena:
Warrior Princess (1995–2001) played with the relationship between Xena and Gabrielle for years, tantalizing lesbian viewers until the characters were finally outed in the series finale. Other oft-appropriated characters include Samwise and Frodo from the Lord of the Rings and Sherlock Holmes and Doctor John Watson. Some historians have challenged queer readings of these British classics, on the basis that Americans don’t understand British friendships, or the World War I concept of the “batman,” which is clearly the position of fiercely loyal servitude that Samwise occupied in relation to Frodo.

The Holmes and Watson relationship has been particularly controversial, and has inspired a number of memorable — and completely irreconcilable — “readings.” This is possibly partly due to the fact that Watson reveals little about his wives or his married life, which muddies the narrative waters enough that many scholars and fans are confused as to how many times Watson was married, and to whom. They all agree, however, he was married once to Mary Morstan, the heroine of The Sign of Four (1890). June Thompson maintains that Holmes and Watson were merely wonderful friends, and that was the nature of their relationship:

It was not, I believe, homosexual, although some evidence in the canon might suggest, upon first reading, a homoerotic relationship, such as the fact that Holmes and Watson share a double bed during the Man With the Twisted Lip inquiry or that Holmes bundles Watson out of sight in the Dying Detective Case with the words, “Quick, man, if you love me!” Although on occasions he might have been naïve, Watson possessed a great deal of common sense and, knowing, as he must have done, the penalties of social ostracism should sexual deviation be suspected, or imprisonment should he be found engaging in homosexual activities, he would hardly have risked arousing suspicion by publishing these admissions unless he knew his own and Holmes’ sexual behavior was beyond reproach.

Watson, one of whom’s most endearing qualities was an inability to lie convincingly, was incapable of carrying out such a sustained deception on his readers [10–11].

Thomson theorized that Watson was happily married twice — to Mary Morstan and Grace Dunbar. William S. Baring-Gould posited that Holmes and Irene Adler had a son together, Nero Wolfe, and that Watson was thrice married and thrice widowed (to Constance Adams, an American, then Mary Morstan, and then Lady Francis Carfax). Other authors (including Rex Stout and Marilyn MacGregor) have suggested that Holmes and Watson were lovers, but that either Holmes or Watson was secretly a woman.

Laurie R. King has written a series of novels in which a 59-year-old Sherlock Holmes marries a very young, Jewish, cross-dressing Oxford University theology student, Mary Russell, and the two solve cases together with the occasional help of “Uncle John” Watson and “Brother-in-law” Mycroft. Like Baring-Gould, King’s books also reveal that Holmes and Adler had a child, only in King’s version that child is the surrealist painter, and possible criminal, Damien Adler. When Holmes and Russell share their first, passionate kiss in A Monstrous Regiment of Women (1995), the two characters are presented as being in complete ecstasy — but they still manage to tease one another in between kisses:

“By God,” he murmured throatily in my hair. “I’ve wanted to do that since the moment I laid eyes upon you.” …

“Holmes,” I objected when I could draw breath, “when you first saw me, you thought I was a boy.” …

“And don’t think that didn’t cause me some minutes of deep consternation,” he said [273].

That bit of dialogue is odd — a mixture of phobic and funny that makes it unclear where King’s version of Holmes falls on the Kinsey scale. He certainly likes girls, but how much he likes boys is not revealed. In her fiction there is an extent to which King is striving to
dramatize a classic female sex fantasy — in which a strong, alluring young woman melts the heart of a male-chauvinist, Henry Higgins-style lover (see Haskell) — without completely spoiling interpretations of Holmes as being bisexual or gay.

While these are the straight depictions of Holmes, there are several notable gay ones. Billy Wilder's _Private Life of Sherlock Holmes_ (1970) and the BBC series _Sherlock_ (which is, interestingly, set in modern day) both play with the possibility that Holmes is gay. More daring, Rohase Piercy's novel, _My Dearest Holmes_ (2007), suggests that Watson married Mary Morstan to fool the homophobic British public about the mutual love he and Holmes shared. Bisexual actor Jeremy Brett played homes as bisexual in the Granada _Sherlock Holmes_ series (1984–1994) and in love with Watson, Adler, and Enrico Firmani. Rupert Everett played Holmes as in love with Watson and jealous of Watson's American bride in _Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Silk Stocking_ (2005). Robert Downey, Jr., joked in interviews that his Holmes and Jude Law's Watson were a couple, and that Morstan was Watson's "beard" in _Sherlock Holmes_ (2009), but nothing overt was depicted on screen.

Like the divergent readings of the _X-Men_ comic books, these different versions of Holmes, presented by critics, pastiche writers, and film and television adaptations, show how rich a character Holmes is and how invested certain people are in his sexual orientation. Many of these portrayals work on their own terms, but the least convincing portrayals of Holmes are the ones when he is the most romantic heterosexual, as in the silent film _Sherlock Holmes_ (1922), where John Barrymore plays the detective as a virtual Romeo. The Mary Russell novels are good enough that they work despite the occasional nagging feeling that something isn't right about the romance.

Indeed, it is difficult to come up with a "reading" of Holmes' sexuality that seems to accurately take into account his asexual, emotional scientist inclinations, his unclear feelings for Irene Adler, his deep friendship with Watson, and his flirtation with Charles Augustus Milverton's maid, among other things. Arguably, Jeremy Brett's bisexual portrayal of Holmes solves all of these problems, even making all of the above narratives fit together to a degree. Brett's bisexual Holmes has a kinship with his Victorian contemporary, Oscar Wide, whom Holmes expressed sympathy for (in the 1976 Nicholas Meyer pastiche _The West End Horror_ ) after Wilde's life was ruined by the public revelation of his affair with Lord Alfred Douglas. Unlike the sanitized, dull, heroic ideal version of Holmes portrayed by Basil Rathbone in the World War II era Hollywood films, Brett's Holmes was a very real, very exciting variant of the character. As Steven Doyle and David A. Crowder wrote in 2010:

Brett’s performance came like a thunderclap to viewers used to the traditional interpretation of Holmes. Whereas previous Sherlocks tended to fix on individual characteristics of Holmes's complex personality, Brett presented the full character, warts and all. Not only did Brett's performance finally replace Rathbone's as Sherlock Holmes in the public mind, but it also changed the public's understanding of Holmes. No longer was Sherlock a stuffy old-fashioned straight arrow, saying, "Elementary, my dear Watson," while being followed around by a doddering old duffer. No, Brett's Holmes was mesmerizing, brilliant, moody, drug-abusing, and, to be honest, a bit scary [279].

Indeed, Brett is so superb as Holmes that he is not only the best screen Holmes of all time, but arguably the most compelling, charismatic bisexual character in the history of popular culture. As much of a mess as Holmes' life is, he is arguably not a great role model for young gays or bisexuals per se, but he is sympathetic, and that goes a long way.

