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Magneto Was Right: How the Holocaust Shaped an X-Men Antihero

Benjamin J. Morse

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MAGNETO WAS RIGHT: HOW THE HOLOCAUST SHAPED AN X-MEN ANTIHERO

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Bachelor of Arts -- English
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2004

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the

Master of Arts -- Journalism & Media Studies

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Magneto was Right: How the Holocaust Shaped an X-Men Antihero

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Abstract

Created in 1963 by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, the X-Men property has extended beyond comic books over the last 30 years into television and film among other mediums. The initial premise of the canon, that mutants gifted with inherent superpowers were feared and hated by normal humans, has served as an allegory for discrimination against minorities on the basis of race, religion, and sexual orientation. Chris Claremont, the primary author of the X-Men from 1975-1991, did significant work introducing Judaism into the metaphor, in large part by making the series' primary antagonist, Magneto, a Holocaust survivor working to prevent mutants from suffering the same plight. In 2003, Grant Morrison made an effort to push Magneto back toward the roots of the character as a charismatic terrorist that would later be overruled by Claremont and others. The 2008 work *X-Men: Magneto Testament* firmly rooted the character's history in the Holocaust. Scholarly readings of X-Men range in opinion on the portrayal of Magneto and the Holocaust from empowering to exploitative in regards to the real-world victims of the event. This paper will use textual analysis of primary sources (comic books, television, and film) featuring Magneto and the X-Men as well as a variety of scholarly works and interviews to determine how the use of the Holocaust has shaped the character in various media. Further, this thesis will use an analogy related to *Maus* author Art Spiegelman by Marshall McLuhan about the "tug of war" between the vulgar and the genteel in comics and how Magneto embodies that struggle when it comes to the trauma of the Holocaust and the use of reprisal by its victims.

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Introduction

“Be quiet! When I was a boy, I saw men executed. Women and children...each night I swore to myself, never again. But, we must prevail. Goodbye, Senator. Mutant liberation begins.”

-Magneto from *X-Men: The Animated Series*

In the second story of the 1987 comic book *Classic X-Men #12*, written by Chris Claremont, the magnetically-powered supervillain Magneto struggles to sleep as he recalls with vivid and even disturbing details illustrated by artist John Bolton his childhood trials experienced in Auschwitz, the Nazi concentration camp used to jail Jewish prisoners at the height of the Holocaust. The panels of “A Fire in the Night!” depict a gaunt pair--the future Magneto and his wife Magda--escaping their barbed wire confines by violently assailing Nazi guards. The balance of the story depicts the couple struggling to assimilate in a small village and the traumatic death of their daughter, Anya, in a fire, a trial mirrored back in the modern-day where Magneto rescues a young girl and her mother from a similar fate. This story takes place shortly before *Uncanny X-Men #200*, where Magneto stands trials for past crimes. It’s a powerful snapshot at Claremont’s attempts to rehabilitate Magneto, who began as a one-dimensional antagonist, into a complex antihero. Through the character and the story, a combination of what some might consider vulgar entertainment with the genteel touch of real-life facts from history, a reader can begin to gain a level of insight into the events of the Holocaust framed through an adventure-based comic book.

At age 11, I heard Magneto, the ostensible “bad guy” of *X-Men: The Animated Series*, give the speech quoted above. It was from “The Final Decision,” the season finale of the first season that initially aired as part of Fox’s Saturday morning cartoon block on March 27, 1993. The show had captured my attention a few months earlier when it premiered in the fall of

1992--Halloween night, to be specific. It spurred my interest in superheroes in general as well as the X-Men specifically and drove me to the comic books on which the program was based. Despite growing up in a predominantly Jewish suburb of Boston and, in fact, being of Jewish heritage on my father's side, Magneto's words represented my first exposure to the Holocaust, capping off themes of racial persecution that percolated throughout X-Men both in print and on the screen.

Watching *X-Men: The Animated Series* as a child was the start of a lifelong interest in comic books. I continued to consume media produced by Marvel, the company responsible for the X-Men, as I advanced through high school and college. After graduating from Connecticut College in 2004 with a degree in English, I traveled to Comic-Con International in San Diego that summer seeking a job in the comic book industry. Shortly thereafter, I was hired to write for the now-defunct *Wizard Magazine*, a position I held for three years before getting hired at Marvel to create content for their digital media department in 2007. I spent a decade working within Marvel, ultimately holding the position of Editorial Director of New Media. In 2018, I left that job and moved to Las Vegas, where I became a visiting lecturer at UNLV as well as a graduate student in the journalism and media studies program. With this background and expertise, my grounded knowledge after a decade at Marvel and in the comic book industry, I am uniquely qualified to take a scholarly look at Magneto and his role in media as a Holocaust survivor and antihero.

At the same time, I also want to use the experience of my own extensive fandom that accompanies my industry experience as an aca-fan (academic fan). In doing so, I follow a line of academics who have used fan engagement and personal fandom as a legitimate form of academic scholarship including Will Brooker and Henry Jenkins, whose work I use to frame my methods.

Gene Leun Yang, an academic-turned-comic book writer and recipient of a MacArthur fellowship, composed his 2003 Masters of Education degree around the use of comic books as a teaching source, another subject I plan to cover in-depth. Finally, Grant Morrison, a prolific author in and outside of comics whose body of work includes three years of writing *New X-Men* for Marvel, also wrote the 2011 book *Supergods* containing a series of academic essays observing superheroes and their impact on society (Yang, 2003; Brooker, 2005; Morrison, 2011; Jenkins, 2020).

In 2011, Greg M. Smith moderated a discussion in *Cinema Journal* regarding the state of comics scholarship that resonates a decade later. The purpose of this discussion was to contextualize the positioning of academic scholarship on comics within the broader popular culture sphere and to question the ability of scholars to legitimately study comics. While panelist Thomas Andrae lists a variety of texts dealing with the topic, Scott Bukatman and Thomas LaMarre counter that comics scholarship is still navigating problems “endemic to a new field” (Smith, Andrae, Bukatman & LaMarre, 2011; 135-139). The panel argues the problems of separating scholar from fan, and the need for a serious approach that strips away some level of enjoyment in the process of studying the subject. Bukatman contends that much of the most engaging writing being done in comics studies is taking place in the domain of blogs (internet forums and public commentary) rather than academic papers (Smith, Andrae, Bukatman & LaMarre, 2011). As somebody with a background both as a fan but also training as an academic, I hope to bridge the gap that concerns this panel through my own positioning as a former Marvel employee who produced public commentary on comics and now operates through the lens of academic scholarship. Thus, my positionality is somewhat unique as an author and scholar, but also as a professional academic fan (pro-aca-fan).

Education and Graphic Novels

Educator and writer Gene Leun Yang in writing his 2003 Masters of Education degree proposal pointed to the recognized value of comics in academia dating back to the 1930s and 40s, citing articles in scholarly journals and the use of comic books in school classrooms. Yang specifically cites a 1944 report from University of Pittsburgh professor WWD Sones that details “more than a hundred in educational and nonprofessional periodicals” centered on comics that appeared between 1935 and 1944 (Sones, 1944; Yang, 2003). Yang points to psychiatrist and juvenile delinquency scholar Dr. Frederic Wertham’s campaign to classify comics as dangerous with his 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent* as damaging comics’ relationship with education in a way that would not heal in full until 1992 and the publication of Art Spiegelman’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Maus* (Sturm, 2001; Wright, 2001; Yang, 2003).

There has been a tension between whether comic books and graphic novels can be legitimate academic sources for scholarly debate since the early part of the last century and into the current day. As noted, the panel convened by *Cinema Journal* in 2011 raised concerns on the viability of comics scholarship a decade ago due to some of the best work being done outside of academic circles. Nonetheless, they were able to name writers like Will Brooker, Charles Hatfield, Will Jacobs, Gerard Jones, and Scott McCloud as doing meaningful work bringing comics studies forward (Smith, Andrae, Bukatman & LaMarre, 2011).

Despite this consternation amongst academics, comics themselves were affected by the work of these scholars. In *Comics and Stuff*, Henry Jenkins recounts Spiegelman telling arts critic WJT Mitchell that in the 1970s, influenced by Marshall McLuhan, the author made what he felt was a necessary push of comics towards being art rather than a mass medium (Spiegelman, 2012; Jenkins, 2020). As a result of the work of Spiegelman and his

contemporaries, comics shifted towards “graphic novels,” and, per Jenkins, “graphic novels can be taught in literature classrooms...whereas few would have taken traditional comic books into such spaces” (Jenkins, 2020). This lent to the rise in the legitimacy of graphic novels and their salience in popular culture, but also as an academic object of study. Kuttner, Weaver-Hightower, & Sousanis (2020) tout “a resurgence of scholarly interest in comics” and the creation of comics in academia to communicate more effectively, in particular, to convey findings across non-academic lines in their paper on how comics as research tools afford scholars the ability to communicate with contemporaries in audiences in a way that emphasizes and conveys their voice (Kuttner, Weave-Hightower & Sousanis, 2020, p. 195).

Jenkins describes “*Maus* and many other graphic novels” as being “shaped by tensions between the respectability that comes from assimilating realist conventions and the vitality that comes from incorporating more vernacular elements--for example, dealing with family memory and public trauma through the funny animal book” (Jenkins, 2020). Similarly, the graphic novel form was incorporated into the storytelling and character-building of Magneto as a conduit for digesting public trauma and as a kind of popular culture pedagogy. Claremont’s framing of Magneto as a Holocaust survivor similarly expands *X-Men* beyond a superhero story. Later Greg Pak’s *Magneto Testament* in the tradition of *Maus* is historical fiction rather than a superhero comic.

Those Uncanny X-Men

The first grouping of X-Men made their debut in the inaugural issue of *The X-Men*, produced in 1963 under the auspices of writer Stan Lee and principal artist Jack Kirby. The conceit of the story was that certain individuals within the world occupied by the Marvel

Universe were born with inherent superpowers and labeled as genetic aberrants, or “mutants” (Lee, 1963; Miller, 2003). The initial iteration of the X-Men concept, centering on a school in which young mutants learned to control their powers, did not sell as well as other Marvel titles conceived by Lee and Kirby (Foege, 2000). In 1975, with *Giant-Size X-Men*, writer Len Wein and artist Dave Cockrum reimagined the franchise around an international collection of adult heroes (Wein, 1975). Following that first issue of the new direction, Claremont succeeded Wein as scripter of *Uncanny X-Men* and “played up Lee’s idea that the X-Men were outsiders, hated and feared because they were mutants” (Foege, 2000). Claremont, a Jew like Lee and Kirby, introduced a young Jewish mutant named Kitty Pryde as the new point of view character for the series and also investigated Magneto’s past as a Holocaust survivor, expanding the metaphor of *X-Men* to include the Jewish experience (Weinstein, 2006; Lynskey, 2016). He remained on the title, with a variety of artists and editors, chronicling the adventures of the X-Men in multiple titles through 1991. At its peak in the early nineties, *Uncanny X-Men* circulated approximately 500,000 copies a month, while a second title, *X-Men*, sold 7.6 million copies of its debut issue, a record-setting figure that holds as of 2021 (Foege, 2000).

