Ramzi Fawaz

"Where No X-Man Has Gone Before!" Mutant Superheroes and the Cultural Politics of Popular Fantasy in Postwar America

Writing for the *New York Times* in 1971, Saul Braun claimed that "[t]oday's superhero is about as much like his predecessors as today's child is like his parents." In an unprecedented article on the state of American comics, "Shazam! Here Comes Captain Relevant," Braun wove a story of an industry whose former glory producing jingoistic fantasies of superhuman power in the 1930s and 1940s had given way to a canny interest in revealing the power structures against which ordinary people and heroes alike struggled following World War II. Quoting a description of a course on "Comparative Comics" at Brown University, he wrote, "[N]ow heroes are different—they ponder moral questions, have emotional differences, and are just as neurotic as real people. Captain America openly sympathizes with campus radicals . . . Lois Lane apes John Howard Griffin and turns herself black to study racism, and everybody battles to save the environment." Five years earlier, *Esquire* had presaged Braun's claims about comic books' generational appeal, dedicating a spread to the popularity of superhero comics among university students in their special "College Issue." As one student explained, "My favorite is the Hulk, I identify with him, he's the outcast against the institution."[1] Only months after the *New York Times* article saw print, *Rolling Stone* published a six-page exposé on the inner workings of Marvel Comics, while *Ms. Magazine* emblazoned Wonder Woman on the cover of its premier issue—declaring "Wonder Woman for President!" no less—and devoted an article to the origins of the latter-day feminist superhero.[2]

Where little more than a decade before comics had signaled the

American Literature, Volume 83, Number 2, June 2011
DOI 10.1215/00029831-1266090

moral and aesthetic degradation of American culture, by 1971 they had come of age as America's "native art"; taught on Ivy League campuses, studied by European scholars and filmmakers, and translated and sold around the world, they were now taken up as a new generation's critique of American society. The concatenation of these sentiments among such diverse publications revealed that the growing popularity and public interest in comics (and comic-book superheroes) spanned a wide demographic spectrum, appealing to middle-class urbanites, college-age men, members of the counterculture, and feminists alike. At the heart of this newfound admiration for comics lay a glaring yet largely unremarked contradiction: the cultural regeneration of the comic-book medium was made possible by the revamping of a key American fantasy figure, the superhero, even as that figure was being lauded for its "realism" and "social relevance." As the title of Braun's article suggests, in the early 1970s, "relevance" became a popular buzzword denoting a shift in comic-book content from oblique narrative metaphors for social problems toward direct representations of racism and sexism, urban blight, and political corruption. "Relevance" also came to describe the intertextual nature of modern superhero comic books, now discussed alongside epic poetry, Shakespearean drama, Hollywood film, and the American novel.

While news media and mainstream readers assumed comic books could be at once political and entertaining, creative producers, editors, and hardcore fans within the comic-book industry struggled over the appropriate balance between fantasy as pure entertainment and as a vehicle for social-consciousness raising. This struggle manifested in popular form through the material output of the industry throughout the 1970s, as the superhero comic book became the site for reinventing print entertainment to compete with television and film while offering the ground from which mainstream forms of cultural criticism influenced by radical left politics could be lobbied at contemporary sociopolitical conditions. In this essay, I argue that an understanding of the resurgent popularity of comic books and the figure of the American superhero requires a reconsideration of the relationship between literary and cultural forms of fantasy and American political life.

I reappraise existing understandings of fantasy by offering a new category of analysis, *popular fantasy*, as an alternative to traditional genre analysis or myth criticism. Popular fantasy describes the social uses of enchantment to examine the ways tropes of literary

enchantment come to organize real-world social and political relations.[3] Simultaneously, I identify the superhero as the paradigmatic example of American popular fantasy, showing how innovations in the creative uses of the superhero in the mid-1970s politicized the figure by making explicit the mutually constitutive relationship between fantasy and political life. To illustrate this claim, I develop a close reading of Marvel Comics's *X-Men* series between its relaunch in 1975 and the publication of its canonical storyline, "The Phoenix Saga," in 1977. The single best-selling superhero comic book of the late twentieth century, the *X-Men* tells the story of an international cadre of superpowered beings known as "mutants," genetically evolved humans outcast by a bigoted and fearful humanity. Circulating in the mid-1970s at the zenith of post–Civil Rights left social movements including liberal and radical feminisms, environmentalism, black nationalism, and gay liberation, the comic book's transnational cast and visual and narrative articulation of "mutation" to social and cultural difference more broadly underscored the tie between expressions of popular fantasy and the ideals of radical politics in the postwar period.

With the proliferation of identity movements that emerged out of the internal conflicts of the New Left, the comic-book industry, long committed to the antiracist and antifascist ideals of democratic politics, used visual culture as a space for modeling new modes of radical critique that offered alternatives to direct-action politics and the discourse of civil liberties. Creators used the biologically unstable body of the superhero to explore, and potentially bring into being, the states of bodily and psychic liberation espoused by a variety of countercultural movements in this period. Whether in the "getting loose" philosophy of the hippie generation or the consciousness-raising projects of liberal feminism, the ecstatic physical states of disco culture or the spiritual communion with nature celebrated by popular ecology, the call for a countercultural politics grounded in felt experience was visually manifested in superhuman figures whose powers literally materialized these ways of being as physical extensions of the self. Like the figure of the superhero, these forms of elevated consciousness circulated through a variety of cultural genres including science fiction, fantasy, and myth; understanding the productive link between the seemingly disparate worlds of superhero comic books and left political world-making projects requires a reassessment of the political uses of fantasy outside of these discrete categories.