According to Phil Jiminez, a writer and artist who is also gay, there is a lot at stake when it comes to the sexuality of characters such as Holmes:
I think it matters very much; some disagree with me, but I think the way we self identify absolutely affects the way we receive and process fiction. When we learn characters are more or less like us in very personal, and some times socio-political ways, it affects our affection for them. I always think the sexuality of characters should be an organic, natural outgrowth of the character and not foisted upon them; however, if it hasn’t been established one way or the other and it makes sense, I think it’s always fair game to tweak a character’s back story for such a reveal.

I do think it’s worth noting that I’m one of those people that parses language — male, female, masculine, feminine, gay, queer, etc. I think a character can have a gay sensibility but still be “straight,” sexually; I think a character can be totally straight in their social sensibilities but be physically attracted to someone of the same gender.

Jiminez doesn’t name Spider-Man here, but that is a very valid reading of Peter Parker — a straight man with a classically female personality. This would also explain why his personality translates so well to the personalities of female superheroes who act a lot like him: Buffy Summers and Kitty Pryde.

Jiminez’s goal is to create more GLBTQI characters for comic books than there are currently, but he admits that there are many challenges to writing gay characters in a way that will appeal to a broad range of readers:

most minority characters of any kind get stuck with representing whole swaths of people..., there are as many different kinds of gay people as there are people on the planet, from all walks of social, racial, and economic life. I don’t think any character should be saddled with representing the entire gay population; I also think it’s absolutely impossible, and usually dooms a character to oblivion. Same with minority characters, same with female characters.

[s]he only gay character I’ve ever written extensively — Kevin Zapada in “Otherworld” — was based on a couple of gay friends of mine (and me, when I was younger). The intent ... was to explore the rejection many gay people feel from religious or spiritual institutions and their embrace instead of secular, commercial ones.... Ultimately, none of it feeds our spiritual selves. It’s stuff we vigorously invest in and defend, but what does it do for us, really, except carve out an acceptable niche?

In “Otherworld,” Kevin ends up so enraptured by the secular, technologically-driven world to which he and his friends are taken, which doesn’t judge him for his sexuality or his ethnic background, and actually celebrates him or it — and rejects his allies and misguided sides with the main villain to defend this Land, free of the intolerance and harsh religious dogma he’s known his whole life. I’d consider that flawed; However, most gay journalists who interviewed me ... wanted to know if the character was going to get

In the television series The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes (1984), Jeremy Brett played Sherlock Holmes (left) as a bisexual in love with both Dr. John Watson (David Burke, right) and Irene Adler (Gayle Hunnicutt, not pictured).
a boyfriend and kick ass. ... I realized that for many gay readers, all they wanted to see was a gay character in romantic situations who could do some damage to villains. ... I realized that I'd leapt right over some basics—the simple desire to see a "normal" out, gay super-hero that could maybe end up on the Justice League one day.

Jiménez does cite Hulk and Wikkan of the Young Avengers as two of the best mainstream gay characters in comic books, and worth greater exposure to the general public.

Similarly, while they are imperfect in many ways, the literally gay and symbolically gay characters in the X-Men films tell GLBTQI members of the audience that they are not alone. It is a rare message indeed, even in an era following Ellen DeGeneres' coming out and the inclusion of gay characters in supporting roles in a variety of sitcoms, reality TV shows, and dramas. McKellen's complex performance as Magneto with a threefold grudge against mainstream American culture as a persecuted gay man, a Jew, and a mutant, casts him at times as a villain, at times as a revolutionary, and sometimes even as a hero. Again, while he may not necessarily make a wonderful role model for a given viewer—irrespective of sexual orientation, he is clearly in the upper-echelon of excellent gay or bisexual characters in mainstream American popular culture.

In fact, while most comic book fans do not share the opinion, the X-Men films are distinguished by being superior to their source material. They benefit from excellent writing and acting, and boast representations of Wolverine, Xavier, Magneto, Rogue, Ice Man, Jean Grey, and the Beast that are infinitely superior to their comic book incarnations. Shadowcat and Cyclops (James Marsden) are very good in the films as well, but they have comparatively little screen time, making their biggest fans less likely to embrace the films. The only real disappointment is Storm, who should have been played by Angela Bassett, and who should have exuded more strength and maturity. Still, there are only so many X-Men the films can portray at once, and the central characters are pitch-perfect.

Magneto in particular is a screen triumph. The Magneto of the printed page, like too many comic book characters, is a steroid-enhanced, over-the-top supervillain dressed in red spandex and a silly red helmet. In deference to the comics, McKellen is briefly saddled with this helmet in a handful of scenes in each film, and that is unfortunate. Otherwise, he is a far better physical fit for what the character Magneto would be like in real life—a frail, older man who survived the Holocaust and is, paradoxically, infinitely powerful thanks to his control of all of the magnetic forces around the globe. Like Yoda, McKellen's Magneto is far stronger than he looks, and that makes for superb dramatic effect.

McKellen is also adept at playing Magneto because Magneto is designed to be a sympathetic antagonist in the mold of Shakespeare's charismatic villains, and McKellen is the Shakespearean actor Harold Bloom praised for giving the best ever stage performance of Richard III. Traditionally, Shakespeare's villains Edmund, the bastard son of the Earl of Gloucester, and Shylock, the Jewish moneylender from The Merchant of Venice, have been played as demonically evil or comic, but many actors have found in Shakespeare's original prose evidence that these figures have reason to be angry, and can justify their violent actions as retaliation for past wrongs. Edmund's speech proclaiming that he, a child conceived in passion, should be Gloucester's true legal heir, while his "legitimate" brother Edgar, who was the issue of a marriage of convenience, is the true abomination, is excellent drama. Similarly, several of Shylock's speeches about the abuses he suffered from Italian anti-Semitism are deeply affecting, and his speech "If you prick us do we not bleed?" has been viewed as an unlikely inspiration for Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, "I Have a Dream" speech. One should not overstate the sympathetic aspects of Shylock who, like Marlowe's Jew of Malta,
is tainted by anti-Semitism, but Shylock remains an excellent character nonetheless, unlike Dickens’ Fagin from *Oliver Twist*, who is simply too loathsome to stomach. One of the things that helps distinguish Magneto from Shylock and Fagin is that he is consistently written by Jews who understand his anger and empathize with him. Also unlike Shylock, Magneto has been portrayed as a hero on several occasions — including during the first half of *X2: X-Men United* (2003) — and even led the X-Men at one point during a period after he and Xavier’s teams had been at each other’s throats for years.