Magneto also debuted in *The X-Men #1* by Lee and Kirby as the central antagonist of the piece. Initially, no motivation was ascribed to the character outside of the loose idea that he wanted to conquer the world on behalf of mutants, but also for his own benefit. Nothing about Magneto’s past or personal identity was revealed in this first appearance (Lee, 1963). However, in a 2008 interview, Lee would say he “did not think of Magneto as a bad guy. He just wanted to strike back at the people who were so bigoted and racist...he was trying to defend the mutants, and because society was not treating them fairly he was going to teach society a lesson. He was a danger of course...but I never thought of him as a villain” (Thomas, et al., 2008). Later writers

like Claremont would fill in Magneto's background, establishing his status as a Holocaust survivor 18 years after his creation (Claremont, 1981; Cronin, 2018). The 2000 *X-Men* feature film opened with a scene of young Magneto witnessing the death of his family at an Auschwitz concentration camp and first manifesting his powers of control over magnetism as a result, grounding the movie from the start with an origin set in the Holocaust, a theme that would be mirrored through the plight of mutants and how the characters push back against persecution and prejudice (Singer, 2000). The 2008 *X-Men: Magneto Testament* series written by Pak would dive fully into Magneto's Jewish heritage and Holocaust experience, giving him the birth name of Max Eisenhardt (Pak, 2008).

But again, I first encountered Magneto in 1993 via *X-Men: The Animated Series*. By the time he made his way to this platform, the character had experienced three decades of development, initially from Lee and especially from Claremont. His cartoon depiction reflected elements of his original supervillain persona coupled with the sympathetic qualities introduced later on (Lewald, 1992). As a young viewer, Magneto represented, for me, a leap forward--a cartoon "bad guy" with depth, different from characters like Cobra Commander from *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* (1983), Megatron from *The Transformers* (1984), Mumm-Ra from *ThunderCats* (1985) or Shredder from *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (1987), all antagonists motivated by a desire to accumulate personal power and influence. The portrayal of Magneto in the animated series, influenced by the comics, would not only inform his eventual cinematic debut, but also heralded a new era of ambiguous antiheroes in animation, live-action television, and film who would often even become the protagonists of their respective story.

A variety of literature expresses a range of opinions on the role of the X-Men and Magneto in crafting a perspective through fiction on the Jewish experience and Holocaust

survivors (Baron, 2003; Miller, 2003; Bower, 2004; Oei & Short, 2016). In this project, I extend the work of Baron (2003) and Bower (2004), who explored Holocaust fiction in the general sense of all comics, by focusing specifically on the role of the X-Men and Magneto. I align with Oei & Short's (2016) call for portrayals of Holocaust survivors as active participants in their own personal narratives being imperative to breaking through some of the stereotypes other media forms addressing the event perpetuate. Specifically, other Holocaust texts have put in place a narrative solely of victims in need of a savior. Oei & Short argue that in contrast to traditional works like *The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Sophie's Choice*, *X-Men* does not seek to portray Holocaust survivors solely as victims waiting to be saved by America, and places power and agency in the character of Magneto. Miller (2003) suggests that *X-Men* promotes an assimilationist view of America, emphasizing the "melting pot" and abandonment of cultural distinctions to fit in an assumed society. I agree that, at its heart, *X-Men* is a reflection of America's mythologizing of assimilation at the cost of cultural identity. The text explores the inherent strengths of a melting pot that provides common ground and camaraderie for transplanted immigrants but also problematizes this philosophy where those same adopters can sometimes sacrifice their individuality.

Oei & Short's empowered portrayal of the Holocaust victim is on display in the opening scene of the 2000 film *X-Men*, which features a young man who would become Magneto and his family being persecuted in a concentration camp, setting up his mission in the movie to safeguard mutants from suffering a similar fate to the Jews in World War II (Singer, 2000). The portrayal of Magneto as a character willing to protect those who matter to him by any means necessary places Magneto in dialogue with other prominent antiheroes who came to prominence in media portrayals during the 2000s and 2010s. This list includes prominent pop culture figures

such as the likes of Tony Soprano on *The Sopranos*, the title character of *Dexter*, Walter White on *Breaking Bad*, or Jax Teller on *Sons of Anarchy*. In their article on anti-heroes in popular culture, Jonason, Webster, Schmitt, Li & Crysel (2012) reference Gregory House from the television show *House* as well as the various incarnations of Batman and James Bond as examples of modern antiheroes. They note the popularity and entertainment value of these figures who possess dark traits such as narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism but “despite their costs, traits like these can confer reproductive and survival benefits for the individual” (p. 192). Magneto’s evolution over multiple mediums from the eighties to 2000 establishes a template for a particular articulation of an antihero. The prominence of the antihero as a protagonist for highly-rated television programs in the nineties and 2000s reflects explicitly a sharpening of the target audience for this material as well as an increase in diversity of representation in lead characters (Tokgoz, 2016).

Methods

The goal for this thesis is to use a deep reading and textual analysis of *X-Men* related materials as well as my personal experiences and knowledge to track the history of Holocaust representation in comics, the use of the X-Men as a metaphor for discrimination, and primarily Magneto's evolution narratively to situate the franchise and character and their impact on audiences and media. This paper's method is modeled after Will Brooker's (2000) book *Batman Unmasked: Analyzing a Cultural Icon*. Like Brooker, I intend to employ textual analysis to investigate how different interpretations and iterations of Magneto through the years have informed his cultural influence. I will be examining primary texts--comic books, TV shows, and film--as well as scholarly works on the X-Men, Magneto, and the rise of the antihero. In his work, Brooker takes a historical, chronological, and autoethnographic approach to examining Batman, pulling from specific texts in order to look at the evolution of the character and his standing in pop culture. From the close reading of *Batman*, Brooker conducts a "forensic investigation" of the character to determine why and how the mythos had become pervasive in society, to "recover the meanings carried by this cultural icon at key moments in his history" (Brooker, 2005). I intend to analyze textual representations of Magneto taken from significant work within the X-Men canon, paying particular attention to how different authors and interpretations portrayed him. Some of these works include selections from *Uncanny X-Men* and *Classic X-Men* written by Claremont, the 1992 cartoon *X-Men: The Animated Series*, the films by Singer, Brett Ratner, and Matthew Vaughn, *New X-Men* from 2003, and 2008's *X-Men: Magneto - Testament* comic book limited series.

I am also using the model established by Kathrin M. Bower (2004) in her work on the topic in which she took a chronological approach to exploring comic books as specific texts to

provide a worthwhile framework for my own study. Bower performs a textual analysis of various comic book texts, such as Captain America comics from the 40s and the 70s, which portrayed Holocaust survivors as shallow stereotypes and contrasts these with the depth of Magneto's characterization in comics and film. She is focused primarily on parallels between the Nuremberg trials and the depiction of Magneto's own trial in the comics, asking questions about the ethics of representations of justice. My analysis builds from Bower's usage of some of the same texts such as *The Master Race*, but extends beyond comics into multiple mediated Magneto iterations, in addition to the X-Men literature previously outlined.

Further influence comes from Henry Jenkins' *Comics and Stuff* (2020); while Jenkins' goals differ from mine in that he sought to examine a "relationship between comics and material culture," and the application to the subdiscipline of material culture studies, I look at the portrayal of the Holocaust in a popular fictional medium. However, I draw from his methods, motivation, and approach to comics scholarship as an aca-fan (or pro-aca-fan).

Following Oates (2017), these representations of Magneto serve as "textual extensions," which do ideological work that is "to be communicated, struggled over, and reconciled" and ultimately serves to "mobilize popular effect in ways that can be shaped into politics" (p. 20) and connects to articulations of the Holocaust. Also, from my reading of Oei & Short (2016), I plan to incorporate broader works like Spiegelman's seminal graphic novel exploration of the Holocaust, *Maus*, into my analysis. These works provide the methodological justification for a textual analysis and deep reading wherein Magneto, as a textual extension, articulates salient discourses and representations of the Holocaust.

To summarize, I follow the model of Bower in terms of examination of the texts I have selected as well as integrating Brooker's approach that expands on how these texts impact a

larger public and understanding Magneto as a cultural icon. The selected texts serve as these “textual extensions,” which articulate salient discourses through media artifacts (Oates, 2017; Conley & Burroughs, 2019; Rugg, 2020). Similarly, Jenkins uses “a series of close readings of particular artists and their works...that combines visual analysis with narrative and thematic analysis” (Jenkins, 2020). My analysis leans more into the latter two categories with less focus on the visual aspects of the text outside of their implications for the characters, but I will use a close reading of *X-Men* media and other works featuring Magneto to form the basis of my research. This textual analysis will be accompanied by my own knowledge of the material gleaned not only from reading and viewing but supplemented by interviews I conducted during my time with *Wizard Magazine* and Marvel Entertainment.

Overview

The remainder of the thesis consists of three primary chapters, followed by a summative conclusion. This thesis explores how Magneto is constituted as a cultural icon, mediating popular entertainment with historical fact to create an accurate, yet compelling portrait of the Holocaust. Magneto provides a broad audience potentially unfamiliar with the material both vulgar and genteel pathways for embodying the trauma of the Holocaust. The first chapter looks at the history of comic books depicting the Holocaust stretching from the propaganda-based material of titles like *Captain America Comics* that were published in concurrence with events all the way up to more contemporary works like *Maus* and *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*. In the second chapter, I will examine how *X-Men* as a larger body of work serves as a metaphor for cultural and social exclusion and dive further into academic literature about the franchise, its strengths, and uses. The third chapter is a detailed textual analysis of Magneto as a character featured primarily in *Uncanny X-Men* by Chris Claremont, *New X-Men* by Grant Morrison, and *X-Men: Magneto Testament* by Greg Pak. Finally, my conclusion will evaluate where Magneto fits in Spiegelman and by extension McLuhan's "tug of war" between the "vulgar" origins of superhero comics where he originated and his "genteel" nuanced portrayal as an antihero rooted in the Holocaust. It is betwixt and between this negotiation of vulgar and genteel where Magneto articulates a poignant, contextual, yet complex conception of the Holocaust made salient in popular culture. Magneto realizes McLuhan and Spiegelman's vision of comics being able to find a place in popular culture situated beyond its origins as entertainment but not totally devoid of that initial value.

Chapter 1: The History of Holocaust Comics

With this opening chapter, I explore the path of Holocaust representation in comic books and their inspired media, beginning with heavily propagandized work occurring parallel to the historic event, through to the more revered texts of the last 30 years, including *Maus*, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*, and, most prominently, the *X-Men* comics and film series depicting Magneto's origins. The chapter again uses Spiegelman and McLuhan's spectrum of the vulgar and genteel, situated within earlier works like *Captain America*, and how Magneto constitutively straddles the two where other texts err farther to one side or the other.

In explaining a rationale for selecting the topic of her 2015 capstone project, Rachel Elizabeth Mandel (2015) cites a desire to elevate comic books and graphic novels in trauma studies as a "legitimate medium for Holocaust representation" (p. iv), a goal I share for my work. Mandel borrows from comics historian Scott McCloud, author of *Understanding Comics*, the definition of comics as "juxtaposed pictorial images in deliberate sequence intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud, 1993; Mandel, 2015). I align with Mandel on the positioning of comics as a medium that encompasses many genres such as superhero, horror, and romance, of which Holocaust representation is one, and not simply as a genre of fiction itself (Mandel, 2015).