Literary fantasy has traditionally been analyzed as a genre formation (a narrative structure identified by its distinct content—namely, the existence of phenomena inexplicable by scientific means, including magic, hauntings, and mythical creatures) or as a psychoanalytic mechanism for managing repressed anxieties and facilitating the formation of the ego. This latter avenue, famously paved by Bruno Bettelheim, places fantasy in a pedagogical position as a set of themes or tropes that teach children how to approach the frightening realities of everyday life by metaphorizing them in figures of enchantment who can safely be managed at the level of the psyche. Alternatively, theorists like Rosemary Jackson have stressed the importance of historicizing fantasy's psychic dimensions, specifically its ability to express or disavow cultural desires, to understand how forms of enchantment mark the limits of a social order's ability to imagine ways of being in the world that lie outside its dominant ideologies. More recently, Fredric Jameson has theorized fantasy's distinguishing tropes in Marxist terms, reading the ability to wield magic, for instance, as an attempt to reunite alienated labor with the body from which it was originally abstracted.[4]

The emergence of a Marxist critique of fantasy has helped historicize structural and psychoanalytic accounts of enchantment by demanding that fantasy be understood in relation to the material conditions of its production. Simultaneously, this approach has reified the split between fantasy and political life by suggesting that any radical political potential of fantasy can only be recuperated after the fact by a critique attuned to the political economy of fantasy production and circulation. Mark Bould rightly claims that one of the defining features of fantasy is that it constitutes a world-making project—literally, the creative production of fantastic worlds and environments—and hence is situated in the institutional matrix Marxism seeks to analyze, including the means of production and labor that enable the building of worlds. Bould extrapolates from this that the single psychoanalytic category useful to a Marxist theory of fantasy is paranoia, since paranoid thinkers cleverly develop conspiratorial maps of whatever world they inhabit in order to better explain its intricate operations.[5] By suggesting that the only genuinely political mode of subjectivity enabled by fantasy is that of an economically alienated member of a capitalist system, this mode of critique disavows the multivalent nature of subjectivity, trivializing racial, sexual, and gendered forms of relationality

and world making as mere "identity politics"; consequently, it ignores fantasy's ability to have a transformative effect on the self-perceptions of its audiences, alter the meanings that attach to forms of social power, and offer recognition to lifeworlds deemed worthless or unlivable.

Pushing at the limits of Marxist critique, I use the term *popular fantasy* to describe expressions of literary and cultural enchantment that suture together current social and political realities and impossible happenings, producing widely shared political myths that describe and legitimate nascent cultural desires or modes of sociality for which no legible discourses yet exist. The seemingly impossible character of popular fantasies signals the continued "otherness" of the potential social relations they seek to describe, while making that otherness desirable as an alternative to normative social aspirations. The entertainment value of popular fantasy—its ability to induce pleasure in witnessing impossible phenomena or experiencing lifeworlds that have no everyday corollary—signals not only its embeddedness in commodity culture but also its capacity to constitute new political desires. To view fantasy as a site for the production of political desire, and consequently as a cultural location where desire itself can be politicized, necessarily complicates a purely allegorical understanding of enchantment as a fictionalized reflection of contemporary relations of capitalist production; it foregrounds fantasy's ability to imaginatively articulate previously disconnected social and political relations through figures of enchantment that lend legitimacy to inchoate "real-world" affiliations across an array of differences.[6] To address the cultural work performed by these imagined figurations, my analysis of popular fantasy culls from the insights of feminist cultural theory, which accounts for the ways people use the figures and tropes available in cultural texts to fashion new subjectivities that are not ultimately or fully determined by structures of capitalist exploitation.[7]

In her recent work on the interrelationships among human beings, animals, and technoculture, Donna Haraway highlights the capacity of figures and figurations to generate stories in order to make sense of the mutually transformative encounters between human beings and machines in a world increasingly mediated by technology. She uses the term *companion species* to describe a host of figures—including the techno-organic "cyborg" as well as dogs, genomes, microchips, and scientists—whose complex histories of mutual interaction dramatically destabilize the seemingly naturalized distinctions (such as

those between man and machine, nature and culture, human and animal) that define the human being as biologically and psychically distinct from the material worlds it inhabits.[8] This quality of figures to "co-shape" or transform one another's material and psychic existence is also explored by a range of feminist epistemologists from Susan Babbitt to Judith Butler, as well as feminist political theorists such as Linda Zerilli. These thinkers suggest that encounters with figures of radical otherness not only provide tools to subvert dominant systems of power but also reorient one's ethical investments toward bodies, objects, and worldviews formerly dismissed as alien to the self.[9] The radical transformation of identity in the service of producing new standards for ethical action is a central project of popular fantasy. Through fantastical or hybrid figures like the cyborg, the mutant, and the alien, popular fantasy generates previously unimaginable affective bonds that alter the way all parties perceive their best interests. I deploy popular fantasy to account for the productive, rather than merely reflective, dimensions of enchantment; in turn, I offer a thicker historical assessment of the relationship between fantasy's various formal expressions—in literature, film, and comics—and its broader uses as a mode of political communication.

Rather than compartmentalizing cultural fictions and political myth making, the study of popular fantasy demands that we situate literary and filmic genres such as science fiction and fantasy along a continuum with the broader political categories that drive the putatively humanist values of the nation-state. This view allows us to conceptualize fantasy as a historically contingent trope deployed in a variety of sites, including political life, where the categories of the latter are always understood to be a mode of fantasy, different in kind from literary fantasy because they are legitimated by state and social institutions. This trope might include the political concept of universal human rights, which relies on the popular fantasy of a recognizable human subject capable of free will and agency, or a fictionalized concept like that of the genetic "mutant," which extrapolates from the study of evolutionary biology and fears of radioactive fallout the possibility that genetic transformation might render one more than human, and hence no longer identifiable as the subject of universal human rights.[10] In this way, popular fantasy acknowledges that what counts as "reality" at any given moment is subject to manifold interpretations, making it amenable to being punctured by or rerouted toward fantasy.

The reality of radioactive and chemical fallout in the 1950s and 1960s, for instance, was linked to an array of fantasies including the growth of giant killer insects, the brainwashing of women into subservient housewives, and the accelerated evolution of the human species into superpowered mutants.[11] That most scientists could not proffer a factually solid explanation for the biological and environmental effects of radiation exposure (often extrapolating such effects using the language of fantasy) suggests that these former cultural fantasies were not tangential to an understanding of real-world conditions but actually productive of them.[12]

Few arenas of cultural production exemplify the work of popular fantasy more than the superhero comic book, a cultural form that weds the bodies of ordinary people to the emergent technologies of industrial society, granting them extraordinary abilities. In the postwar period, the *X-Men* series emerged as one of the most innovative expressions of the superhero comic book, framing its characters not as champions of the national good like Superman and Captain America but as mutants, genetically evolved human beings whose biological difference made them social and species outcasts. By developing the capacious category of "mutation" as a biological marker and a category of otherness akin to race and gender, the *X-Men* deployed popular fantasy to describe the generative alliances across difference being forged by radical feminists, gay liberation activists, and the counterculture in the 1970s. Within the comic book's narrative content, the encounter between geographically and ethnically diverse mutants who formerly struggled to survive independently of a mutant community transformed the political investments each of these figures had previously held, reorienting their everyday choices around an ethical commitment to protect one another from various threats posed by antimutant activists, government agents, and other mutants bent on their destruction. The *X-Men* developed the popular fantasy of the mutant superhero not only to resist a variety of repressive social norms—including racial segregation, sexism, and xenophobia—but also to facilitate the ground from which new kinds of choices about political affiliation and personal identification could be pursued.