As anyone who has visited discussion boards and chat rooms on the World Wide Web knows, there are a host of unintelligent, snarky, sexist, and racist comments made by anonymous posters online every day. The internet is both blessed and cursed by the fact that it is a realm in which the id may be unchained, and individuals hiding behind the safety of assumed names and avatars can use their newfound freedom to express themselves for good or ill. Fortunately, Ian McKellen’s personal web site is one of the few places where one can find intelligent comments from comic book fans on the political content of comic books and on the ethical code and morality that comic books promote. Part of the reason for this is that the abhorrent feedback is screened out, but that doesn’t mean that all of the messages published on the page are universally positive.

Many of the posters are sympathetic to McKellen’s efforts to promote gay rights and frame their remarks thoughtfully and sensitively. The most interesting comments posit different ways in which viewers interpret what “mutants” mean to them in a real-world context; many posters comment on similarities between Magneto and real life activists, whether they be Malcolm X or British gay rights activist Peter Tatchell, while others wonder to what extent McKellen is comfortable with the representation of Magneto as a villainous Jewish figure, or villainous gay man. As correspondent James Veldon argued, “I don’t think Magneto, Toad etc give young gay people, black people, Jews, the disabled, non-nationals or non–Christians positive role models (a topic you discuss in relation to this movie) and neither do the inoffensive, closeted, self-loathing good guys. If you accept this reading, even as a possibility, then was your experience as a gay man used to perpetuate straight propaganda?”

McKellen replied:

I am certain that the story devised by Bryan Singer and Tom De Santo was not intended to demonise Jews, gays et al. Rather they might simply be illustrating that institution-ised ill-treatment of innocents can breed violence a generation later. Magneto’s conscious response to Auschwitz (where significantly he discovers his mutancy), is to be

In the first *X-Men* film trilogy, gay actor Ian McKellen played Erik Lehnsherr (Magneto) as a man who has suffered a lifetime of racist persecution because he is Jewish, gay, and a mutant. Seeking to destroy those who have wronged him and his people, Magneto leads a leftist terrorist campaign against the governments of the world in the hopes of installing a new, mutant world order and make “normals” into the powerless minority. From *X-Men: The Last Stand* (20th Century–Fox, 2006).
alert to other legalised discrimination. His decision to match mutant-bashers with military force is explained but not lauded in the movie...

Some might be persuaded by Magneto’s violent politicking as, without his intervention, the wicked senator’s prejudice could have prevailed. Others may be troubled about the film’s representation of minorities. I’m heartened by mailers who say they use *X-Men* in the classroom to debate the issues it raises.

He further summed up his feelings on the role of the Magneto character in reply to a separate Veldon letter:

The central disagreement between Magneto and Professor Xavier can be related to the divide evident in all human rights struggles between those who are prepared to use violence and those who are not. Beyond that, I would not look to the film or the original comics’ storylines to illuminate the particular problems of gay activism. As for my own sympathies, they lie with the Professor’s concern to give mutants pride in their abilities.

Veldon and McKellen both have equally understandable and compelling reactions to the *X-Men* films as gay narratives. There is an extent to which the films are very effective at promoting tolerance for gays, especially the third installment, *X-Men: The Last Stand*, in which the discovery of a drug that “cures” mutants and makes them human enrages the X-Men as much as it angers Magneto. There is an extent to which the humans are granted understandable motivations for wanting to create the drug — it can be used to power-down mutants who have God-like, uncontrollable powers, such as the Dark Phoenix (see also *The Dark Phoenix Saga*), and it can liberate mutants from a mutant ability that is more of a curse than a blessing, as in the case of Rogue, whose vampire-like powers make it impossible for her to touch another human being without sucking their life away.12

In fact, Rogue herself wants to take the drug because she sees her mutanthood not as a badge of honor but as a form of leprosy. To the extent that she does not define herself by her mutant power, she does not work as an allegorically gay character, unless viewers were prone (like Storm) to see her as a gay person who was ashamed of her own homosexuality. It is very difficult to view Rogue in this fashion precisely because the extreme nature of her powers should predetermine her feelings about them. In addition, I have long been uncomfortable with efforts to use vampire-like characters as stand-ins for gays because of how murderous and destructive vampires are often portrayed as being, even in gay vampire stories such as *Interview with the Vampire*. Like Dark Phoenix, the very extreme nature of Rogue’s powers reminds us that gays in the real world, whatever *True Blood* suggests, are neither vampires nor God-like beings capable of vaporizing cities at will. The only way that Rogue might work as a pseudo-gay character is to see her vampire-state as representing her as a gay character with AIDS who can only be cured of AIDS if she was also cured of being gay. The ideal solution for Rogue, of course, would be if her mutant powers’ negative side effects could be controlled or eliminated, and their positive side — her ability to read other people’s minds and mimic their powers — could be retained. The fact that Rogue is also presented as heterosexually attracted to Wolverine and involved in a love triangle with Iceman and Shadowcat further invalidates this reading.

However, the problematic instances of Rogue and Dark Phoenix notwithstanding, the humans’ efforts to “cure” mutants are fundamentally offensive and Nazi-like. Viewers recall similar, real-world efforts to “cure” homosexuality, such as Christian camps that brainwash homosexuals into embracing a heterosexual lifestyle, and they shudder. “Why would anyone in their right mind want to ‘cure’ a gay person?” the film asks. It celebrates the beauty of the mutant, Angel, a handsome man with a divine pair of angel wings growing from his
back that give him the gift of flight. His father invented the cure for mutancy specifically because the wings offended him and because he couldn't see the beauty, and the glory, of the gift of flight his son had been given. In choosing Angel as its prime example of a beautiful “gay” mutant, X-Men 3 also condemns religious fundamentalists who deny that gays are close to God and divine creations in their own right.

While McKellen is interested in the X-Men as an allegory for gay rights, he respects posters on his web site who suggest alternative readers, even the comparably apolitical interpretation of “mutants” as awkward teenagers going through puberty and feeling alienated from their parents, peers, and society. In a July 7, 2004 post, McKellen offers comfort to an intellectual high school student who feels out of step with youths his age, reassuring the boy that things change in college, when people are freer to choose their own friends and become more comfortable with themselves, as he did. Fan posts, such as those by the high school student, and McKellen's thoughtful and compassionate replies, indicate that there are several individuals who have clearly invested a lot of thought and emotion into a comic book universe that, from afar, might seem trivial at first glance.

After all, to many of the uninitiated, X-Men comic books and movie posters seem like lurid ads for a lowbrow form of entertainment akin to professional wrestling. However, these commentators, such as the 16-year-old teen quoted above, take great comfort from the X-Men, see themselves in the characters, and consider themselves the real-world equivalent of X-Men. If such readers of X-Men comics, and viewers of the films, have few friends in the real world, they can at least find friendship and support by imagining themselves as fellow students of Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, and that is no small comfort.