I conducted an interview with Captain America's original writer and co-creator Joe Simon for *Wizard Magazine* in 2007 in which he told me that he and collaborator Jack Kirby conceptualized the character as a way to participate vicariously in World War II; their motivation came from the pride of being young Jewish men and their distaste for what Hitler and the Nazis were doing. The cover of *Captain America Comics #1* from 1941 literally depicts the title

character in his first appearance punching Hitler in the face, the wish-fulfillment of Simon and Kirby made manifest (Morse, 2007). This account supports the assertion from Bower (2004) that Golden Age comics served as assimilation vehicles for the Jewish creators producing them. A child of immigrant parents growing up in 1920s New York City, Kirby would also go on to help create some of the most popular characters in fiction, including Captain America, Thor, The Hulk, the X-Men, and Black Panther (Hatfield, 2011).

Bower also highlights *The Master Race*, a 1955 story illustrated by Bernard Krigstein for EC Comics' *Impact* magazine. The eight-page story depicts a man on a train reminiscing about the Holocaust, providing a summary of the events leading up to and unfolding at the concentration camps. Ultimately he is confronted by a survivor and jumps in front of a train, revealing he had in fact been a Nazi commanding the camp and was riddled with guilt and fear (Krigstein, 1955). *The Master Race* is structured to make you think the protagonist is a survivor; the reveal of his true nature is powerful and unexpected. This is very nuanced storytelling where the "bad guy" is relatable by the way his plight is framed, a clear departure from the cartoonishly villainous Nazis found in *Captain America Comics* and its contemporaries a decade earlier. This can be considered a form of "experiential critique" where the author's use of "mediated acquiescence" (Conley & Burroughs, 2020a) instructs the audience as they affectively engage with the villain through layers of storytelling--experiencing, sympathizing, and challenging perceptions of the Holocaust.

In addition to *X-Men* creators Lee and Kirby, the franchise's most prolific writer, Claremont, and the director of the 2000 *X-Men* feature film, Singer, are all Jewish Americans, as pointed out by Lawrence Baron (2003) in his article about the Jewish subtext of the movie.

Baron cites Lee and Kirby's experiences as Jews coming of age in World War II-era America and the period following as shaping their narrative in *X-Men* to push back against a fear of racism broadly and specifically antisemitism. He also notes "faith in American democracy" and the seeking of "acceptance and social mobility through assimilation" to be intrinsic to Marvel comics originated in the forties through to the sixties and even beyond. Helena Frenkil Schlam (2001) notes "feelings of Jewish anxiety" contributed to the motivation of many architects of the Marvel Comics expansions, first in the forties and later into the sixties, to create heroes who could safeguard the vulnerable and push back against threats representative of the Third Reich (Baron, 2003).

According to Bower (2004), the Holocaust became a more common topic for general discussion in the late seventies as a result of the *Holocaust* TV mini-series written by Gerald Green airing on NBC in 1978. More popular media, including comics, began featuring the Holocaust as a story element going into the eighties. In the 1980 comic *Captain America #245*, written by Roger McKenzie, an elderly Holocaust survivor named Anna Kapplebaum confronts one of her tormentors from the Diebenwald concentration camp. Both are caught in a crossfire between a famous Nazi hunter with his daughter and a group of Neo-Nazis. When presented with the opportunity to kill Doctor Menhaus, Anna hesitates, only for Marie, daughter of Nazi hunter Aaron Heller, to pull the trigger, as her father simultaneously dies of heart failure. Captain America urges Anna to "Put the gun down!" since "Murder will not solve anything!" Following Marie shooting, Captain America laments "It will never be over. Not until we learn to temper justice...with mercy" (McKenzie, 1980). The idea that heroic protagonists need to rise above terminating even repentant Nazis reflects a change in the medium of comics with an increased value placed on idealism over revenge.

Maus and the Graphic Novel

In 1980, cartoonist Art Spiegelman began *Maus*, an autobiographical account of his father's life as a Holocaust survivor based on conversations and their own relationship; the series ran in serialized form over the next 11 years as part of the magazine *Raw* before being collected as a graphic novel in 1991 (Spiegelman, 1991; Mandel, 2015). As the conceit for *Maus*, Spiegelman employs the storytelling mechanism of using anthropomorphic representations of Jews as mice, Nazis as cats, and Poles as pigs. Stripped of any false drama, *Maus* is arguably a more powerful portrayal of events surrounding the Holocaust than anything else I've read to date. The mundane tone and wealth of details make it feel very real. In 1992, *Maus* became the only graphic novel to win a Pulitzer Prize, an honor it holds to this day (Spiegelman, 1991; Mandel, 2015).

Spiegelman explains in his 2005 memoir *Breakdowns: Portrait of the Artist as a Young %@#*!* how a misguided attempt by his father to purchase “disposable” crime and horror anthologies from EC Comics in order to prove their futility instead had the opposite effect. In the eighties, as comics moved from “mass medium to fringe medium,” a “shift accompanied by a gradual narrowing of subject matter” (Jenkins, 2020, p. 4) and began to focus more on superheroes with less room for other genres, Spiegelman and his contemporaries in the independent or underground comics scene laid the groundwork for a resurgence of comics like *Maus* to reclaim that abandoned territory. Spiegelman engaged in “negotiations with potential gatekeepers” (p. 4) like scholars and bookstores to get graphic novels into the mainstream and elevated consciousness.

Furthermore, Jenkins states, “Mitchell and Spiegelman (2014) suggest a ‘tug of war between the vulgar and the genteel’ that has informed the most innovative work in the comics

medium” (Jenkins, p. 5) in works like *Maus* as well as later antecedents like Chris Ware’s *Jimmy Corrigan: The Smartest Kid on Earth* (2000), Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis* (2000), Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home* (2006) as well as John Lewis and Nate Powell’s *March* (2013), each adopting its own strategies for gaining cultural respectability while retaining what’s most vital and liberating about the comics tradition” (Jenkins, 2020, p. 5-6). Similarly, Claremont’s framing of Magneto as a Holocaust survivor expands *X-Men* beyond a superhero story. Returning to the concept of the vulgar and the genteel, Magneto in the first 18 years of his portrayal gains comic book appeal and traction as a traditional, one-dimensional bad guy carrying out evil plots in an adventure story, but Claremont’s work adds the elegance and depth of historical context. Later Pak’s *Magneto Testament* in the tradition of *Maus* is historical fiction rather than a superhero comic. In the way Jenkins uses works like *Daytripper* to examine how comics represent physical objects, *X-Men* can be used to depict how comics explore the Holocaust through the lens of Magneto’s portrayal.

The opening scene of Singer’s 2000 film adaptation flashes back to the death of Erik Lehnsherr’s family at Auschwitz, a reimagining of scenes enacted in comic books written by Claremont and others. This event sparks Lehnsherr to become the mutant leader Magneto, motivated by a determination not to allow the Holocaust to recur with his genetic brethren as victims of human prejudice (Singer, 2000). Per Baron (2003), while younger generations viewing *X-Men* in 2000 may lack a personal attachment to the Holocaust due to not having experienced it firsthand or perhaps even knowing survivors who could provide a secondhand account, the context of the movie, as with the comics, encourages the audience to relate Magneto’s struggles to those of more contemporary civil rights figures. He also pushes back against the framing of Magneto as a Holocaust survivor becoming a “supervillain” or terrorist with the alternate reading

that he is “a victim of a previous genocide who reasonably anticipates that paranoid humans will subject the mutants to the same fate European Jewry experienced during World War Two” (p. 48).

In their own viewing of Singer’s *X-Men* Oei & Short (2016) contrastingly contend that Magneto “defies the ‘victimhood’ Holocaust narrative familiar to American audiences: his origins as a Jewish American resistance figure, as an antihero, as a critique of the US government, and as a mutant all defy Americanization” (p. 1-2). They distinguish *X-Men* from other fictionalized accounts of the Holocaust in print or film like *The Diary of Anne Frank* or *Sophie’s Choice* by having a Jew taking the onus of action rather than relying on “American saviors.”

In an example of the collision between comics books and the Holocaust coming full circle from the days of Simon and Kirby, Michael Chabon’s 2000 novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* (a Pulitzer Prize recipient like *Maus*), fictionalizes two young, Jewish comic book artists breaking into comics during the 1940s in New York City. Lee Behlman (2004) explains how Chabon’s work positions its fantasy trappings to provide factual details, saying “*Kavalier & Clay* explores the use of fantasy not as a means of giving shape to the documentary facticity of the Holocaust, not as a set of stage properties surrounding the real, but as a potential means of ‘escape’ from the past” (Chabon, 2000; Behlman, 2004). Again, in Behlman’s description of Chabon’s story, we see Spiegelman’s tug of war between the vulgar fantasy and its grounding in genteel historical fact.

The earliest instances of the Holocaust being included as the impetus for the heroes’ actions in comics like *Captain America Comics* served as propaganda generated by young Jews acting out of both fear and a desire to fight back against tormentors an ocean away. With some

distance from the actual events, attempts to contextualize Holocaust fiction into a more traditional comic book framework that included a narrative drive for melodrama resulted in work ranging from the heightened tension of *The Master Race* to attempts at idealism in *Captain America #245*. It's not until Magneto's portrayal by Claremont that birthed later interpretations from Singer and Pak that we see Spiegelman's "tug of war between the vulgar and the genteel" by way of Jenkins.

As a character, Magneto blurs the boundaries between the vulgar and genteel through multiple character articulations. As a vulgar and one-dimensional super villain in his earliest appearances, he possesses the genteel qualities of being well-spoken and able to articulate his motivations even if the audience doesn't fully align with him. When Claremont makes Magneto more complex through a series of evolved iterations that encompass being a victim of the Holocaust as well as a hero--or antihero--to his own people, the character grows to be palatable even as he remains in opposition to our heroes. During Grant Morrison's *New X-Men*, discussed in detail later, the credo "Magneto Was Right" rises in the youth population of Xavier's school when they believe him martyred. The idea of "Magneto Was Right" mirrors modern acceptance of morally grey antiheroes by wide audiences; these figures, like Magneto, represent an uninhibited and ruthless approach to life that we prefer to admire from afar, mediated through texts like X-Men. Magneto blurs boundaries between the vulgar and the genteel along his anti-hero progression, melding the philosophical foundations of his actions with his Holocaust portrayal.

Ultimately, *Maus* as well as *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* highlight the ability of the comic book and superhero mediums to represent material like the Holocaust in a way that is both educational and entertaining, the true two-pronged objective at the heart of these

attempts. *Maus* is framed as a “funny animal” comic that makes the Holocaust more digestible through entertaining images, but the details conveyed are accurate and descriptive from a deeply personal account. The tension between the vulgar and the genteel is manifested through the graphic novel as media format. Magneto is grounded in the actual depiction of the Holocaust as a dominant event in his past, but the dramatic interpretation and reinterpretation of the character with visual imagery like his costume to overly loquacious speeches that philosophically justify his actions, carry him from being a simple hero or villain into more complex antihero territory.