I begin my discussion by unpacking the *X-Men*'s politicization of the category of mutation, subsequently situating the series's creative project within the broader history of superhero comic-book production. I then analyze the critical role the *X-Men*'s female characters

played in visualizing the comic book's absorption of gay and feminist public cultures. I conclude with a close reading of the *X-Men*'s acclaimed story arc "The Phoenix Saga," an epic space opera that marshaled the combined elements of science fiction, fantasy, and myth to rewrite the normative assumptions underpinning purportedly "realist" political discourses that negated the legitimacy of alternative modes of social and political affiliation.

From Humanity to Mutanity

First published in 1963, the *X-Men* series introduced readers to five suburban teenagers gifted with extraordinary abilities that stemmed from an evolution in their genetic make-up.[13] In the fictional world of the Marvel Universe, such beings came to be known as mutants, a distinct population existing alongside those made superhuman by radioactive materials, scientific experimentation, or extensive physical training. Under the guidance of world-class telepath Professor Charles Xavier, the X-Men honed their abilities while exploring the complex and often contentious relations between human beings and an emergent mutantkind. Popularizing the genetic mutant as social and species minority, the series helped lay the foundation for reimagining the superhero as a figure that, far from drawing readers to a vision of ideal citizenship through patriotic duty, dramatized the politics of inequality, exclusion, and difference in postwar U.S. culture.

Public use of the term *mutation* long predated the initial publication of the *X-Men*, circulating widely throughout the 1950s in conjunction with concerns over incidences of radiation-related death due to atomic testing. In 1962, Rachel Carson's best seller *Silent Spring* rerouted national discourse on the negative effects of radiation to the widespread use of insecticides, whose chemical qualities, Carson claimed, could wreak havoc on the human genome.[14] Once again resignifying the meanings attached to "mutation," the X-Men fused real-world fears about the disabling effects of radiation exposure with the impossible notion that such effects could in fact accelerate the evolution of the human species, granting people remarkable "mutant powers." The *X-Men* revalued physical disability and visible difference from ordinary humanity as the ground upon which new forms of social and political community could be articulated. In this way, mutation became both a biological category describing a genetic transforma-

tion in the human species and a sociological category designating a particular collective whose biological difference articulated itself to other kinds of difference based in race, gender, sexuality, and ability, potentially barring the X-Men from full citizenship rights.

As generative as the concept of mutation was for a popular appraisal of cultural difference, the *X-Men*'s all-white suburban cast seemed out of place in the popular culture milieu of the late 1960s, especially when juxtaposed with the increasingly diverse casts of other Marvel Comics productions that introduced readers to the first African superhero (the Black Panther) alongside alien races from every corner of the universe.[15] Despite its initial success, the series foundered in the late sixties and was canceled. In the case of the original *X-Men*, the failure to explicitly articulate mutation to race, gender, and sexuality evacuated the political purchase of the category by leaving it an empty placeholder for a variety of real-world differences.[16]

In 1975, five years after its initial cancellation, the *X-Men* series was reborn under the creative direction of Marvel editor Len Wien and newcomers Chris Claremont and Dave Cockrum. Reinventing the team as an international cadre of mutants with diverse and often traumatic personal histories, Claremont and Cockrum helped make the *X-Men* the single most successful comic book in industry history. The revamped team included Ororo Monroe (Storm), an African weather goddess able to manipulate atmospheric forces like lightning, hurricanes, and hail; Peter Rasputin (Colossus), a Russian farmer capable of turning his body into impenetrable steel, granting him superhuman strength, stamina, and invulnerability; Kurt Wagner (Nightcrawler), a German elf able to teleport to any location within visible range; Logan (Wolverine), a rapid-healer with "adamantium"-laced retractable claws capable of cutting through nearly any material; and Sean Cassidy (Banshee), a former *X-Men* villain turned ally, able to produce supersonic sound waves powerful enough to slice steel.[17] By expanding the racial, geographic, and gender makeup of the mutant species to include characters and identities previously ignored by the series, the new *X-Men* articulated mutation to the radical critiques of identity promulgated by the cultures of women's and gay liberation.

Throughout the 1970s, these social movements developed critiques of heteropatriarchy that celebrated gender nonconformity, alternative community building outside heterosexual coupling, and the politicization of private life as a way of building alliances between people of

disparate identity groups. Within this political logic, the developing category of "gay identity," which initially described same-sex desire, became conceptually linked to a variety of identities that similarly thwarted the normative expectations of traditional heterosexual life paths. In this way, an expansive understanding of gay identity as a category that bound people across racial, gender, and class differences through their shared experience of alienation from heteropatriarchal norms emerged as a socially viable popular fantasy that was as culturally and politically capacious as the concept of "mutation."[18]

Echoing Xavier's recruitment of the original X-Men as students at his school, the legendary first issue of the new series opens with a sequence of vignettes depicting Xavier traveling the world in search of new mutants to join his team. These snapshots display the diverse ethnoracial background of each new recruit while vividly foregrounding the struggles of mutants to survive in a world where they are "hated and feared" by a human majority; in the opening scene, Xavier saves Kurt's life when he telepathically pacifies a mob of German villagers prepared to lynch the young mutant for his elfish features and blue skin. Equally poignant is Peter's struggle to leave the Russian village where he and his family have lived together since his youth; raised under Communist rule, he questions whether to use his powers or hide them, fearing they grant him unfair advantage in a world populated by the working poor. As these scenes attest, the new *X-Men* visually links the popular fantasy of mutation to concrete differences grounded in histories of race hatred, Cold War political oppression, and western imperialism.[19]