On the other hand, many commentators, such as James Veldon, find the political content of the X-Men films highly dubious and question their effectiveness as the bearers of a socially progressive message. Veldon objected specifically to the characterization of gay mutants in the first X-Men film. Other concerned posters objected to the portrayal of Magneto as a Holocaust-survivor turned would-be mass murderer. However, McKellen objected to posters who characterized Magneto as being, essentially, the same as Hitler. “Hitler's power used constitutional power to oppress minorities,” McKellen explained. “Magneto is a political subversive fighting for freedom. The rhetoric might be similar but their beliefs are not.”

McKellen wrote on his web site that, while he knows the comic books explicitly identify Magneto as Jewish, the script for the first X-Men film does not, so he assumed Magneto could also be either a gypsy or gay or a member of any other group targeted by Hitler. While he is more in sympathy with Xavier's pacifist approach to activism than Magneto's more militant one, there is an interesting real-life parallel between McKellen and Magneto. The first X-Men film sees Magneto launch a campaign to prevent the passage of the Mutant Registration Act, a deeply racist law proposed by a conservative Senator Robert Kelly (read: Joseph McCarthy). In real life, McKellen came out to the British public in 1988 on a BBC Radio 3 program to protest the homophobic and reactionary British law "Section 28,” which banned the “promotion” of homosexuality and the teaching of schoolchildren that homosexuality is acceptable “as a pretended family relationship.”

In an interview, McKellen revealed that his own participation in the anti-Section 28 campaign was “a focus for people [to] take comfort that if Ian McKellen was on board for this, perhaps it would be all right for other people to be as well, gay and straight.” Unfortunately, the reactionary initiative of Margaret Thatcher's Tory-led government was enacted on May 24, 1988, causing a large number of gay and lesbian support groups in
schools and colleges to close, and fueling homophobia and AIDS paranoia in England for many years.

McKellen co-founded Stonewall, a gay and lesbian rights advocacy group, to fight the legislation, and Tatchell founded OutRage! Meanwhile, comic book writers and artists Alan Moore, Frank Miller, Robert Crumb, and Neil Gaiman raised $17,000 through AARGH (Artists Against Rampant Government Homophobia) to fund anti-Section 28 activists.14 Even after the Tories left power in 1997, Labour Party Prime Minister Tony Blair seemed slow to repeal Section 28, and McKellen was a vocal and persistent critic of Blair’s on this point. The law was finally repealed on June 21, 2000 in Scotland, and on November 18, 2003 throughout Great Britain.

Even after this victory, McKellen has continued to campaign for gay rights internationally, donated funds to gay charities, and participated in gay pride events. Certainly, there is plenty of homophobia left in the world to combat, as the 2008 passage of Proposition 8 in California — which provided that “only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognized in California” — has clearly illustrated. Since the pro-Proposition 8 movement has been largely funded by religious groups, especially Mormons and fundamentalist Christians, McKellen has consistently dared to challenge Christianity’s validity and condemn the religions for homophobia. This opposition to conservative Christianity was, in part, the reason he took the role of the villain in The DaVinci Code (2006), a film that condemned Christianity for its long history of male chauvinism and advocated a historical reassessment of the centrality of women to the founding of Christianity. McKellen has also made a point of tearing out all of the anti-gay passages in the Bible whenever he finds one in the drawer of a hotel room he is staying in, because it is, he says, dangerous leaving pornography like that lying around to corrupt innocent people.

Also significant is the fact that, in the late 1990s, McKellen campaigned to get a statue of Oscar Wilde built in England because, at the time, there were no statues honoring the bisexual playwright, novelist, and poet. It was an important, symbolic means of getting the British people to apologize to Wilde for imprisoning him for two years for being homosexual (and arguably killing him indirectly with the hard labor that destroyed his health), and to, at long last, recognize Wilde as a national hero.15

A campaign such as this that is worthy of any gay man, and any member of the X-Men.

Where Are All the Black Superheroes?

Laudable as the first three X-Men films were as political statements condemning discrimination on the basis of religion and sexual orientation, there was an extent to which issues of racial discrimination were sidelined. Indeed, while Storm (Halle Berry) has more screen time than team leader Cyclops, she was highly peripheral to the plot, and the screenwriters clearly had little idea of what to do with her. Nor were other black members of the X-Men, including Bishop, Gateway, Cloak, and Shard, anywhere to be seen. On the one hand, this is not surprising, as the black characters named above are rarely featured prominently in the comics, and Storm’s role has diminished in the X-Men universe since the 1980s, when she was both team leader and mentor to Shadowcat in Uncanny X-Men. However, this lack of centrally important black characters in the X-Men franchise is odd, especially given the oft-drawn parallel between Xavier and Martin Luther King and Magneto and Malcolm X. If that parallel is supposed to be strong, then where are the black X-Men?
Aaron McGruder explored this theme with angry gusto in his *Boondocks* comic strips, in which he voiced criticisms of the absence of black X-Men, as well as Storm’s straight white hair and general irrelevance. In *Fresh For ’01 ... You Suckas: A Boondocks Collection* (2001) McGruder depicted several exchanges between his young *Boondocks* protagonists Huey and Riley Freeman in which they wondered aloud if white comics fans would like it if they had to read about characters named “White This” and “White That” and were drawn with “nappy hair.” Riley Freeman admits that Lee and Kirby probably did not create the original X-Men to be commentaries on the civil rights movement, nor did Len Wein’s “new X-Men” of 1973 seem to have such a commentary embedded, but he did have Riley Freeman maintain that “it’s well known that around the 80s the comic book began to increasingly draw upon the civil rights and Black Power movements for inspiration — the pivotal moment of change being *God Loves, Man Kills*, published in 1982” (90).

Aside from the Martin Luther King and Malcolm X parallels, there is another link between the world of the Marvel mutants and the real-life world of blacks that lived under Jim Crow. Prominent African American writer and intellectual W.E.B. Du Bois argued in “Does the Negro need Separate Schools?” (1935) that blacks who attend predominantly white schools are subject to such racism that it undermines their ability to learn, achieve recognition, and develop a healthy self-image. Consequently, he argued against the ideal of integration that would later be the cornerstone of the Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court Case, and advocated that blacks should attend schools of their own, which could be just as good as traditionally white schools, or better, and would be free of prejudice. Du Bois agreed that integration was preferable, but would only be possible when racism in America had abated. In recent years, similar arguments have been made about the necessity of founding separate high schools for gay students to give them a safe haven from persecution.

Clearly, Charles Xavier was thinking along these same lines when he founded Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters. Only by segregating mutants out of mainstream American society and giving them a safe haven to develop their powers, intellectuals, and worldviews as free of oppression as possible could they hope to lead fulfilling lives as adults. While these students learned, Xavier would work on improving the image of mutants in the non-mutant community, in the hopes of creating a better world outside the walls of the school so that, some day, his school would no longer be necessary. It was a dream Xavier had spent all of his life achieving, and many X-Men fans have wondered what kind of life Xavier led before the events of *X-Men #1* (1963). In 2011, the film *X-Men: First Class* finally revealed Xavier’s hidden past.