Chapter 2: The X-Men as a Metaphor

This chapter will look at the premise of the larger X-Men franchise as a metaphor for exploring alienation and discrimination along cultural and social lines. To do so, I will look at primary texts from the comics as well as the television and film series they inspired. I will also explore literature about the metaphor extending into sexuality and religion as it moved into the eighties and nineties. The scholarly work of Andrew Miller (2003) introduces the argument that *X-Men* serves to reinforce the mythic idea of America's "melting pot" and the goal of assimilating society into a unified whole. In this chapter I look at how academics have positioned the X-Men, the pedagogical potential of the franchise in the classroom, and end with how a queer reinterpretation of the text can be of value to the gay community--also showing how this queer reading opens up potential pathways for understanding Magneto as a cultural icon.

To review, as covered earlier in this paper and reinforced by Alex Foege's 2000 New York Magazine article, the initial title featuring these characters, *The X-Men*, debuted in 1963 featuring the work of writer Stan Lee and artist Jack Kirby. The premise centered on genetic mutations and a group of "gifted" teenagers gathered by paraplegic telepath Charles Xavier with the purpose of instructing them in the use of their abilities "for the benefit of mankind...to help those who would distrust us if they knew of our existence!" (Lee, 1963; Foege, 2000) As Lee recounted during an interview for *The Archive of American Television*, "I couldn't have everybody bitten by a radioactive spider or exposed to a gamma ray explosion. And I took the cowardly way out. I said to myself, 'Why don't I just say they're mutants? They were born that way'" (Lee, 2004). In the first issue of *The X-Men*, the team thwarts "evil mutant" Magneto from taking over the Cape Citadel military base. The idea of normal humans fearing and distrusting

mutants is introduced by Professor X but not explicitly demonstrated by the men at Cape Citadel (Lee, 1963).

With 1965's issue #14 of *The X-Men* comes the introduction by Lee and Kirby of the Sentinels, robots designed by a fearful human populace to hunt mutants. The first story featuring the Sentinels would be retold by writer Kurt Busiek and painter Alex Ross in their 1994 retrospective limited series *Marvels*. The Sentinels also appeared as the featured antagonists in the pilot episode of 1992's *X-Men* animated series and in the 2014 film *X-Men: Days of Future Past*, adapted from a 1981 story in *Uncanny X-Men* by Chris Claremont and John Byrne in which the robots gain a level of sentience and conquer the United States as part of what they see as the natural extension of their programming to guard humans from mutants. In all of these stories, the Sentinels represent racial discomfort on the part of normal humans and operate as a metaphor for the persecution of minorities by the dominant race (Wells, 2014). Moving forward from the first stories featuring the Sentinels, Lee and his successors would expand the idea that the X-Men were "outsiders, hated and feared because they were mutants" (Foege, 2000).

Despite developing a cult following and addressing important issues, *The X-Men* did not achieve the commercial success of other Marvel properties and ceased publication of new material in the title following 1970's issue #66 and instead reprinted archived stories. In 1975, writer Len Wein and artist Dave Cockrum revitalized the property with *Giant-Size X-Men #1*, featuring a new team of adult mutants with an international background boasting members from Africa, Canada, Germany, Ireland, Japan, and Russia as well as a Native American representative. When *The X-Men* resumed publication with issue #94, Claremont took over from Wein as a writer, a position he would hold on the flagship title for the next 16 years. Retitled as *Uncanny X-Men* in the early-eighties, Claremont's work with artistic collaborators like Cockrum,

Byrne, and others garnered acclaim, becoming the top-selling comic book of the decade; *Uncanny X-Men* “was circulating roughly 500,000 copies a month” in 1991 when a second title, *X-Men*, launched and “sold 7.6 million copies of its first issue” (Foege, 2000; Nickerson, 2008).

While many have cited Professor X as an in-world stand-in for black civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. based on his dedication to a dream of peaceful coexistence between humans and mutants, and Magneto for the more militant Malcolm X (Godoski, 2011), Claremont himself has said he saw the characters as more comparable to Israeli political figures David Ben-Gurion and Menachem Begin, stating specifically “My view of Magneto is that he’s the terrorist who might someday evolve into a statesman” (Foege, 2000; Lynskey, 2016). Regardless, Claremont and other creators who have worked on *X-Men* in all forms of media since the late sixties acknowledge the allegory; as told to Foege by then-*X-Men* editor Mark Powers in 2000, “the X-Men’s true enemy is hate, which is something that’s never going to go away” (Foege, 2000).

In addition to establishing Magneto as a Holocaust survivor and introducing Jewish teenager Kitty Pryde as a point of view character for *Uncanny X-Men*, Claremont would tell stories that stretched the title’s analogy involving mutants as minorities to religious groupings like Jews and other marginalized populations including the gay community. *X-Men: God Loves, Man Kills*, written by Claremont with art by Brent Anderson as the fifth in the *Marvel Graphic Novel* line of books in 1982, introduced the character of Reverend William Stryker, a preacher advocating for the persecution of mutants as abominations in the eyes of God. Stryker would later be repurposed as a military scientist fighting for similar ends in the 2003 film *X2*. In 1985’s *Uncanny X-Men* issue #200 by Claremont and artist John Romita Jr., Magneto stands trial for his past crimes before an international body and direct allusions are made to the Nuremberg trials as

the only precedent for such a proceeding. During the issue prior, Magneto and Kitty visit a Holocaust Memorial where the reformed “evil mutant” describes his motivation as wanting to save mutants from the fate that befell the Jews and the two bond over their shared experiences which includes the younger character revealing a great-aunt who died in Auschwitz (Miller, 2003).

Miller notes in his article examining what the X-Men stand for that mutants serve as easily identifiable for teenage readers in particular due to their divergence occurring at the onset of puberty and the alienation from their family and community that occurs as a result. Per Miller, “[the X-Men] find comfort with others who are alienated and get together and save the world” and “find the control over their lives that many adolescents feel they lack” (Miller, 2003). In an interview included as part of the 1985 book *The Comic Book Heroes*, Claremont describes *X-Men* as “a story about downtrodden, repressed people fighting to change their situation, which I think anybody can empathize with” (Jacobs & Jones, 1985).

In 1994, Anne Haas Dyson conducted a qualitative study framed as a critical analysis surveying students in the second grade class of an urban San Francisco elementary school. As the basis for the study an activity in the class called “Author’s Theater” had the children writing and acting out popular culture stories as a group. The selection of the stories was based on their own experiences as well as entertainment media they found popular. With *X-Men: The Animated Series* in the midst of its run on the Fox network as Saturday morning programming, Dyson found many members of the class selecting the X-Men characters as the cast of their stories and observed how their reactions and decisions reflected feelings on power and gender specifically (Dyson, 1994). Connell (1996) and Schrock (2009) are among the academics who cite Dyson’s

study in their own work on the construction of masculine identities through childhood development.

Per Dyson's observations, while most of the children were familiar with the X-Men from the popularity of the television show, in particular, the suggestion to use these characters originated mostly with male students from lower-middle-class backgrounds but was accepted by females and those from stricter middle-class families whose parents discouraged this form of entertainment. Dyson also observed that the class shifted in their Author's Theater subject matter from an initial focus on the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* cartoon over to *X-Men* due to the former having only one dominant female character, April O'Neil, a supporting cast member without true agency, while the latter included Jean Grey, Rogue, and Storm as options for the girls to play. The students noted that in *X-Men* the women were "as strong as men." Dyson adds that "X-Men stories emphasize mental as well as physical strength" personified by wheelchair-bound team leader Professor X (Dyson, 1994).

A source of conflict in the students constructing their Author's Theater X-Men stories came from romantic relationships shown in the cast; for example, while many children gravitated to Rogue and Gambit as characters, they would abandon the roles after being teased by their peers by the pair's flirtatious dynamic on the show (Dyson, 1994). The fact that the use of the *X-Men* cartoon forced these students to confront adult issues aligns with a central focus for this chapter: *X-Men* can be a valuable teaching tool for children in particular who have yet to be exposed to topics like adult relationships in this case, or the Holocaust when it comes to Magneto.

In the ultimate X-Men story composed by two girls for Author's Theater, the "superhero teams were dominated by women of color who, nonetheless, served with men and women of

different races. Moreover, power itself was tempered with human fragility: people fought, became tired, grieved, and died” (Dyson, 1994). Dyson observed that when telling stories using the X-Men characters, children were more likely to embrace a diversity of gender as well as race” and concludes “As educators, we must, I believe, help children discover the ways in which their reading and writing of each other limits their collective possibilities and prevents the play from going on” (Dyson, 1994).

In her 2011 paper discussing the comic *Astonishing X-Men* by Joss Whedon and John Cassaday as a vehicle for progressive feminism, Molly Louise Sharp constructs the case that the 2004 series mentioned “provides an example of how norms in the mainstream superhero comic book medium, which scholars have criticized as sexist, can be reworked for a new generation of feminists” (Sharp, 2011). While Whedon has become a problematic figure in recent years due to scandals accusing the author of racism and misogyny, his primary body of work, including the television show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and indeed *Astonishing X-Men*, remains a dominant text for feminists. Sharp cites the characters of Kitty Pryde and Emma Frost as well as the villain Danger as examples of “third wave feminism” (Sharp, 2011). Sharp draws attention to the malleability of texts such as the X-Men and their ability to traverse boundaries such as gender, race, and age in popular culture.

In further examining the potency of *X-Men* as a text, Miller (2003) delves into the idea that the team mirrors America’s melting pot mentality, particularly from *Giant-Size X-Men* forward where a group of immigrants come together and “give up parts of their individual ethnic traits, converting to the more Eurocentric ideals of American society” (p. 288). Significantly, Storm, a mixed-race African-American born of a Kenyan mother and a father from the United States, first appears in *Giant-Size X-Men* not wearing clothing and being worshipped as a

goddess by tribal natives; she divests her status as a would-be deity and adapts to more traditional garb in order to become a member in good standing of the X-Men (Wein, 1975). Storm's arc over the course of the next several years under Claremont furthers her integration into the team's Eurocentric ideal, rewarding her with close relationships and "professional" success as field leader of the team, but at the cost of her cultural individuality. In 1983, under the visual guidance of then-*Uncanny X-Men* artist Paul Smith and at the behest of the book's editor Louise Simonson, Storm shed the remaining vestiges of her African heritage by adapting a mohawk hairstyle and black leather ensemble in the vein of an American punk rock star (Cronin, 2017).

Conversely, Sunfire, a Japanese mutant who also joins the team in *Giant-Size X-Men*, leaves in the very next installment with his fierce nationalism trumping any other obligations. Sunfire would never return to the X-Men as a long-term operative outside of stories set in alternative realities. As Miller puts it, "Those who cannot let go of their ethnicity have no place on the team" (Miller, 2003).

I agree with Miller that part of the X-Men's vitality as a franchise lies in its "reaffirmation of one of our greatest American myths, that of the melting pot" (Miller, 2003). While the idealism expressed by Claremont of the "downtrodden" finding camaraderie in a diverse group echoes the story of the immigrant in America, so does the sublimation of native cultures in order to create an improvised family unit. In this, *X-Men* serves not just as an allegory for minority groups based on race, religion, and sexuality, but as a metaphor writ large for the American experience. As Miller puts it, "It is overly idealistic and certainly mythic, but it has been part of American culture since the beginning, and the X-Men will probably be part of that culture for years to come" in describing the larger "melting pot" analogy (Miller, 2003).