From the outset, the newly revamped X-Men staged a conceptual stand-off between the team's old guard and their new, transnational incarnations. This was dramatized in the iconic cover image of *Giant-Size X-Men* #1, which depicts the new team in full color bursting through a blue-hued portrait of the original team, whose faces appear contorted in horror as they are superseded by this new, interracial mutant cohort (see fig. 1). The disparity in formal color between the two sets of mutants serves to underscore the obvious racial differences that distinguish the two teams (highlighted by the presence of black, brown, and even blue-skinned figures in the central image); at the same time, the new X-Men's literal "tearing through" the borders of the frame suggests that the shift in group membership could effect an equivalent transformation of the comic book's visual politics, now tasked with depicting an expanding set of characters and their

Figure 1 Cover to Len Wein (w), Gil Kane (p), Dave Cockrum (p), and Dan Crespi (p), "Deadly Genesis!" *Giant Size X-Men* #1 (May 1975), Marvel Comics; reprinted in *The Uncanny X-Men Omnibus, Vol. 1* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2006), n.p.

myriad social identities. The effectiveness of this visual project rested on the broader cultural reinvention of the superhero, arguably the most potent popular fantasy in late-twentieth-century American culture, from a liberal icon of empowered self-actualization during World War II to a monstrous social outcast mapping the limits of the human in the postwar period.

Originating with the publication of Joe Shuster and Jerry Siegel's *Superman* in 1938, the superhero launched the comic-book medium to national notoriety while providing Americans with a fantasy of unlimited physical power and agency in an era when the promise of liberal individualism and self-determination appeared all but impossible in light of an unremitting economic depression. Comic books emerged as a distinct cultural form in the early 1930s, originally sold as pamphlets containing reprinted newspaper comic strip materials. Although editors at DC Comics initially refused to publish *Superman* in 1936 for fear that the character was too "unbelievable," they would soon discover that if someone could draw the man of steel, readers would believe in him. Between the late 1930s and the end of World War II, superhero comic books like *Superman* and *Batman* reached monthly circulation figures of nearly nine-hundred thousand issues; cheap, portable, visually sensational, and accessible for repeat readings, comic books packaged the populist ideals of folk culture in mass cultural form.[20] Eschewing the need for big-budget special effects or costly technical apparatuses, comic strip visuality used traditional line drawing to depict an array of fantastical bodies as no other medium could.

Gifted with abilities beyond the ken of normal human beings, superheroes possessed an unprecedented ability to extend their bodies into space and manipulate the material world with physical powers—among them extraordinary strength, speed, agility, and energy projection—that mimicked the capacities of modern industrial technologies. Both scholarly and fan literature on the American superhero often locate the figure at the tail end of a long-standing tradition of iconic folk heroes, namely the frontier adventurers and cowboy vigilantes of nineteenth-century westerns. Although in one sense the superheroes of the late 1930s limned these figures through recourse to heroic masculinity and the embrace of vigilante justice, the superhero is historically distinguished from these previous icons by its mutually constitutive relationship to twentieth-century science and technology: unlike

the frontier hero escaping the constraints of civilization, the superhero emerged in the late Depression era as an embodiment of the synthesis between the seemingly "natural" biological self and the technologies of industrial society.

Whether in Superman's paralyzing susceptibility to the alien substance Krypton or in Captain America's origins as a test subject in the U.S. government's "super-soldier" program, from the outset the seemingly invulnerable superheroic body was constantly mediated by scientific and technological innovations. During World War II, this contradiction was smoothed over by the putatively white male superhero's affirmative relationship to the state; often deploying his abilities in service to national security, the superhero's robust masculinity served as a metaphor for the strength of the American body politic.[21] Alternatively, postwar superheroes emerged as the monstrous progeny of the age of atomic and genetic science, no longer identifiable citizens of the nation but outcasts from humanity itself. Postwar comic books shifted the discursive field of the superheroic body away from the question of ethical citizenship—the performance of egalitarian civic acts in service to the state, or for the good of a universal "humanity"—toward the broader question of how one becomes a legible subject capable of performing citizenship in the first place.

A variety of historical circumstances made this project viable for the comic-book industry between the late 1950s and the mid-1970s, including demographic shifts in reading audiences, new technologies of media production and circulation, and national interest in atomic and genetic science. Arguably the most important of these factors was the transformation of the relationship between this industry and the state from one of mutual affirmation during World War II to one of clashing political and cultural interests in the postwar period. Responding to public criticism of the violent content of crime and horror comics by Catholic decency groups, psychologists, and school officials, in 1954 the House Un-American Acts Committee convened a special Senate session on juvenile delinquency, threatening comic-book publishers with regulatory action if they refused to develop content standards for their publications. In the wake of government chastisement, mainstream comic-book producers returned to the superhero as a fantasy figure traditionally understood to embody patriotic American values.[22] Ironically, this creative shift allowed writers and artists such as Stan Lee and Jack Kirby at Marvel Comics to explore bodies whose

abnormal physical morphologies offered a rich site for critiquing the regulatory powers of the state and its inconsistently applied guarantee of national citizenship based on humanist ideals. It was in the very project of self-regulation through narrative conversion from "subversive" horror stories to "wholesome" superhero tales that creative producers were able to articulate the formal and narrative qualities of superhero comic books to the political ideals of New Left and countercultural social movements, protected from public censure by the widespread assumption that popular fantasy was necessarily apolitical.

By explicitly articulating the category of mutation to an array of real-world cultural differences, the *X-Men* stands out as an exemplary instance of the politicization of the superhero comic book in the postwar period. Yet the radical nature of the series's visual politics ultimately rests in its distinctly feminist approach to the project of forging alliances across difference, which contributed to the broader deconstruction of the superhero's supposedly seamless relationship to the liberal state on the basis of his good citizenship and performance of idealized masculinity. As a corollary to its critique of normative identity, the *X-Men* shifted the traditional locus of affective and political identification in mainstream superhero comics from white male heroes to powerful and racially diverse female superheroes whose emotional strength anchored the kinships forged among mutant outcasts. The depiction of empowered female superheroes indexed the political values of feminism while visualizing those ideals through the aesthetics of feminist and gay cultural formations—particularly the politics of sexual liberation and disco culture. Specifically, the comic book presented the superheroine's exercise of her mutant abilities as a psychedelic flowering of self-awareness, which enabled a refashioning of the terms that organized her identity as woman, mutant, X-Man, or Other. Ultimately, the female superheroes of the *X-Men* linked the pleasures and dangers of deploying one's mutant powers to the work of forging new bonds between unlikely allies that necessarily transformed psychic and physical states of being.