When he conceived the story for *X-Men* trilogy prequel *X-Men: First Class* (2011), Bryan Singer set the film in the 1960s, during the height of the civil rights era, and chose to feature Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr., and John F. Kennedy in the narrative. Filmed in England, the United States, and Russia, the *First Class* is designed to have a 60s aesthetic inspired by the Sean Connery James Bond films and Silver Age Marvel Comics. James McAvoy and Michael Fassbender play the younger versions of the characters created on film by Patrick Stewart and Ian McKellen, and Matthew Vaughn (Kick-Ass) inherited the director seat from Singer. “Before Charles Xavier and Erik Lehnsherr took the names Professor X and Magneto, they were two young men discovering their powers for the first time. Before they were archenemies, they were closest of friends, working together, with other Mutants (some familiar, some new), to stop the greatest threat the world has ever known. In the process, a rift between them opened, which began the eternal war between Magneto’s Brotherhood and Professor X’s X-Men.”
Singer and his fellow screenwriters incorporated into the X-Men: First Class team Caucasian X-Men Havok and Banshee, as well as a crimson-skinned character, Azazal, and the blue-skinned returning characters Beast and Mystique. Unfortunately, despite the claims of pre-production publicity, the theatrical cut of the film featured neither Malcolm X nor Martin Luther King. Another failure of First Class is that the much-hyped bi-racial mutant Darwin (Kenyan-born Edi Gathegi) had a minimal part and was, essentially, cannon fodder for the villains.\textsuperscript{19} In the end, an X-Men movie that was expected to explore African American issues in greater depth skirted them yet again to privilege Singer's laudable—but-now-familiar gay allegory.

Elwood Watson, professor of History and African American Studies at East Tennessee State University and author of Outsiders Within: Black Women in the Legal Academy After Brown v. Board and co-editor of The Oprah Phenomenon (both 2009), has written extensively about the portrayal of African Americans in popular culture.\textsuperscript{20} According to Watson, while representations of black men and women have improved somewhat over the years, “there are still too many instances where Black men are represented as sambos, buffoons, pimps, thugs, immature, oversexed men, etc. You can see this on the nightly news. Interestingly, if you look at more recent commercials, it seems that the Black guy is always the smartest guy in the room. He knows where to get matches, how to fix a tire, how to get the best hotel room rates, how to solve mathematical equations, and it is often his White buddy who is the lame one. There have been a number of positive representations such as Sidney Poitier (for the most part), Denzel Washington, Blair Underwood, Colin Powell and our current Commander-in-Chief, Barack Obama.

“Black women have been seen as sassy, oversexed, often obese, those who are physically attractive are usually saddled with so many emotional issues — paranoid, temperamental, always angry, in some cases, confused — that they are unable to have a healthy, functional relationship with anyone (think Tara in True Blood, Thelma on Good Times, Omarosa on The Apprentice). Every year and then we get a character like Dominique Deveroux on the 1980s hit nighttime soap opera, Dynasty, who was played by the incomparable Diahann Carroll, Claire Huxtable on The Cosby Show, which was also an 80s/early 90s show. This
show was also a pleasant departure from the traditional image of Black families as being either poor, on welfare, dysfunctional, always up against it.”

Regarding superheroes, Watson sees little change. He said he never recalled seeing black superheroes on television when he was growing up, and there seem to be very few black superheroes that have penetrated the mainstream media from the comic book world, “I always looked at my parents, relatives and my older siblings as my Black superheroes,” he said. “I do not mean to be flippant, but I did.”

Even in comic books, black superheroes are rare figures. They often operate as “sidekick” supporting characters to other heroes — usually white, male heroes like Tony Stark — or as background members of team books who are sometimes interesting in their own right and sometimes “token black guys.” Black characters that star in their own books, as Black Panther does in a comic that has been written by Reginald Hudlin and Christopher Priest, are rare. Spawn is another rare exception that headlines his own comic book. However, he is a disfigured, demonic African American who wears a mask that he rarely seems to take off, so his value as a black role model is questionable. There is also the odd phenomenon of the African American cyborg, seen in Marvel’s Deathlok comics and DC’s Teen Titans hero, Victor Stone (a.k.a. Cyborg).

The black Iron Man, James Rhodes, and the black Green Lantern, John Stewart, were both briefly the main characters of their own books, deputized during periods when their white bosses, Tony Stark and Hal Jordan, were incapacitated by alcoholism and self-doubt. (Please note: This John Stewart is not to be confused with Daily Show host Jon Stewart, who is not currently a Green Lantern. However, his persistence in standing up to Fox News shows that he has strong willpower and the ability to overcome great fear, so perhaps the Oans should consider recruiting him.) Several other attempts have been made to replace traditionally white male superheroes with men of color, or with women, but they have tended not to remain in the role for long, usually only until the characters they have replaced are resurrected from the dead or emerge from retirement. In one case the Atom (Asian Ryan Choi) first replaced — and then was replaced by — white man Ray Palmer. In another case, the black, pinch-hitter Firestorm (Jason Rusch) didn’t sell many comic books, so the original, white Firestorm (Ronnie Raymond) returned from the grave to take over. In the 1970s, Gloria Steinem campaigned for the creation of a black Amazon in the Wonder Woman comics, but The Crisis on Infinite Earths wiped the character of Nubia from continuity in the 1980s. She was reintroduced briefly in 1999 as Nu’Bia, but remains a minor, minor character.

One of the few successful transformations of a traditional white character into a black one was the refitting of white, cigar-chomping, eye-patch-wearing World War II veteran Nick Fury into the bald, black, eye-patch-wearing Samuel L. Jackson, founder of the 21st century incarnation of the Avengers and director of S.H.I.E.L.D. This radical alteration succeeded because the new Nick Fury was part of the justification for the creating of a parallel Marvel Universe called the Ultimate Universe, and he was featured as a supporting player in two enormously popular comic books, The Ultimates by Mark Millar and Bryan Hitch and Ultimate Spider-Man by Brian Michael Bendis and Mark Bagley. The fact that Samuel L. Jackson consented to play the character that was now drawn to look exactly like him in the Iron Man and Avengers films helped the change stick. If Jackson had been less popular with comic book readers, or the black Nick Fury had not been drawn to look like an already famous black man, the alteration might not have been as successful.