Michael Lecker speaks to his personal experiences as a queer youth looking for “positive and diverse representation in the media” and reinterpreting *X-Men* to this end. He defines the X-Men as “a group of people who were born slightly different than the rest of the world” (Lecker, 2007). In his reinterpretation he specifically refers to early issues of the 1985 *X-Factor* comic, the comic book limited series *X-Men: Children of the Atom* from 1999, the 2000 and 2003 films *X-Men* and *X2*, and finally the nineties *X-Men: The Animated Series* cartoon.

Lecker felt “an academic queer reading of the X-Men has never been done” as of his own work in 2007, criticizing two prior attempts as insufficient in drawing “the many connections between the queer and mutant experiences, or why queer readers would be drawn to X-Men texts more than to other comic book texts” (Lecker, 2007). He applies Eve Sedgwick’s theory of queer reading in which she contends the seriousness of adolescent interpretation to lie in a queer youth’s lack of confidence or clarity in their own sexuality. Texts such as *X-Men* can be valuable to the development of a young person struggling with sexual identity. Citing Dr. Robert E. Owens Jr.’s book *Queer Kids*, Lecker notes the prominence of negative or limiting stereotypes in media when it comes to the portrayal of queer role models.

In describing why *X-Men* is “conducive to queer readings,” Lecker specifically writes about the parallel between mutant powers and a sense of queer identity emerging around puberty, but also that mutants possess greater physical power and that older mutants like Professor X seek out youth and guide them to adulthood. “In the fictional world of the X-Men, queer youth find an ideal place where the well-adjusted, adult, oppressed minorities take care of the younger and frightened members” (Lecker, 2007). In this Lecker is saying that a queer reader can find the X-Men sympathetic but also aspirational.

Lecker examines 1985's *X-Factor #1* and the sequence in which a teenage mutant, Rusty Collins, rejects the sexual advances of a prostitute and unwittingly triggers his pyrokinetic abilities, lighting her on fire. Further, he describes the 1992 and 2000 parallel scenes from *X-Men: The Animated Series* and the *X-Men* film in which Rogue speaks about her abilities placing her boyfriend into a coma upon physical contact. Lecker notes that both instances for the young mutants "occur during their teenage years and at times of high sexual emotions, paralleling the realization of difference for queer youth" (Lecker, 2007).

Returning to Owens, Lecker says that most mutants in *X-Men*, like the majority of queer youth, find their difference from others to be "a naturally occurring phenomenon" rather than a choice they are making (Lecker, 2007). As mutants acquire their abilities through genetics rather than by accident like Spider-Man or consciously like Batman, there's a greater kinship to queer youth confronting confusing feelings. Lecker also contrasts Owens' contention of reluctance by queer individuals to fully accept their identity at first with a moment from *Children of the Atom* wherein Charles Xavier exhorts Bobby Drake, whose mutant power has just manifested uncontrollably, "Acceptance of what you are is the first step" (Casey, 2000). Continuing to refer to Owens as well as *Children of the Atom* and *X-Factor*, Lecker lays out several scenarios of self-hatred and isolation by mutant characters like Rusty and members of the X-Men, again noting the similarities between this and the experience of queer youth.

Ultimately, Lecker concludes that the portrayal in *X-Men* of mutants as the empowered heroes and villains of their stories lends an empowering message to queer youth learning to cope with feeling different from their societal peers. "In the queer youth's everyday life, the battle for a solid positive identity seems like an uphill battle, but the X-Men provide identification with a minority who defeats the majority, who despises and seeks to destroy them" (Lecker, 2007). He

specifically names Magneto and his portrayals in television, comic books, and film as a character preaching the superiority of this disenfranchised group and their noble destiny.

Going back to Sedgwick and Owens, Lecker finishes by advocating the need for guidance by the larger queer community to their youth, who often grow up without positive examples to model themselves after. A queer reading of *X-Men* and equating the battle for civil rights to be one in which they are engaging can help to bolster and guide these adolescents. “In a world where queer youth are starving for positive representation, the X-Men provide empowering and heroic images” (Lecker, 2007).

I agree with Lecker that *X-Men* does lend to a queer reading in the same way it can be read along racial or religious lines. The commonality is that a persecuted sect of society bands together and finds ways to overcome challenges by working together. In this regard, *X-Men* can be seen as a valuable teaching tool for young people. There are parallels to be drawn between Lecker’s queer reading of X-Men and the particular value of Magneto as a vehicle for Holocaust understanding and civic education. Lecker’s point of view shows X-Men opening up a space where differences are celebrated and the young and vulnerable are protected by suitable and reliable mentors. Magneto’s story as a Holocaust victim who overcomes this persecution to become a powerful advocate for his people also demonstrates a positive role model to others, particularly young people, suffering alienation based on a number of factors, from their emerging sexuality to their religious beliefs. However, the X-Men and Magneto do not need to only be a metaphor for racial inequality or queer orientation, they can be both at once, as well as encompassing any other form of marginalization.

Chapter 3: The Evolution of Magneto

This chapter will establish who Magneto is as a character, the changes made to the character's motivations, and his portrayal as a Holocaust survivor who is scarred by the experience, now actively seeking justice. The interplay between the vulgar and the genteel told through Magneto and the media form of comics and the graphic novel, opens up a space for thinking through the Holocaust. I will look at Magneto's earliest appearances in which he was more of a traditional "bad guy," and how that changed in later stories largely written by Chris Claremont during his metamorphosis into an antihero. I do an extensive analysis of *X-Men: Magneto - Testament*, the 2008 series by Greg Pak which, for the first time in comic book form, explores the events of the Holocaust and Magneto/Max's upbringing in detail. Additionally, I will discuss Magneto's portrayal in film, specifically in Bryan Singer's initial 2000 *X-Men* film (which opened with a flashback to Auschwitz that in likelihood was the first exposure of many audiences to the idea of Magneto as Jew and Holocaust survivor). To a lesser degree I will talk about Brett Ratner's *X-Men: The Last Stand* and Matthew Vaughn's *X-Men: First Class*, which both reinforce the background established by Singer. While the texts themselves are the main source of content for this chapter, I will also touch on the scholarly work of Baron and Kelley.

As noted earlier, Magneto makes his first appearance in the first issue of 1963's *The X-Men* by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby which also introduces the concept of the team, as well as his counterpart, Charles Xavier (aka Professor X). Magneto is referred to explicitly as an "evil mutant" bent on conquering the world on behalf of the mutant race of which he is a part. Magneto drives the action of this initial story by invading the Cape Citadel military base and seeking to assert his power, which puts him into conflict with the X-Men. The motivation for Magneto here is a lust for power and an attitude of expressed mutant fitness to rule the planet

which is not totally divorced from Nazi philosophy; the character is not identified as a Jew or Holocaust survivor in his earliest appearances. Both Magneto and Angel, a member of the X-Men, use the term “homo sapiens” as a means of disparaging humans, in comparison to mutants or “homo superior.” The crux of the character can be summed up from his statement “The human race no longer deserves dominion over the planet Earth! The day of the mutants is upon us!” (Lee, 1963). Some of Magneto’s villainous exploits in the early days of *X-Men* and through other appearances in comics like *Avengers* and *Fantastic Four* include conquering a fictional South American country to establish a mutants-only state ruled by him and his allies (Lee, 1964) as well as launching an unprovoked attack on New York City by manipulating Atlantean dignitary Namor into declaring war (Lee 1970), the vulgar actions of a traditional antagonist. Even as late as *Uncanny X-Men #150*, Claremont attempts to accentuate the genteel side of the character, he sinks a Russian submarine and kills its crew, albeit purportedly in self-defense (Claremont, 1981).

Per Brian Cronin (2018), we would not learn of Magneto’s Jewish heritage or his experiences in Auschwitz until 18 years following his initial appearance with the publication of 1981’s *Uncanny X-Men #150* written by Claremont with art by Dave Cockrum. Claremont had begun to add layers of sympathy to the character of Magneto prior to this by revealing he had a late wife named Magda (para. 7-12). However, *Uncanny X-Men #150* marks the beginning of Claremont’s quest to redeem Magneto in earnest, fleshing out his motivation in the early pages of the issue as self-preservation and protecting his people rather than simply seeking power. Magneto argues that his actions will “offer a golden age, the like of which humanity has never imagined” with “the money and energy devoted now to war...turned instead to the eradication of hunger, disease, poverty” (Claremont, 1981).

Despite lamenting violence, Magneto still kills in *Uncanny X-Men* #150 by sinking a Russian submarine that threatens him. After thinking he has killed teenage X-Man Kitty Pryde, Magneto makes mention of his past: “I remember my own childhood--the gas chambers [at] Auschwitz, the guards joking as they herded my family to their death, as our lives were so beneath them, so human lives became nothing to me” (Claremont, 1981). In his final words to Storm, Magneto proclaims regret: “I believed so much in my destiny, in my own personal vision, that I was prepared to pay any price, make any sacrifice to achieve it...In my zeal to remake the world, I have become like those I have always hated and despised” (Claremont, 1981). This is a far more nuanced approach to the ramification of the Holocaust than work discussed earlier in this paper like *Captain America Comics* or even *The Master Race*. Magneto owns his feelings but also recognizes his mistakes. Talking to Dorian Lynskey of *Empire* magazine, Claremont described Magneto’s story as “an evolving 150-issue arc” that takes the character from “angry, anti-human, pro-mutant terrorist” to a self-realizing former victim who must confront his own origins (Lynskey, 2016).

In the wake of *Uncanny X-Men* #150, a story published the next year in issue #161 is a reframing of the Xavier/Magneto dynamic that has been at the heart of the series. Xavier still represents idealism and the hope that the events of the Holocaust can avoid being repeated, but while Magneto remains in opposition, Claremont gives credence to his feelings and where they originate. In a flashback to their first meeting, Xavier recalls teaming up with Magneto against a Nazi war criminal to save Gabrielle Haller, a survivor of the Dachau concentration camp. Their opposing views of mutant-human co-existence versus mutants defending their right to life through force, shaped by Magneto’s experiences in Auschwitz, metastasize quickly. Magneto is positioned as an ally and friend to Xavier, the consummate hero of *X-Men*, albeit one whose

experiences have shaped his outlook in a way that makes him skeptical and untrusting.

Claremont has begun the deliberate process of threading the genteel into the fabric of Magneto's character.

Magneto's past is made more explicit in *Uncanny X-Men* #161 where we see the numbers of his Holocaust identification tattooed on his arm as he states that he "grew up" in Auschwitz. Xavier's colleague notes that the volunteers at this hospital for Holocaust survivors, like Magnus--the "real" name given to Magneto for the first time here--"were in camps...They bring a degree of empathy to their work that the rest of us can't match" (Claremont, 1982). Magnus confronts Baron Strucker, a Nazi war criminal from the *Nick Fury* series serving as the story's antagonist, and expresses regret his powers did not manifest when he was a child: "By then, the war was over. But had I possessed it in the camps, butcher, your Third Reich would have been ended overnight." Strucker, defiant, responds, "*Nein!* You might have destroyed *Deutschland [sic]*--you may now destroy me--but our ideals, our great purpose, will live on after us, and it will **prevail!**" This emboldens Magnus to swear he will not let mutants suffer as Jews did. In his final exchange of the issue with Xavier, Magnus says, "You are far too trusting, Charles, too naive. You have faith in the essential goodness of man. In time, you will learn what I have learned--that even those you love will turn from you in horror when they discover what you truly are. Mutants will not go meekly to the gas chambers. We will fight...and we will win! Farewell" (Claremont, 1982).