"Enter: The Phoenix!" The *X-Men*'s Feminist Cosmology

No female figures dominated the visual and affective narrative of the new *X-Men* more than the African weather goddess Ororo Monroe, claiming the moniker "Storm," and the team's first superheroine, Jean

Grey, who would become the all-powerful cosmic being "Phoenix." In these two characters, readers were witness to the absorption of popular feminist politics into the pages of mainstream superhero comics. Applauding this project, the teenage *X-Men* reader Marilyn Brogdon wrote in to the letter column of *X-Men* #103, "I've been an X-fan since 1967. All this time, I thought it highly unlikely that all 'good' mutants were Caucasians who live on the east coast of the United States. The emergence of an international and interracial team is a great step forward. As a young black woman, I am particularly interested in Ororo. I wonder how Chris will handle her relationship with a group of white males."[23] Articulating her personal investment in the *X-Men* through her identity as an African American woman, Brogdon joined countless readers who found in the revamped series a narrative testing ground for new social relations across race, class, and gender; to be an "X-fan" was to inhabit a new subject position that produced a "democratic equivalence" between the political worldviews of individual readers whose affinity to the comic book indicated a shared investment in the progressive ideals of racial tolerance, sexual equality, and radical inclusion.[24]

Ororo is a character with few, if any, genuine antecedents in American superhero comics: a superpowered black woman, orphaned at age four, who grew up a vagabond walking the desolate landscape of the Sahara Desert. She is discovered by Xavier in a small Kenyan township, where villagers worship her as a rain goddess. Although committed to those she has considered her people and basking in the glow of godhood, Ororo is convinced by Xavier to acknowledge her mutant identity and develop her skills under the rigorous training of the Xavier Institute. When the original X-Men take temporary leave of the team, Storm replaces Jean Grey as the female heart of the group, proving herself as formidable as her teammates by displaying exceptional strength of will and adept use of her powers. Most importantly, she represents a new affective relation between the teammates that dismantles the heterosexual order that had prevailed in the original team.

Untrained in the sexual and gendered norms of the United States, Storm questions the strictures of normative femininity—initially refusing to wear clothes around the mansion grounds because she deems them needlessly restrictive, and training with her male teammates at their own level—and she consistently rebuffs the romantic over-

tures of her colleagues, recoding their relationship in familial terms by naming Colossus, Wolverine, and Nightcrawler her brothers.[25] Simultaneously, Storm's embodiment of the black female "disco diva" that dominated gay and African American visual culture—namely through her cascading mane of white hair, her hyperbolic performance of an "African Goddess" persona, and her skin-tight costume, which sported thigh-high boots, a leotard with cut-outs, and a flowing cape and tiara—positions her as a figure capable of taking pleasure in the performance of a variety of racial and gender identities. The hyperbolic styling of Storm's character highlights the series's broader visual absorption of the aesthetics of disco, which manifests in the team's flamboyant costuming, the use of fantastic color and psychedelic backdrops to depict the exercise of mutant powers, and the racially diverse cast itself, which mimics the dance-floor demographics of disco culture.[26] Exploring the agency afforded by her newfound kinship network, Storm at times takes on the role of team matriarch and confidant to her sister mutants while alternately asserting leadership of the team, a warrior protecting her fellow X-Men. Storm's feminist sensibility, then, did not emerge as a wholesale abandonment of gendered relations, but as a demand to be a free agent who chooses her own affiliations rather than allowing them to be dictated by social expectations.[27]

This fact is most evident in two narrative tropes that would come to define Storm's character: the first is her ability to balance collective intimacies with her need for personal autonomy, a skill figuratively reflected in her mastery over atmospheric forces, which demands a similar understanding of the natural world and her place within it. Although Storm grows increasingly close to her fellow mutants, she maintains an enclave of her own in Xavier's mansion, a lush greenhouse that serves as a space of private contemplation and connection to the natural world. In between the X-Men's countless adventures, the comic book presents affectively charged scenes of Storm returning to the greenhouse to give sustenance to her beloved plants, speaking to them as though they were sentient creatures. At other times, she strips naked and bathes in the moisture of a miniature rain shower inside her room, liberating her mind and body from the constraints of costumes (superheroic and social) that wed her to specific identities and expectations.[28]

In Storm's character, the comic book identifies the central condition

of producing social worlds as that of cultivating an interior domain of self-reflection: Storm is at once a willful agent and a living ecosystem producing and sustaining relations through the use of her abilities. In these moments, the series attaches the activity of "worlding"—the production of social bonds *and* the maintenance of a complex natural order—to the female body. In one sense, then, the *X-Men* essentializes the category of "woman" as divine force (akin to figurations like "Mother Earth") maintaining networks of relations seemingly inaccessible to men; at the same time, these moments of strategic essentialism work precisely because they universalize particular identities only to ultimately relocate them in the daily lives of individual characters.

This phenomenon is dramatized in Storm's key weakness, a debilitating claustrophobia. Storm's fear of enclosed spaces initially appears as another manifestation of her Mother Earth persona, a desire for freedom of mobility echoed by the romantic language of "whole earth" environmentalism; contrary to this assumption, readers learn that her claustrophobia is linked to her history as the orphan of parents killed in the military strikes on Cairo, Egypt, during the 1956 Suez crisis. In Issue #102, when the X-Men battle the villain Juggernaut beneath Banshee's Irish castle, Storm is physically incapacitated by her claustrophobia.[29] Her psychic anguish occasions a vivid flashback that relates how Storm's parents, an American photojournalist and a Kenyan princess, moved from Harlem to Cairo in 1951, only to be killed five years later when a French fighter plane destroys their apartment building. Following the bombardment, Ororo awakens to see the limp hand of her mother jutting from beneath a pile of debris. The scene concludes with a kaleidoscopic vision of Ororo escaping from the rubble, living among thieves in Cairo, and finally, at age twelve, trekking across the Sahara to Kenya. This image is immediately followed by the memory of Xavier's call to join the X-Men, galvanizing Storm's mental connection with the professor and recalling her multiple loyalties to her African heritage and her mutant kinship. Here, Storm's personal history, one unfolding from the geopolitics of postcolonial military conflicts, intersects with the struggle to define a mutant solidarity as the ground for a new collective history shorn of the violence and despair that have occasioned her own.