(Interestingly, while the black Nick Fury has dealings with the X-Men in the Ultimate
universe, it is the white nick fury who is a member of the x-men, and a friend of xavier's, in chris claremont's monthly comic x-men forever.

in contrast to samuel l. jackson's success remaking nick fury, black actresses who have played catwoman have not inspired comic book artists to draw the character as black, and the majority of batman fans seem to prefer michelle pfeiffer and julie newmar to eartha kitt and halle berry in the role. on a related note, in early 2011, christopher nolan assembled a cast for his third batman film, the dark knight rises, which included caucasian actress anne hathaway as catwoman and english actor tom hardy as the hispanic villain bane. nolan was also rumored to be considering french actress marion cotillard for the role of a major arab character, talia al ghul.

blade, an african american vampire hunter who was himself part vampire and the child of a prostitute, is an anti-hero figure who was popular as a supporting character in marvel's 1970s era tomb of dracula comic book, but has never generated enough money for the company to maintain his own monthly title. he achieved mainstream fame in the 1990s by appearing in a series of violent, modestly budgeted blade horror films starring wesley snipes, but the superhero's film success did not translate to success on the small screen (a spinoff television series was short lived) or the comic book world (he still does not have a monthly title). however, to give the character a home, marvel made him a member of the x-men in 2010.

the falcon, luke cage, vixen, black lightning, and (the appallingly dull character) triathlon have helped bring some racial diversity to the traditionally all aryan teams the avengers and the justice league—as have blue-skinned, red-skinned, and green-skinned characters, such as the beast, vision, she-hulk, and martian manhunter, all of whom represent a free-floating "otherness" that could stand-in for any "minority" or "disenfranchised" american figure. blue and green characters can sometimes reach black audience members (as dave chappelle said about the hulk: "he's green. i'm black. it's close enough."). but it isn't the same as seeing a bona fide black character on the screen to relate to.

despite her silly name, bruce banner's cousin she-hulk is a superb character who can be seen as "pseudo-black," in part because she is occasionally drawn to resemble a green angela bassett. created by stan lee and john buscema, the character was introduced as jennifer susan walters, the shy daughter of a los angeles sherriff, who was shot and nearly killed by a vengeful crime lord. fortunately, her cousin bruce was in town to save her life with a blood transfusion. he passed his "hulk condition" on to jennifer, but she has had far more success controlling the powers than he. indeed, she has spent years as she-hulk, preferring being tall, strong, and beautiful, to being small and plain as a regular "human." she even remains in her she-hulk form when working in the courtroom as a criminal defense lawyer. she-hulk has appeared in several of her own monthly comic books, all of which had brief tenures before being cancelled, but she has had the advantage of appearing in an excellent string of fantastic four comics by john byrne and in several she-hulk graphic novels by dan slott that were legitimately among the best comic books produced in the first decade of the 2000s.

the television series doctor who has not, traditionally, cast many actors of color, and the few appearances black actors made in the series have often been embarrassing, forgettable, or racially problematic at best. however, the doctor has had three black traveling companions throughout the franchise's history—sharon davis, mickey smith, and martha jones—with mickey being the most memorable of the three, and the most embraced by fans, thanks largely to noel clarke's nuanced acting and charismatic screen presence. martha jones, a wealthy black doctor who heroically saves the world from the master, was a little too defined by her unrequited love for the doctor, and actress freema agyeman's performance was sometimes uneven.
Mickey and Martha are both sidekicks, and the black character's lot in superhero stories is to be the oft-sidelined sidekick or ensemble cast member.

Truly, black characters are often sidelined, and of little interest to readers of ensemble superhero narratives. Still, it is refreshing to note that, thanks in large part to African American writer Dwayne McDuffie, John Stewart was essentially the most important member of the Justice League in the 2000s animated series, and has been regarded by a generation of fans as the one, true Green Lantern as a result. Created by Dennis O'Neil and Neal Adams, Stewart was an out-of-work architect invited to join the Green Lantern Corps to provide backup for a burnt out Hal Jordan in his first appearance in Green Lantern vol. 2 #87 (1971). Jordan was uneasy about Stewart's ghetto background and leftist political views. He also felt that Stewart had a chip on his shoulder, and reveled too much in one small part of the Green Lantern Corps oath that Stewart seemed to verbally italicize as he uttered it, "In brightest day, in blackest night, no evil shall escape my sight. For those who worship evil's might, beware my power, Green Lantern's light."

Stewart's first assignment as Green Lantern was, provocatively, to prevent the assassination of a racist presidential candidate, Senator Jeremiah Clutchter (who seemed to be a transparent commentary on George Wallace). Despite a reluctant Jordan second-guessing his every move, Stewart first prevents a black assassin from shooting Clutchter, then reveals to the public the truth about the "assassination attempt"—Clutchter himself had staged it to turn the American people against the black power movement and get himself elected president. After this turn of events, Jordan reassesses Stewart and apologizes for being so skeptical. The two Green Lanterns become friends (see O'Neil, "Beware My Power").

While Hal Jordan was written out of the Green Lantern comics for years, giving Stewart and Metrosexual Green Lantern Kyle Rayner the spotlight, Jordan's return to prominence as the central Green Lantern in the DC universe in 2004 took much of the attention away from Stewart. Indeed, while Stewart was going to be the Green Lantern featured in a mooted Justice League film project, and played by rapper Common, that project was scuttled and replaced by a Green Lantern feature film in which Caucasian actor Ryan Reynolds played Hal Jordan. At this point, Stewart seems to be a pinch-hitter at best as Green Lantern in the DC Universe.

Outside of the comic book world, the greatest wellspring of African American superheroes was the Blaxploitation film genre of the 1970s, which produced female vigilantes Coffy and Foxy Brown as well as larger-than-life male figures Shaft, Superfly, Dolemite, the Mack, Watermelon Man, and Petey Wheatstraw: The Devil's Son-in-Law. Pam Grier found stardom as the title character in Coffy (1973), a tough nurse who initiates a war on drugs, and the pseudo-sequel, Foxy Brown (1974) in which Grier infiltrates a sex-slave ring to save black women from a life of drug addiction and prostitution. (Coffy was remade with an all-white cast in 1981 as Lovely But Deadly.)

Melvin Van Peebles' Watermelon Man (1970) is a supernatural Blaxploitation film in which a racist white insurance salesman named Jeff Gerber finds himself mysteriously transformed into a black man. His neighbors effectively drive him out of the upscale suburban community in which he lives because they fear his presence will drive property values down, and his supposedly liberal wife leaves him and takes their children with her because she can't handle the public scrutiny that comes with an interracial marriage. Ironically, by the end of the film, the once racist Jeff radicalizes and joins the Black Panthers, seemingly ready to rebel against an oppressive white regime.

Perhaps the most famous male Blaxploitation hero was Shaft, due in no small part
to Richard Roundtree’s charismatic performance, and the funky main theme provided by Isaac Hayes. *Shaft* (1971) and *Shaft’s Big Score* (1972) introduce John Shaft, a ladies’ man detective who pits himself against an Italian Mafia bent on seizing violent control of Harlem. These films were followed up by *Shaft in Africa* (1973) and a CBS television series (1973–1974). In 2000, John Singleton directed *Shaft*, a continuation of the Shaft saga starring the original Shaft’s nephew, also named John Shaft (Samuel L. Jackson), and including a cameo by Roundtree’s Shaft. The story involves a rich, racist young murderer, Walter Wade, Jr. (Christian Bale), who escapes from justice because his father is wealthy and the murder victim was black. An idealistic police officer, Shaft vows to bring Wade to justice to prove that the system works, but the more stymied he is in his efforts, the more disillusioned he becomes.