1985's *Uncanny X-Men* #200 sees Magneto stand trial for his past crimes with Haller and Xavier defending him in court. Many parallels and insights into how Magneto's Holocaust experiences and whether those mollify his actions are made throughout. Fenris, the twin children of Strucker from issue #161, are the antagonists as the trial goes on. On page one of the story,

Magneto is likened to Hitler but also framed as “both liberator and hero” (Claremont, 1985). Direct allusions are made to the Nuremberg trials as the only precedent for such a proceeding. In this regard, Magneto is again framed as a criminal, but over the course of the issue, his reformation and justification continue to be highlighted. In allowing himself to be tried, Magneto distinguishes himself from the Nazis as he has remorse for his actions. The prosecution argues “I have seen no death camps, heard no reports of genocide...if prejudice exists, there are means within society to combat it” to oppose Magneto’s use of a cause (Claremont, 1985).

In one of her statements, Gaby says, “Recent history, however, is full of accused, and admitted terrorists--thieves and murderers--whom the international community later accepted, even welcomed as statesmen” as well as “Should a person who acts for a cause be judged by the same standard as one who acts from greed? And if the cause is just, what then of the deeds committed in its name?” In speaking with Kitty Pryde, Gaby relates her family’s experience, “It’s easy to run away--or give up, as my parents did. They were lucky, They died in Bergen-Belsen. For them, the pain ended quickly. They’ve no memories to haunt them, no more fears. But we who survived have a duty to make certain the Holocaust *never* happens again to anyone!” (Claremont, 1985, emphasis in original). This is the heart of Magneto’s justification and development from villain to antihero.

In his own defense, Magneto gives a lengthy speech: “My dream, from the start, has been the protection and preservation of my own kind, mutants. To spare them the fate my family suffered in Auschwitz” (Claremont, 1985). As with Gaby’s earlier statement, Magneto’s actions are justified by taking any means necessary to spare his people another Holocaust, straddling the line between the vulgarity of violence and a brand of genteel atonement. By the issue’s end,

Magneto has saved human lives and volunteered to take the mantle of Xavier's dream, his redemption in some regards complete.

From a short story included in 1987's *Classic X-Men #12* by Claremont and artist John Bolton comes the most graphic depiction of Magneto in Auschwitz to date. Magneto recalls his time in the concentration camp as well as fleeing to a new life with his love, Magda. They settle in the Soviet Union where they are again ostracized, ultimately leading to the emergence of his powers but failure to save their daughter, Anya, from a fire. Magneto is once again faced with the reality of his inability to protect those he cherishes--his own fragility and human trappings despite his mutant abilities and identity. In the present day, Magneto saves a woman and her child from a burning building, preventing the fate of his own family from befalling them. This story is heavily focused on humanizing the character of Magneto through his relationship with Magda and the loss of his daughter.

By 1991, Magneto had abandoned his role as a surrogate to Xavier's dream and leading the X-Men, not returning entirely to his earlier posture, but distancing himself from even the antihero role. In *X-Men #1*, again written by Claremont with art by Jim Lee, Magneto is playing the isolationist, secluding himself in outer space away from human affairs. It is the arrival of the Acolytes, a group of mutant zealots who hold up Magneto as their ideal, that motivates him to return to Earth and resume his cause. At the end of the issue, Magneto declares: "All my life, I have seen people slaughtered wholesale for no more reason than the deity they worshipped, or the color of their skin--or the presence in their DNA of an extra, special gene. I cannot change the world but I can--and will--ensure that my race will never again suffer for its fear and prejudice." With this, he offers his Asteroid M space satellite as a sovereign haven, inviting other mutants to take up his isolationist posture, threatening, "But mark this and mark it well--harm

against any mutant is harm done to me. And I shall respond accordingly” (Claremont, 1991). Claremont is attempting to situate a Magneto between his earliest incarnations and the more recent heroic interpretations.

The opening three-issue arc of *X-Men* in 1991 would be Claremont’s final work on the franchise for nearly a decade as he pursued other creative ventures. The story’s end saw Magneto betrayed by one of his “Acolytes” and then seemingly sacrificing his life to save the remainder of the group from the destruction of Asteroid M. Writers who followed Claremont during the nineties did not do away with Magneto’s past, but brought him back and used him in a more traditional role as the X-Men’s enemy.

Magneto Was Right?

Significantly, beginning in 2001, acclaimed Scottish writer Grant Morrison launched *New X-Men*, with the title replacing *X-Men*, and embarked on a nearly three-year run that would reframe the franchise in general and Magneto specifically. At the conclusion of his first issue, *New X-Men* #114, new villain Cassandra Nova leads a Sentinel attack on the mutant haven of Genosha, led at the time by Magneto, that leaves him and the entire population slaughtered in an act of genocide. Under Morrison, Magneto, in death, achieves a level of influence as a martyr beyond what he accomplished in life and is at the face of the anti-human movement. Characters and settings throughout *New X-Men* are adorned with “Magneto Was Right” iconography.

In *New X-Men* #132, a group that includes Xavier, Magneto’s son Quicksilver, and the Israeli hero Sabra investigate the remains of Genosha. Sabra refers to Magneto as “a Master-Race lunatic who coerced the entire Genoshan mutant population into a war with humanity and brought this on himself.” Magneto’s former lackey, Toad, tells Professor X, “You

know all Magneto ever wanted, Xavier? He wanted you to admit that human beings were murderous scum. He only ever wanted you to admit he was right” (Morrison, 2002). The X-Men intercept Magneto’s last words, which he left in audio recording form:

“This is the voice of Magneto. This is the voice of the Genoshan nation. It’s a strange thing to die in the darkness. It’s a strange thing to die. I was Magneto, the master of magnetic forces. Now I will be a voice in the darkness, echoing forever. Once, I was a mortal man. Now I am becoming memory, immortal. They must have thought they could silence us forever. Instead, we have become magnetic. Unstoppable. Do you understand? Our voices will be broadcast around the world...into space. At the speed of light. At the speed of radio. Our voices traveling without end through the depths of time and space. Beyond this life. And far, far...beyond this death” (Morrison, 2002).

As these words are playing, Quicksilver, Magneto’s estranged son, is helping his remaining followers transform the husk of a Sentinel, one of the robots that destroyed Genosha, into an effigy of his father.

“Planet X,” the five-issue penultimate arc of Morrison’s *New X-Men* drawn by Phil Jimenez, reveals Magneto to have faked his own death and infiltrated the X-Men as the masked Xorn in order to further manipulate events toward his pro-mutant agenda. As “Xorn,” Magneto has been teaching a “special” class of “sensitive and traumatized” students and developing them into his new followers, indoctrination that feels very reminiscent of Hitler Youth. Revealing his true identity, Magneto tells Xavier, “You’ve had it all to yourself for too long and nothing much has changed...has it Charles? Without guidance, without an effective creed, I’ve watched your ‘dream’ run rampant, watched discipline fail” (Morrison, 2003). Magneto’s comments here move him closer to the “Master-Race lunatic” described by Sabra, positioning mutants as a dominant species akin to the Nazis rather than a victimized minority in the vein of the Jews.

In the subsequent four issues of *New X-Men* from Morrison and Jimenez, Magneto conquers New York City and begins the subjugation of its human population. Magneto's underage lover, Esme, tells him the unmoved populace "want to see the world's most charismatic terrorist at the height of his powers" (Morrison, 2003). He begins to struggle, using enhancement drugs to maintain his vitality while his followers begin to lose patience with him. The Magneto of this arc seems like an echo of late Hitler, a formerly compelling, charismatic figure who is losing touch with his base and descending into addiction.

The opening scenes of *New X-Men* #149, awash in grey, depicts humanity being herded like cattle to be exterminated. If the evocation of the Holocaust wasn't evident enough, young mutant Beak asks Magneto, "...when did we all turn into such total Nazis?" and he replies "Nazis? Do I look like a failed artist with a neurotic grudge against his father and the world?" Though he rails against Hitler comparisons, it's clear Magneto has become the monster that tormented his youth. Continuing the argument, Beak tells Magneto, "There is nothing new about people marching into the ovens" and his lover Angel adds, "Yeah, I don't know if I really want my kids growing up to be Imperial Stormtroopers." Magneto continues to justify his actions claiming, "I'll do whatever it takes to save mutantkind" (Morrison, 2003).

Morrison's Magneto is both a push back against the heroic Claremont model, but also a critique of his philosophy. While Claremont and others framed the character's actions as almost romantic, Morrison shows the ends do not necessarily justify the means. When Esme turns on Magneto, attacking him and calling him "a fossil," he kills her by jabbing her earrings into her brain. In the aftermath of killing Esme, struggling to justify his actions, he says "May the future forgive me. May history judge my actions, great or small. In the final reckoning...when I have

given them paradise and the world is free...these poor dead will not seem so many” (Morrison, 2003).

Magneto is in paranoid overdrive during “Planet X” trying to frame himself as the hero. When the crowd of onlookers won’t even acknowledge him as Magneto, Professor X tells his old friend, “...the worst thing you ever did was to come back, Erik. Magneto had become a legend in death, an inspiration for change. Now look at you--just another foolish and self-important old man, with outdated thoughts in his head. You have nothing this new generation of mutants wants...except for your face on a T-shirt” (Morrison, 2003). In the story, younger mutants embrace the ideal of what Magneto ostensibly stands for, but they’re not willing to take action, and on some level, neither is he.

In their essay examining Morrison’s *New X-Men* and how he framed the franchise in a post-9/11 culture, Eric Garneau and Maura Foley (2014) argue that Magneto’s tactics in “Planet X” “don’t hold up” as mutants during Morrison’s run have become trendy instead of marginalized, celebrated by the human population. Garneau and Foley compare Magneto in “Planet X” to President Bush in the days following 9/11, attempting to drum up support for the War on Terror by using “us vs them” framing. They contend that in the same way Bush was unable to maintain a “culture of fear” when it became clear the larger Muslim community “couldn’t be painted with a wide brush,” Magneto’s agenda fails because he does not understand “that mutant culture has reached a place where it cannot be encapsulated by a single idea anymore” (Garneau & Foley, 2014).

Garneau and Foley cite Morrison from his own book, *Supergods*: “[Magneto] had depth and dignity, so I turned him into a demented drug addict, unable to connect with a younger generation of mutants who only wanted his face on their Magneto Was Right T-shirts, like a

latter-day Che Guevara” (Morrison, 2011; Garneau & Foley, 2014). In this case, the argument that Magneto’s actions are justified by his own suffering as a victim of the Holocaust is trumped by his lack of self-recognition that he has lost touch as the facile puppetry of populist persecution and is perpetuating the same cycle as his tormentors. In this way, Magneto is pushed to his vulgar extremes--replicating the same inhumane genocide as his own warped version of restorative justice.