It is only when the battle destroys the side of the castle that Storm regains her senses, joyfully taking flight while exclaiming, "I—can see

Figure 2 Storm joyfully breaks free from the tombs of Cassidy Keep. Image from Chris Claremont (w) and Dave Cockrum (p), "Who Will Stop the Juggernaut?" *X-Men* #103 (December 1976), Marvel Comics; reprinted in *Uncanny X-Men Omnibus*, 223.

the sky! Free! Gods of the Earth and air be praised! I am free!" (see fig. 2). This spirit of freedom as a condition of mutant kinship presciently captures the dual identities of Storm as otherworldly weather goddess and historical immigrant. The very "Gods" she praises, natural deities that wed her to an ethereal vision of Mother Earth, are also ciphers for her biological mother, to whom she first calls out when struck by claustrophobia in the tombs of Cassidy Keep. A historical ghost, Ororo's mother ties her to the world of forced migrations, dual African and American identities, and global violence that make up the lineaments of her identity.

Storm's embodiment of the shifting demands of gendered and racialized identity is echoed in the evolution of the X-Men's first lady, Jean Grey. Where Storm's sisterly affection for her fellow teammates reorganizes the patriarchal structure of the nuclear family form, Jean's transformation into the mythical powerhouse Phoenix illustrates her liberation from the constraints of traditional American womanhood. Formerly Marvel Girl, Jean was introduced in the original *X-Men*'s inaugural issue as the team's first female recruit. She enthralls her colleagues with her beauty and intelligence, but her telekinetic abilities seemingly pale in comparison to her teammates' powers. In the

new series's first year of publication, Jean outgrows her shrinking violet persona, moves out of the Xavier School, and develops an intimate bond with Storm. These developments pave the way for the fundamental transformations the series had in store for Jean over the next two years while presaging the forms of alliance that Ororo and she would develop between black and white women alongside the posthuman categories of mutant and alien.

Between 1975 and 1978, the X-Men undertook two outer space adventures that served as narrative vehicles for the dramatic evolution of Jean's character. In their first exploit, the X-Men find themselves trapped on a space station run by a malevolent scientist who has rebuilt the mutant-hunting Sentinels—giant robots programmed to exterminate mutants—that plagued the X-Men in their youth. To save her teammates, Jean sacrifices her life piloting their damaged space shuttle back to earth, using her telekinetic abilities to shield the hull from a deadly radiation storm. Jean's corporeal body is destroyed by radiation exposure, only to be reknit together by the power of a mythical cosmic entity known as the Phoenix Force.[30] The moments leading up to her death literally split Jean between her corporeal and psychic selves, the former screaming out to her beloved Scott Summers (the original X-Men's team leader, Cyclops), while a psychic projection of her terror-stricken face surrounds the ship in a fiery halo reminiscent of the globular motion of a lava lamp. When the rocket ship crash lands in the ocean off Cape Canaveral, Florida, the X-Men are shocked to see their friend torpedo up from the water, garbed in an unfamiliar costume (later identified as emblematic of the Phoenix) and vitalized with new life. Jean's commanding first words capture the thrust of her transformation: "Hear me X-Men! No longer am I the woman you knew! I am fire! And life incarnate! Now and forever—I am Phoenix!"[31] The full import of Jean's statement would become clear only later, but in the immediate context it reinterprets "the last moments of a young woman's life" not as literal death but as a transformation from naive youth to empowered womanhood, wherein the mental expansion of her psyche into the vastness of the cosmos occasions the absorption of unprecedented liberatory energies into the body.

Jean's hallucinatory transformation into the Phoenix visually marshals the "getting loose" discourse of the hippie counterculture as a corollary to the concept of feminist consciousness raising. As Sam Binkley explains of the counterculture's philosophy, "[t]he world this

new vocabulary unfolds is one in which states of conformity and self-regimentation are undermined . . . . Related through metaphors of eruption, epiphany, and release . . . [t]o 'be yourself,' to 'let it all hang out' . . . was to release a primordial vitality, to become an artist of oneself and of one's identity.[32] Much as the feminist rhetoric of self-determination worked to unleash women's dormant political energies by refashioning them into agents of their own social destinies, so too the Phoenix brought "a primordial vitality" into the world, granting Jean a repertoire of abilities to transform the fabric of reality.

Literally materializing the feminist mantra "I am woman, hear me roar," Phoenix commonly appears rising in cruciform shape, arms alight with energy, mouth agape in a primal scream that symbolizes an unprecedented show of self-determination as well as an exhilarating potential for the loss of self-control. The famous cover of *X-Men* #101, which depicts Phoenix's birth, presents in stark visual terms both the emancipatory dimension of the Phoenix Force and the threat it poses to existing affiliations between Jean and her fellow X-Men (see fig. 3). Poised dramatically at the center of the cover, Jean launches from the depths of the Atlantic garbed in the green and gold costume of the Phoenix as bolts of energy radiate from her upturned hands, her fiery hair in full bloom. Below Jean's imposing figure, Storm struggles to lift an arm from the water, her features contorted in terror while Cyclops faces the reader gasping for air. If the Phoenix may be read as a popular fantasy embodying the concept of feminist consciousness raising—a physical transformation representing Jean's "coming into consciousness" as a feminist—Storm and Cyclops iconically stand in for the figures most alienated by this performance of liberated white femininity: namely, black women and white men, here literally drowned out by the force of Jean's self-actualization. Accompanying them, though left-of-center, is Nightcrawler, his blue features and elfish hand barely staying afloat of the roiling waters; as the single visibly "mutant" figure in the scene, he joins Storm and Cyclops as part of a constellation of identities effaced by the empowering but solipsistic personal emancipation the Phoenix Force enables.[33]

In the figures of Storm and Phoenix, the *X-Men* dramatized two distinct but overlapping feminist projects of the mid-1970s that could be materialized and critiqued through the popular fantasy of mutation: the desire for female autonomy and self-actualization and the development of alternative intimacies and solidarities outside of the scheme