Years after the heyday of Blackexploitation films came to a close, Quentin Tarantino embedded elements of the genre in *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and *Jackie Brown* (1997), bringing Jackson mainstream stardom and offering Pam Grier one of her greatest film roles in decades. Elwood Watson finds black exploitation films, new and old, fascinating — especially *Superfly*, the definitive film in the genre, as well as *Uptown Saturday Night* and *Bucktown*— but sees the depiction of blacks in these films as highly problematic. “The perception of Blacks as violent, immature and less disciplined than Whites seems to emerge in many of these movies. *Watermelon Man* was rife with racism. *Jackie Brown* was not as blatant in its stereotypes as some of the other movies, but they must use the N-word at least 30 times in the movie. I loved Samuel Jackson in the movie. He is probably my favorite actor.”

Oddly, despite the success of these neo-blackexploitation films, Hollywood seemed reluctant to offer Grier or Jackson a starring role as a traditional, Marvel or DC style superhero, even though there were characters they could have easily played. Jackson voiced Frozone, a character inspired by the Caucasian *X-Men* member Iceman, in the *Incredibles*, and later starred as Nick Fury in a supporting role in *The Avengers* and *Iron Man* films, but has yet to headline a film as a traditional superhero. An oft-mooted Luke Cage film has had similar difficulty getting made, and the plug was pulled on a *Justice League* film starring John Stewart. Notably, *Hancock*, a film ultimately starring Will Smith, languished in development hell for years before executives finally took a chance with it.

Race issues are sublimated in *Hancock* (2008), but they are there to see if viewers look for them. Modeled on Marvel’s Spider-Man and DC Comics’ Hawkman, John Hancock is an incompetent, publicly vilified superhero with the powers of flight, superhuman strength, and near invincibility. He dresses in stereotypical urban ghetto clothes, drinks while he flies, curses in front of children, frequently makes homophobic remarks, and destroys billions of dollars in property in his efforts to protect public safety.

For the first half of the film, Hancock is depicted as deserving public scorn because he is incompetent, misanthropic, and scornful of authority figures. When he saves public relations expert Ray Embrey (Jason Bateman) from being struck by a train, Embrey chooses to show his gratitude to Hancock by making it his mission to change the anti-hero’s public image. He gives Hancock a 21st-century-style superhero costume — skin-tight, monochromatic, and sporting a subtle hawk logo — and demands that Hancock take responsibility for his actions by serving a prison term for the crimes he has committed while, paradoxically, fighting crime. When Hancock demonstrates his humility by accepting punishment at a penal institution he could escape from at any time, public opinion turns in his favor and he is soon pardoned and deputized by the District Attorney’s office into stopping a deadly bank heist in progress.
If the film ended there, it would arguably lay the blame for Hancock's alienation from society on Hancock himself. The first half of the film suggests that, if only Hancock had dressed better, stayed off the drink, and not been such an "ornery nigger," then he would have never run afoul of the law. The second half of the film presents the alternative view that Hancock did not choose to separate himself from society, but that he was forced to live, segregated from the world, by racist Americans. At the film's midpoint, the audience learns that Hancock suffers from amnesia and does not know who he is or how old he is. He knows only that he does not age, and that his earliest memory was waking up in a hospital in 1931 after being nearly beaten to death by white supremacists outside of a movie theater showing James Whale's Frankenstein.

What Hancock does not know, or remember, is that Embrey's wife Mary (Charlize Theron) is really a closeted superhero, Superwoman, who used to be married to Hancock. This revelation is unexpected, and completely alters Mary's motivations as a character, but it sets up a dramatic love-triangle storyline and brings the racial subtext of the film closer to the surface. Like Hancock, Superwoman is thousands of years old, only she remembers their many lifetimes worth of married life together. As she ultimately reveals to Hancock, the fact that he is black and she is white has caused generations of racists to ambush them when they are at their weakest—when they are together and in love. Time and again, lifetime after lifetime, racial purists were offended by their love and repeatedly tried to murder them for their forbidden, interracial marriage. When KKK sympathizers attacked them both in 1931, and nearly killed Hancock, Superwoman decided it was time they lived apart, so she left him at the hospital to wake up alone, an amnesiac, with no sense that anyone in the world loved him. And that was the beginning of his alienation from society.

Consequently, the message of the second half of the film repudiates the message of the first half of the film, underscoring the feeling that many viewers had that the film turns on a dime tonally and thematically at midpoint. In the second half of the film, it is not Hancock in particular, or black men in general, who emerge as the reason for racial strife in America, but intolerant white Americans. Gone from the second half of the film is all neo-conservative

From Hancock (Sony Pictures, 2008): “Black Superman” John Hancock (Will Smith) rescues civilian Ray Embrey (Jason Bateman) from being struck by a train. This moment is reminiscent of the cover of the first Superman comic book, Action Comics #1 (1938), in which Superman lifts a car. Throughout the film, Hancock is criticized for being incompetent and overly aggressive, but he is bitter and alone because murderous racists broke up his interracial romance with Superwoman (Charlize Theron).
suggestion that militant black men are "reverse racists." When Hancock and Supergirl are together in a hospital at the end of the film, and they are once again beset by working-class white criminals, the suggestion is that, no matter how savvy Hancock is at public relations, no matter how well he dresses or speaks, no matter how polite and well-spoken he is, racists will continue to hate him merely because he is black.

The following year saw the release of a retro-style spoof of Blaxploitation films set in the 1970s, co-written by and starring former Spawn star Michael Jai White. The title character of Black Dynamite (2009) is a former CIA agent who transforms urban ghettos into suburban utopias by single-handedly cutting off the drug trade at its source — the Nixon White House. Black Dynamite defeats Nixon in a kung fu fight in the Oval Office and accuses "Tricky Dick" of working to destroy the black community simply because he is jealous of the prodigious sizes of black men's dicks. The scene is hilarious and outrageous, but it is based on a genuine hostility between Nixon and the black community chronicled in Rick Perlstein's history Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America (2008). First Lady Pat Nixon is won over by Black Dynamite's manhood, and falls at his feet as the hero strikes a heroic pose in the Oval Office. The moment is symbolically appropriate for a film released the year that the mantle of the Presidency of the United States was assumed by an African American male.