Only months after Morrison’s “Planet X” story in *New X-Men*, Marvel walked back his take on Magneto, establishing the figure who acted as a terrorist in New York as an imposter in the first two issues of the 2004 *Excalibur* volume written once more by Claremont. In conversation with Xavier, Magneto goes out of his way to emphasize the actions of the faux figure as being not in keeping with his philosophy as refined by Claremont and others previously (Claremont, 2004). Claremont is brought back to realign Magento’s ethical equilibrium, once again recentring him as a character who can speak to both the vulgar and the genteel. In the ensuing 17 years following “Planet X,” Magneto has occurred more often as an uneasy ally of the X-Men rather than their outright enemy, and his tactics have never mirrored those displayed by the Morrison incarnation.

Testament

In 2008, Marvel published *X-Men: Magneto Testament*, a five-issue series, written by Greg Pak with art by Carmine Di Giandomenico, telling in-depth for the first time the story of Magneto’s upbringing and experiences during the Holocaust and at Auschwitz. I was on staff at Marvel during the time of this publication and was close with the book’s editors, Warren Simons and Alejandro Arbona, as well as with Pak. In his afterword to the first issue, Pak credits past

writers like Claremont with creating Magneto's background but also notes that there have been "contradictory" accounts in different comics and that the goal of *Testament* was to give a concrete story "based on research into the actual historical record" that deals "with this unfathomably harrowing material in a way that's honest, unflinching, and human" (Pak, 2008).

In the first issue of *Testament*, a young Jewish boy named Max Eisenhardt struggles in Nazi-dominated 1935 Germany. We meet Max's family, his father, mother, uncle, and sister, a first for a Magneto story despite it coming 45 years after his first appearance. At school, he is tormented by both his peers and instructors, his romantic interest in another Jew, Magda, mocked by the other students, and his athletic performance decried by the headmaster. Max earns a gold medal for the javelin throw, but when its legitimacy is questioned, his reward is taken back. When Max is asked to replicate his feat with a "regulation javelin," he fails to do so, the implication being he deliberately falls short, heeding the advice of his Jewish teacher not to stand out in the wake of his uncle being beaten for sexual relations with a German woman. Interspersed with visuals of a Nazi parade and Max's uncle being forced to wear a sign reading "I have shamed a German woman," is a textual explanation of the Nuremberg Laws. Max is expelled for supposedly having cheated the first time and then assaulted by German classmates who use the medal in question as their weapon of choice.

The situation worsens for Max and his family. Max's father attempts to solicit aid from an old military colleague but is turned away. Kristallnacht, the organized massacre of Jews by German soldiers carried out on November 9-10 in 1938 and also called the "Night of Broken Glass," forces Max's family to flee their home and seek refuge in Poland. As far as character development, Pak lays the groundwork that Max/Magneto is fiercely protective of "his people" (in this case his family) and will fight back even when it might not be the wisest move as

demonstrated when he gets into an altercation with former classmates who mock his foraging in the garbage. Max's uncle Erich cautions him against fighting back. Forced into the Warsaw ghetto, Max comes of age over the "killing winter of 1941," smuggling food to his parents and ailing sister. When the family attempts to escape, they are captured and shot by Nazi officers, with only Max surviving (the implication being he used his nascent powers to stop the bullets). The recurring theme is that Max wants to fight against his tormentors but members of his family and other mentors caution him of the ramifications for him and those he loves. This builds pretty significantly to the character arc we'll see from Magneto later on.

Max endures the horrors of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp, paying witness to the slaughter of "at least a quarter million dead human beings" including his old teacher, Kalb, who initially tries to save him from being committed to the Sonderkommando, a work unit of interned Jews. Following Kalb's death, a despondent Max is reunited with Magda in the camp. Max learns not to trust the word of his tormentors, and, as seen in his diary, he is becoming increasingly frustrated at his inability to save others (Kalb, the other boy, etc.). In the final issue, Max prepares to participate in a Sonderkommando revolt at Auschwitz while also attempting to save Magda. Ultimately, the couple uses the cover of the uprising to escape. In a postscript, Max writes a letter to any who encounters it urging them to prevent this from ever happening again.

When the Sonderkommando members are debating whether or not to go through with the revolt in *Testament* issue #5, Max says:

"On Kristallnacht, my father wanted to fight. But then the Nazis might have killed the whole family. In the ghetto, I could have gutted a Nazi murderer. But then they would have killed a hundred Jews in retaliation. Two months ago, I could have pushed the Hauptscharfuhrer into the fire pit. But then they would have

killed the rest of my work crew. So to save everyone, I did nothing. And guess what? They killed them all anyway” (Pak, 2009).

This is very much the arc of the series: Max attempting to save the people around him through inaction despite his desire to fight back and ultimately realizing its futility and his inherent fragility. These are the building blocks of Magneto’s character and mission. The only thing more important to Magneto than his cause is his people. When given the opportunity to flee, he does so to save Magda’s life even if it means abandoning the revolt.

Testament differs from more straightforward historical fiction like *Maus* in that there’s nothing mundane about the portrayal of the horrors, everything is dramatized and heightened yet rooted in the historical realities of Holocaust victims. In the afterward to the last issue, Pak writes, “Very special thanks are due to writer Chris Claremont, who had the inspiration almost thirty years ago to give Magneto a history as a Holocaust survivor. In particular, by making Magneto a Sonderkommando and Magda a Gypsy, Claremont provided a way for a mainstream super-hero comic book to introduce thousands of readers to critical but sometimes less well-known aspects of Holocaust history” (Pak, 2009). Claremont’s work, in the eyes of Pak, fulfills Spiegelman’s promise of using a vulgar medium like superhero comics to approach a genteel subject, a pattern he would follow with *Testament*.

In a 2010 article for the *Sequential Art Narrative in Education* journal in which he argues the scholarly value of *Magneto: Testament*, Brian Kelley makes a strong case for implementation of the text in educating students about the Holocaust. Among the strengths and unique characteristics he attributes to *Testament*, Kelley touts Carmine Di Giandomenico’s art as capturing sensitive and brutal moments without ascribing the usual physical beautification of figures seen in other superhero comics. Kelley also relates *Testament* to *Maus*, not denigrating the latter work but noting the use of human characters rather than cartoon animals for the former

can be effective in helping students to connect with the protagonists and their struggle. Kelley feels that *Testament* can be an aid to struggling students in learning about the Holocaust by presenting it in a form couched by compelling action and art through a medium like comics which has proven particularly relatable to younger audiences.

Both Morrison on *New X-Men* and Pak with *Testament* honor the core of Magneto as a complex character with several layers of motivation for his action. Where they differ is their assessment of the work primarily done by Claremont. While Morrison's "Magneto-as-aging-terrorist" take possesses some degree of independence as a concept, it's very much the natural evolution of the villain Lee and Kirby introduced in 1963 dropped into a post-9/11 landscape. *New X-Men* largely writes off the broadening of Magneto under Claremont and others, reverting him to an anti-human antagonist divorced from the depth of his desire to avert another Holocaust; while Morrison's Magneto alludes to a desire to protect his people, it's also clear that power is a huge motivator in and of itself. This iteration of Magneto's trudge through vulgarity isn't balanced by the genteel, but provides a fleshing out of the vulgar possibilities for "Magneto was Right" adherents--not some flippant evil force easily dismissed, but an antihero with a challenging philosophical worldview pushed to the ugliest extremes. Herein, the vulgarity of Morrison's Magneto is given an injection of jostling bite, leading audiences through the trauma of being constituted as wounded "pained publics" (Conley & Burroughs, 2020b). This vulgar anchoring of Magneto, however, does allow for Pak to realize the complexity of Magneto's gentility.

As Pak himself states in the book's afterword, *Testament* is far more reverential toward the work of Claremont. In telling the story of Max and rendering Magneto as a very vulnerable and, ironically, human figure, Pak provides a basis for how Claremont handled the character.

Whereas Morrison attempts to revert Magneto to an advanced version of his original iteration, Pak provides scaffolding for the reinvention of the character as a fully formed antihero. Morrison's interpretation has its own worth as an affective, intense Magneto embodying his trauma. Pak and Claremont, however, reinscribe the vulgar with genteel values, a Magneto with a range of good intentions based on his past, which provides a rich narrative beyond simply a power-hungry villain.

As noted earlier, director Bryan Singer chose to open his 2000 film interpretation of *X-Men* with a scene of young Magneto in Auschwitz attempting in vain to save his family from Nazis. While the movie predated *Testament* by nearly a decade, both pay credence to the Claremont interpretation of the character. While Magneto, as played by actor Ian McKellan, ostensibly functions as the antagonist of *X-Men*, his initial introduction builds a sympathetic case for his actions and their motivators. Brett Ratner's 2006 *X-Men: The Last Stand*, released shortly after Morrison's tenure on *New X-Men*, returns Magneto to the role of the primary enemy to the titular heroes, but it proves a short-lived direction. By 2011 and *X-Men: First Class*, a reboot of the franchise set during the team's early days in the 1960s, director Matthew Vaughn chooses to focus once again on the duality of Magneto--now played by Michael Fassbender--as both victim and avenger. The villain of *First Class* is Sebastian Shaw, portrayed by Kevin Bacon, a Nazi tormentor of youthful Erik, the future Magneto. Over the course of *First Class*, we follow Erik's transformation into Magneto, but while he acts with aggression towards those who threaten him and his loved ones, this is tempered by a heavy focus on his friendship with James McAvoy's Charles Xavier and an attempt to embrace the latter's dream of peaceful coexistence between humans and mutants (Singer, 2000; Ratner, 2006; Vaughn, 2011).

Finally, in an article examining the Jewish subtext of the *X-Men* film, Lawrence Baron (2003) cites Magneto's portrayal as "not an innately evil man seeking world domination. Instead, he is a victim of a previous genocide who reasonably anticipates that paranoid humans will subject the mutants to the same fate European Jewry experienced during World War Two" (p. 48). Further, he concurs with Bower that the choice to imbue Magneto with "the respect accorded Holocaust survivor" strengthens his narrative motivation and complexity. In the same way, I described my own awakening to the existence of the Holocaust as a 10-year-old watching *X-Men: The Animated Series* motivated to seek out and explore the source material, Baron credits Singer with exposing a generation devoid of personal connection to these events to their importance (Baron, 2003).

Magneto's emergence as a complicated antihero is in his response to the cruelty of his youth and how it contrasts with the vision of Charles Xavier. Where Xavier and most X-Men have only experienced a very surface level persecution as the result of being mutants, Magneto survived the decimation of his family and others like him for being other to the dominant ruling class; he can imagine something like the Holocaust happening again, where the other characters in X-Men do not have a similar context. Magneto has endured a level of pain that makes him uniquely qualified in understanding that Xavier's wish for coexistence is limited in some ways. It goes back to Spiegelman's tug of war: the X-Men are purely genteel, an idealized reaction to bigotry with peaceful resistance, where Magneto incorporates the vulgar aspects of his own trauma moving him from hero to antihero, but also a more relatable figure for those who have also suffered.

Conclusion

Comics featuring the X-Men have circulated at their height an average of 500,000 monthly copies, peaking at a record-setting 7.6 billion (Foege, 2000). Based on these comics, 20th Century Fox created a 13-chapter movie franchise stretching from 2000's *X-Men* to *New Mutants* in 2020 that grossed \$6 billion worldwide in cumulative box office totals before rights to the characters returned to Marvel Studios via a Disney purchase the previous year (Katz, 2020; Neal, 2020). X-Men has become a key part of the larger cultural conversation, and by extension, so has Magneto. Bryan Singer's films gave a generation over six decades removed from the Holocaust a stark visual representation of the historical events based on comics created by Chris Claremont and his collaborators 20 years earlier (Baron, 2003).