Figure 3 "Enter the Phoenix," cover to Chris Claremont (w) and Dave Cockrum (p), "Like a Phoenix from the Ashes," *X-Men* #101 (October 1976), Marvel Comics; reprinted in *Uncanny X-Men Omnibus*, 176.

of heteropatriarchy. The series located the former in an important but narcissistic white liberal feminist worldview and the latter in the alliances forged by radical women of color through their articulation of feminist goals to diverse categories of identity. Simultaneously, Storm and Phoenix present readers with fictional examples of the ways individuals are radically transformed by encounters with figures of popular fantasy. Storm's willful remembering of her mutant kinship in a moment of fear and isolation and Jean's absorption of the Phoenix Force as she faces obliteration by a radiation storm reflect the capacity of figures and figurations to offer tools for reimagining personal identity when the terms that organize one's sense of self no longer make for a "livable life."[34] The feminist visual iconography of Storm and Phoenix finds its greatest expression in the *X-Men*'s "Phoenix Saga." Here, the liberatory vision of female powers and agency embodied by these two fantasy figures becomes the material for responding to galactic crises that threaten to destroy the fabric of reality, and with it, the alternative kinships developed within the intimate sphere of the X-Men's mutant solidarity.[35]

"Where No X-Man Has Gone Before!"

Arguably the most canonical storyline in the *X-Men*'s publishing history, "The Phoenix Saga" tells the story of the alien princess Lilandra Nermani's desperate effort to gain allies in a cosmic struggle against the machinations of her tyrannical brother, D'Ken, emperor of a vast alien civilization known as the Shi'ar Empire. The empire is torn apart by civil war when Lilandra turns against her kin, refusing to support his plan to obtain the power of the deadliest force in the universe, the M'Kraan Crystal, in order to achieve absolute rule over the cosmos. Although Lilandra and her supporters fight valiantly, her resistance crumbles. As she explains, "I was jinking through the binary system, trying to shake off my pursuit, when . . . in my mind, I saw a face . . . it was as if I'd found a missing piece of my soul . . . . In that instant I was bound to Charles Xavier . . . and he to me."[36] In her time of need, Lilandra discovers a psychic rapport across the galaxies that leads her to Earth and Xavier's X-Men, calling forth a monstrous mutant kinship against the tainted bonds of blood and empire.

Responding to Lilandra's plea, Phoenix employs her newfound cosmic powers to teleport her teammates thousands of light years from

Earth to "The World," an uninhabited planet where the M'Kraan Crystal, a massive gem containing the energy of a caged miniature universe, is besieged by D'Ken and his forces. The X-Men learn that D'Ken plans to shatter the crystal and unleash the power of the universe within, supported in his maniacal plan by the Shi'ar Guard, a formidable cadre of superhumans sworn to protect their emperor. The three issues that compose the narrative core of "The Phoenix Saga" respectively chronicle the X-Men's epic battle with the Shi'ar guard, their newfound alliance with the Starjammers—interstellar space pirates and sworn enemies of the Shi'ar led by the swashbuckling Corsair—and finally, their entry into the crystal itself, where Phoenix faces the task of reweaving the tapestry of the cosmos.[37] This final project is visually depicted as a metaphorical bonding of the X-Men's multiple identities—across race, gender, nation, and generation—through the *literal* bonding of Storm and Phoenix, figures whose differences could be reconciled by visual reference to the cross-racial and sexual culture of disco, where difference was dissolved in the psychedelic pleasures of the dance floor.

To achieve this reconciliation, the X-Men must first contend with the cultural divisions that structure their encounter with the Shi'ar guard, which are dramatically captured in the saga's opening double-page spread in *X-Men* #107 (see fig. 4). Presciently titled "Where No X-Man Has Gone Before!" the image presents an awesome tableau of superhuman figures flanking the edifice of the M'Kraan Crystal, a giant pink jewel atop a mechanical pedestal. No less than twenty-five figures fill the scene, the X-Men entering the fray from the left with the Shi'ar Guard standing opposite. Across the field of action, a Shi'ar warrior exclaims, "Comrades! Who are these people?! They materialized out of the stargate . . . but are they friends? Or Foes?" Bursting from the center of the spread is the singular declaration of another guardsman: "Aliens!"

Marshaling the epic visual vistas of the space opera, this inaugural image depicts the numerous players in an intergalactic conflict that brings within its orbit unexpected encounters between figures who far exceed the label "human." The scene's central declaration, "Aliens!," functions as a floating signifier attaching itself to all within the space of this panorama: to the imperial guard, the X-Men are quite literally extraterrestrials, and vice versa, while both these groups are alien to the resting place of the M'Kraan Crystal. This fact is reiter-

Figure 4 The X-Men meet the Shi'ar Guard. Cover to Chris Claremont (w), Dave Cockrum (p), and Dan Crespi (p), "Where No X-Man Has Gone Before!" *X-Men* #107 (October 1977), Marvel Comics; reprinted in *Uncanny X-Men Omnibus*, 294–95.

ated in the scene's title, "Where No X-Man Has Gone Before!," which echoes the famed slogan of the popular television series *Star Trek* ("Where no *man* has gone before!") while transforming the putatively "human" referent of the term "man" to indicate something radically distinct from humanity. At the same time it derails the imperial thrust of the original use of the phrase, "where no *one* has gone before," first printed in a 1958 White House press booklet on U.S. space travel, which identified the moon as a site for Americans to claim as a victory of the Cold War space race. Here, traversing the galaxies to arrive at "The World" is not an imperialist project but a liberatory undertaking to protect the M'Kraan Crystal from D'Ken's colonial aspirations. The confusion among the categories of alien, mutant, and human is rendered in both semiotic and visual terms, for the ostentatious garb of the imperial guard appears identical to the X-Men's costumes, both groups resembling the polyester menagerie of a 1970s disco dance floor surrounding a massive mirror ball in the form of a cosmic gem.