Some cultural critics and historians have speculated that Barack Obama's path to the White House was paved by positive popular culture representations of black men, especially depictions of black male presidents from 1998's Deep Impact (Morgan Freeman's President Beck) and the series 24, which featured two black presidents (Dennis Haysbert's President David Palmer and D. B. Woodside's President Wayne Palmer) at the urging of its politically left-leaning star Kiefer Sutherland. The breakaway popularity of movie stars Will Smith and Samuel L. Jackson, the mainstreaming of rap music, and other signs of the growing acceptance and "coolness" of African Americans and what is perceived to be black American culture may also have contributed to his success.

However, as surprised as many members of the African American community were that an inexperienced black man succeeded in becoming the president of a country they perceived to be inherently racist, there were signs that Obama's presidency will never be viewed as legitimate by a large percentage of Americans who cling to racist ideologies of the past. To that extent, the message of the film Hancock seems apt. No matter how smart, well-dressed, and even-tempered a black man is, he cannot earn the respect or affection of a fundamentally racist white American.

Xavier's Dream Fulfilled: A Mutant in the White House

In the first X-Men film, Magneto argued that life for mutants in America would change substantively if the President of the United States, and all the leaders of the world, were suddenly transformed into mutants. After all, Christianity had been a persecuted, underground cult in Ancient Rome until the Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity and established it the official religion of the Roman Empire. What the mutants needed, Magneto felt, was an Emperor Constantine. But he was trying to artificially transform all of the world leaders through an aggressive act of terrorism, and Xavier and his X-Men argued that no act of terrorism would ever lead to an oppressed group finding true acceptance. Indeed, Xavier rightly feels that all terrorism ever achieves is bolstering the power and popularity of the very same oppressive, conservative regimes that terrorism is trying to unseat.
However, Magneto is not patient enough to wait for American public opinion to change, and racism to abate to the point that a mutant is actually elected President of the United States. The idea is preposterous, anyway. So Magneto continues a career of making terrorist attack after terrorist attack against humanity. During one such campaign, when he aggressively sinks a Soviet submarine, killing everyone on board, the X-Men redouble their efforts to end his destructive campaign. In the heat of combat, Magneto strikes out wildly and accidentally wounds Kitty Pryde (see *Uncanny X-Men* #150). Believing he has killed an innocent teenage girl who is, like him, both Jewish and a mutant, Magneto wonders if he has finally gone too far and become exactly like the insane Nazis he has always hated. At this moment, he has an epiphany and announces his reform.

From the moment she was introduced in 1980, Kitty clearly represented the symbolic hope of a better future. Unlike Magneto and Xavier, Kitty did not live through World War II or the turbulent 1960s. She did not have their emotional scars and could look at the world with fresh eyes and begin contemplating how to remake it. A member of Generation X, literally and figuratively, Kitty embraced the X-Men’s mission while still making time to live a normal life, go to college, date, and even spend time exploring the multiverse with *Excalibur* and giving the mutants rights cause a rest. As much as Kitty had to be bitter about—and she had a lot because most of her friends and family members have been killed in anti-mutant hate crime attacks—she somehow manages to maintain her good humor, sense of justice, and kind heart.

When long-time X-Men writer Chris Claremont was commissioned to write a story set in the near future that would bring the X-Men saga to a close, he found an incredibly fitting climax. In *X-Men: The End* (2004–2006), a thirtysomething Kitty Pryde is running against racial purity advocate Alice Tremaine for the position of mayor of Chicago. Though African American, Tremaine is a violent racist and her entire election campaign is based on demonizing Kitty. During a live, televised debate, Tremaine asks the voters of Chicago if they want “the next mayor of this great city to be a human being, or a monster?” A brief look of cold fury passes over Kitty’s face and then vanishes. She then beams, theatrically placing a hand upon her breast, and says, “Well, I’m a monster? What I am, ladies and gentlemen, by accident of birth, is a mutant. In my case, I can walk through walls.” And she demonstrates the power by passing right through her podium, startling everyone watching. By not hiding her true nature, and by showing a sense of humor in the face of Tremaine’s hateful attacks, Kitty gradually starts to turn the tide of the election in her favor during the course of

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A grown-up Katherine Pryde is the liberal candidate in the Chicago mayoral election. Her opponent, Alice Tremaine, is a racist politician who calls Katherine “a monster” because she is a mutant. Notably, Katherine’s head is bandaged during this live, television debate because one of Tremaine’s supporters hit her with a rock during one of her rallies. From *X-Men: The End* (Marvel Comics, 2004–2006), written by Chris Claremont and illustrated by Sean Chen.
one debate. Each time Tremaine tries to make the election about Kitty's mutant background, Kitty turns the public's attention to the fact that Tremaine has spent no time outlining her positions on "the real concerns of real people," such as taxes, education, transportation, health care, housing, and jobs. Ignoring Tremaine's ad hominem attacks, Kitty lays out a series of practical plans for dealing with each of these issues that assures the voting public that she has a well-thought-out agenda. When Tremaine suggests that, as mayor, Kitty would only represent the interests of mutant over humans, Kitty proclaims that idea nonsense.

"I'm a Jew. Does that mean I favor my faith over all the others?" she asks. "Do I favor women over men? White over non-white? Geeks over jocks? A community is people working together for the common good. We don't achieve that by casting some out."

The unlikely outcome of the election is that Kitty Pryde becomes the first mutant mayor of Chicago.

But the story does not end there.

An epilogue that takes place 20 years later, finds Katherine Pryde, the former X-Men neophyte Shadowcat, serving her first term as President of the United States. In the time that has passed since the Chicago mayoral election, she has won Alice Tremaine's respect. However, Speaker of the House Tremaine is still a member of the opposing political party, so they will remain political adversaries even if they have made peace personally. The epilogue does not establish if she is the first female president, or the first Jewish president, but she is certainly the first mutant president. Readers are also introduced to her children, but no husband is referenced or seen.

In the final segment of the story, President Shadowcat, the pride of the X-Men, make a speech on the White House lawn in honor of how far the cause of mutant's rights has come since the passing of Magneto and Xavier — both of whom would have voted for her had they lived to do so. Since America had shown itself to be capable of electing a liberal Jewish woman mutant President of the United States, it had clearly demonstrate its capacity for growth and tolerance. With her election, the age of the X-Men was over, and the need for segregated institutions of learning like Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters had passed. The age of mutant segregation, both enforced and voluntary, was at an end. The era of integration, inter-species tolerance, and intermarriage had begun.

Magneto had believed that the only way to change the United States, make it a genuinely free country, and purge it of the legacy of racism, was to take the White House by force. Kitty Pryde, using Charles Xavier's methods, won over the hearts and minds of the American people, and was democratically elected president. The Oval Office was given to her by a nation of mutants and non-mutants alike.

And the dreams of both Charles Xavier and Erik Lehnsherr were finally realized in President Kitty Pryde.

As were the dreams of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X with the election of President Barack Obama...