As media scholar John A. Lent (2010) noted, the academic acceptance of comic books as legitimate scholarly material has burgeoned, particularly in the last 30 years. Since the nineties and moving into the 21st century, the contributions of comics as an increasingly sophisticated and important piece of media have aided in comics scholarship and opened the door for a thesis like mine examining why *X-Men*, Magneto, and the resulting stories have been an important part of Holocaust representation in media (Lent, 2010). Kuttner, Weaver-Hightower, and Sousanis (2020) affirm the use of comics to help academics explain their work to those not versed in a field of specialty, providing a bridge between scholars and non-scholars. This recognition of comic books and graphic novels as a means to deliver knowledge demonstrates a return to a relationship with academia from the early part of the twentieth century that veered off course due to poor public perception spurred by *Seduction of the Innocent* (Yang, 2003), which vilified comics as corrosive for youth.

In *Comics and Stuff*, Jenkins (2020) has continued the exploration of comics as a medium caught between mass entertainment and respectability. A work like *Maus* by Art Spiegelman takes the conventions that make comic books palatable, in this case, important characters being represented by cartoon animals, and marries it with difficult to approach subject matter rooted in the trauma of those Jews who suffered under the Nazi regime, including his own father (Spiegelman, 1991; Jenkins, 2020). Dating back a decade before the publication of *Maus*, Claremont in *Uncanny X-Men* used the frame of super hero adventure and costumed figures in the same way Spiegelman deployed anthropomorphism to deliver the realities of historical events like the Holocaust (Claremont, 1981).

Comic books are able to bridge the gaps between disparate genres rather than focusing only on one area of discourse. Holocaust representation is within the scope of the stories that can be told by graphic novels. Comics have value in the field of trauma studies in their ability to couch difficult narratives by bringing in elements of entertainment (Mandel, 2015).

Comic representation of the Holocaust originated parallel to the real world occurrences of World War II, resulting in propaganda-heavy material like *Captain America Comics* in its earliest form that served as wish fulfillment vehicles for Jewish creators to express anxiety over events beyond their control. As time progressed and the gap between the Holocaust and its portrayal in media widened, more dramatized interpretations like those seen in *The Master Race* became prominent (Simon, 1941; Krigstein, 1955; Bower, 2004; Morse, 2007). By the time Claremont and Spiegelman approached the subject matter, they found a balance between storytelling and historicity that set *Uncanny X-Men* and *Maus* apart from these previous attempts to convey Holocaust experiences to a general public, ultimately providing a template to be used in work

like Singer's *X-Men*, Michael Chabon's 2000 novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* or Greg Pak's *X-Men: Magneto Testament* in 2008.

Understanding the X-Men

While the initial iteration of *The X-Men* came at least in part out of Stan Lee's desire for a shorthand explanation of gifting characters with superpowers, within the first two years of the comic's existence it explored the idea of friction between "normal" humans and a marginalized group in mutants (Lee, 1963; 1965; 2004). From the introduction of the Sentinels into the series forward, mutants came to act as stand-ins for any populace in society that experienced fear or hatred due to being different (Foege, 2000).

Though initial observations pegged *X-Men* as an allegory for civil rights with Professor X and Magneto being compared to figures like Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, Claremont, the writer who steered the flagship title *Uncanny X-Men* from 1975 to 1991, expanded the metaphor. Under the stewardship of Claremont and his collaborators, parallels were drawn between mutants and Jews, explicitly in stories like *God Loves, Man Kills*, and via the use of Magneto. Claremont saw in Magneto a figure who started out as a terrorist but achieved redemption as a statesman, his ends ultimately justifying his earlier means, in the vein of Israeli prime minister and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Menachem Begin (Foege, 2000; Lynskey, 2016).

Miller (2003) makes a number of insightful observations about the X-Men. In particular, he identifies their particular accessibility for teenagers experiencing a shift from the sheltered family life of children and assimilating into makeshift groups with friends and colleagues. He goes further in comparing *X-Men*, particularly from 1975 forward, to the American melting pot, exemplified by literal immigrants shedding individual traits of their respective cultures to express

their loyalty to a common cause. Storm exemplifies the “successful” transition, going from Kenyan goddess figure to trusted member of the team while Sunfire, a strict Japanese imperialist, does not last in the shared environment. Miller ties the endurance of X-Men as a concept and text to the very American mythology wherein disparate groups can come together under a common banner; just as the United States has framed the melting pot as the bedrock of society, *X-Men* treats the refuge of the team as a welcome shelter for individuals seeking community (Miller, 2003).

In a similar way to Miller’s contention that the X-Men can operate as common ground for people of cultural differences, Lecker (2007) describes the canon as being rife for reinterpretation along the lines of a queer reading, with both ultimately asserting that the text provides a place for community. Queer youth can find similarities to mutants in terms of their growing feeling of difference with the onset of puberty and indeed sometimes sexual awakenings like those experienced by Rogue and Rusty Collins. Taken as a queer reading, X-Men can also prove aspirational in providing empowered role models and a structure in which adults mentor and guide children despite their shared differences from the norm (Lecker, 2007).

Echoing the sentiments of Miller and Lecker, I see X-Men writ large as a reassuring retreat particularly for teenagers, one I discovered slightly younger but on the verge of my adolescence. That sense of shared dependency seen in the characters within the narrative also spoke to the outsider nature of the comic book fan circa the eighties and nineties, albeit a profile that has shifted somewhat mainstream with the pervasive success of the films over the last two decades. If young readers or viewers encounter X-Men through a variety of mediums from comics to film, their initial receptiveness to a place where they can belong can be used as a bridge to teach the morality lessons Lee and Claremont exemplified through their characters.

Enter Magneto

The earliest instances of Magneto as an antagonist in the pages of *X-Men* and other comics by Lee and his contemporaries framed the character as somewhat sympathetic in that preservation and moreover advancement of the mutant race motivated his actions, but a desire for personal power still colored his portrayal as a more traditional super villain. With *Uncanny X-Men* #150 in 1981, Claremont adds the element of Holocaust survivor to Magneto's backstory, providing additional context for why the protection of his people in order to avoid the repetition of tragic history shapes everything about the character. Magneto under Claremont came to be a figure draped in shades of gray, his ends in large part being used to justify extreme means by the narrative and on the edge of redemption, found by issue #200 of *Uncanny X-Men* four years later. In 2016, Claremont described the first 150 issues of *Uncanny X-Men* as "an evolving arc" wherein Magneto questions his own motivations and grows beyond the traditional villain mindset (Lynskey, 2016).

Grant Morrison's 2004 "Planet X" story in *New X-Men* attempts to return Magneto to his roots as a terrorist, shedding the empathetic, genteel qualities imbued in the character by Claremont and others. Morrison removes the idea that Magneto's ends justify his means and likens his creed of mutant domination over humans as closer to actually mirroring Nazi philosophy rather than pushing back and safeguarding against it. While younger characters in the story embrace a "Magneto Was Right" dogma during the period when he is believed dead, ultimately, when returned to life, Magneto falls short as an inspirational figurehead. Though Morrison's interpretation was quickly overridden and discredited by future stories, it remains a stark point of view that asks hard questions somewhat ignored during Magneto's initial redemptive arc under Claremont. Garneau and Foley further examine the mutant population of a

post-9/11 narrative becoming en vogue and no longer needing a protector or boogeyman like Magneto (Garneau & Foley, 2014).

2008's *X-Men: Magneto Testament* is the full realization of Claremont's vision, five issues of historical drama rooted in real-life events and dedicated to framing Magneto, or Max, as both a victim and a survivor who rises above his personal tragedy. Greg Pak, the writer of *Testament*, celebrates and credits Claremont's work in the afterword to his first issue. Two years following the release of *Testament*, Kelley (2010) made a multifaceted case about the value of the work not just as entertainment but in education as a means to disseminate accurate information about the Holocaust to a younger populace possibly unfamiliar with specific events and more likely to absorb details through an adventure and drama-based narrative. I would use this thesis to extend the argument to include not just *Testament* but the full scope and history of Magneto to provide context and serve as a teaching tool for the narrative of the Holocaust victim not only during their captivity but in response as a reintegrated member of society.

Director Brett Ratner chose to reframe Magneto as primary antagonist in his 2006 *X-Men: The Last Stand* after Singer had used Auschwitz flashbacks to ground the character's humanity in *X-Men* and forced him to ally with the heroes against the greater threat of Stryker in the 2003 follow-up *X2: X-Men United*. In *Last Stand*, Magneto has resumed his status as leading the terroristic Brotherhood of Mutants, recruiting unsavory colleagues such as Juggernaut and manipulating Jean Grey into an anti-human stance by taking advantage of trauma suffered on her part. When Fox chose to relaunch their X-Men cinematic universe in 2011 with *X-Men: First Class*, director Matthew Vaughn again played up Magneto's formative years, casting as the film's major villain a Nazi tormentor, and highlighted him as a friend to Professor X reminiscent of the Claremont stories. While Magneto violently separates from Xavier by the end of *First Class*,

subsequent movies again under the direction of Singer have depicted him as an uneasy ally more often than not. Baron (2003) praises the work of Singer and the X-Men films for not only illuminating the events of the Holocaust, but gracing Magneto with a level of respect often lost in fictional accounts with survivors being played solely as victims.

The interplay between the vulgar and the genteel opens up a space that works well within the media form of the comic and the graphic novel, casting Magneto an important cultural icon. Magneto is the realization of what Spiegelman and before him McLuhan were talking about as a character embodying the vulgarity of a historical tragedy with the genteel rehabilitation of victim as liberator. The other piece of the complexity is that the Holocaust itself is vulgar trauma and pain that Magneto is rooted within and finding a way through the character to make sense of that trauma and pain and therefore the Holocaust itself. Magneto demands that the audience ask what should we do collectively with reprisal as a means for restorative justice pushing an eye for an eye as the end. The trauma of Magneto shows us a potential future course of action for the marginalized embodied through his own struggle with the vulgar and the genteel. His willingness to entertain the perspective of his foes, his desire for vengeance on those who wronged him, and his disdain for a humanity that failed to protect him already creates a figure between good and evil, firmly in the realm of complex antihero.

The words of Baron about Singer's *X-Men* being used not to necessarily introduce but elaborate on the events of the Holocaust to a generation that came of age in the nineties resonated with me as having some similarity to my own awakening in regards to Judaism and the plight of the Jewish people indirectly by exposure to *X-Men: The Animated Series*. The journey of writing this paper has reinforced to me the value that comics, X-Men and Magneto have to the academic process. Magneto and his evolution are concepts worth devoting scholarly attention to

because this is the frame through which non-academics and in particular younger people will be indoctrinated into understanding the Holocaust and its trauma; only through Holocaust education and keeping the events alive in the educational discourse can we prevent them from recurring. As such, I believe that this paper serves a greater purpose in exploring how and why Magneto has resonated as a vehicle for presenting historical fiction, opening up a nascent audience to this sphere of discussion.

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