Expanding its visual horizons to absorb a seemingly limitless cast of characters whose contentious encounters embody the struggles of an entire social universe, the first part of "The Phoenix Saga" lays

the groundwork for the X-Men's entry into the M'Kraan Crystal itself, where histories of conflict would dissolve in a stunning network of solidarities born of a shared will to save the world from destruction. As the structure housing the forces that maintain the order of the universe, the crystal is a quintessential example of popular fantasy, an imagined object that metaphorically equalizes the disparities between friend and enemy, human and alien, and dictator and subject by depicting the cosmos as a network of relations rather than a series of antagonisms. Reaching into the minds of those who would intrude upon its sanctum, the crystal forces each individual to experience his or her worst nightmare: D'Ken imagines death at the hands of his monstrous pet, the "Soul Eater"; Nightcrawler relives his fear of being lynched by a bigoted mob, now composed of his friends, the X-Men; and Corsair remembers the murder of his wife at the hands of D'Ken's henchmen years before. With each image, entire psychic histories flash before our eyes, linking the affective lives of each character to the universal network of relations held together by the crystal's center of gravity. Surfacing from her own hallucination—the memory of her death and rebirth as Phoenix—Jean sees Cyclops lash out uncontrollably with his optic blasts, inadvertently rending the surface of the crystal's core. As it fractures, she calls out, "What do I do now?! I don't know what's in there, and even if I did, how am I supposed to stop it! I—I'm all alone."[38]

Combating her fear, Jean finds strength in her identity as a member of the X-Men: "The first thing—is not to panic. I am an X-Man. I've been in tough spots before and I've always come through with flying colors." Speaking these words aloud, Jean projects the Phoenix Force from her body, a cosmic flame in the shape of the mythical bird of its namesake. Beholding the torn latticework binding the universe at its core, she intones, "I'm Jean—yet I'm Phoenix. And I feel as if, for the first time . . . I'm truly alive. This lattice, it's alive. And it's dying." The consequences of the crystal's destruction unfold in her mind's eye, the universe torn asunder, her loved ones swept into the void. In this moment of expanded consciousness, Jean weds her self-actualization with the necessity for affiliation and connection beyond the self; she understands that the process of negotiating multiple identities—to be Jean and Phoenix and an X-Man simultaneously—requires her to declare emancipation from the limits of her former life while affirming the manifold relations that define her as a living part of the world.

So vast is the latticework's reach that even Phoenix's power is not

enough to heal it: "It's absorbing me!" Jean rages in frustration, "It's pulling me so far away from the human plane of reality—that it's as if I no longer exist!" In her moment of greatest need, Jean's desperate plea is answered by her chosen sister, Ororo: "But you *do* exist!" Storm exclaims, reaching for her friend's hand across the chasm separating them, "You need an anchor in this cosmic maelstrom, Jean. I will be that anchor." Held back by her conscience, Jean replies, "No! Storm—Ororo . . . the anchor you offer is your life-force!" To Jean's caveat Storm responds affirmatively, "It is my life to give, my friend." As she utters these words, a panel depicts Storm's hand reaching through the energy field to clasp Jean's in a gesture that affirms her material existence (see fig. 5).

Storm's embrace galvanizes Jean to expand the network, stretching out her free hand to Corsair, who first refuses her call but relents when she recognizes him as Cyclops's father. Acknowledged as the X-Men's kin, Corsair joins Storm in psychically anchoring Jean and giving life to the Phoenix. The double embrace of Storm and Corsair unifies the previously rent identities depicted in the famous cover image to *X-Men* #101, joining categories of male and female, black and white, while bridging the gap between the liberal and cultural feminist worldviews embodied by Jean and Storm respectively. In light of the internal divisions over questions of race and class privilege that plagued women's liberation in the mid-1970s, to see a black woman join hands with a white woman to save the universe was no minor representational achievement; that popular fantasy would engage this vision in mass media concurrent with radical political attempts to articulate cross-racial alliances between women indicated fantasy's imbrication in American political life.[39] Storm's gesture also performs historical reparation for her abandonment following her parents' death. Figuratively completing the grasp her mother's lifeless hand could not reciprocate years before, Storm's gesture of solidarity engenders a cross-racial sisterhood that ameliorates the atrocities marking the individual histories of those bound within it by producing new intimacies based on agency rather than the vicissitudes of identity and political history.

Flying into the heart of the latticework, Jean and Phoenix become one, and above the fray of Shi'ar civil war, of mutant and human conflict, all of Jean's identities merge into a single cosmic form enveloping the crystal to heal the wounds inflicted upon it by a universe of

Figure 5 Storm offers Phoenix a psychic anchor. Image from Chris Claremont (w) and John Byrne (p), "Armageddon Now!" *X-Men* #108 (December 1977), Marvel Comics; reprinted in *Uncanny X-Men Omnibus*, 325.

strife. Finally Jean's consciousness expands to encompass the universe itself, "the patterns of her life, of the X-Men's lives, becoming one with the lattice pattern":

> She falters—panic seizing her as she realizes that for all her awesome power, she still can't do it alone. And then, suddenly she isn't alone. The spirits of the X-Men are with her, giving of themselves as Storm and Corsair gave. In that instant—she feels her power, the powers of her friends sing within her; as she reenergizes the energy lattice . . . . A new pattern forms—shaped like the mys-

> tic tree of life—with Xavier its lofty crown and Colossus its base. Each X-Man has a place, each a purpose greater than him or herself. And the heart of that tree, the catalyst that binds these wayward souls together, is Phoenix. Tiphareth . . . the vision of the Harmony of Things.[40]

Experiencing a state of literal ecstasy while repairing the latticework, Jean's identity is thrown into disarray, and she is no longer able to distinguish herself from the Phoenix, the Phoenix from the cosmos. Much like her initial transformation into Phoenix, Jean's encounter with the M'Kraan Crystal is visualized through the sensory discourse of gay and feminist public cultures, specifically the language of bodily transformation through a variety of states of ecstatic pleasure that included the intoxicating highs of the disco dance floor and the orgasmic intensities of sexual liberation. As Robert McRuer explains, "For . . . most historians of disco . . . the dance floor was a place where one's individual identity could disintegrate and be absorbed into the larger mass of writhing bodies. Through . . . openness to others and . . . a range of bodily pleasures, the self could be remade."[41] This description parallels Jean's experience of reknitting the fabric of the cosmos: as her body is subsumed within the vast power of the Phoenix, Jean is recast as a being made up of the many lives, histories, and experiences that constitute a social world.

Although the visual appropriation of gay and feminist public cultures was a recurrent motif throughout the X-Men series in the 1970s, it was not the only cultural resource from which the comic book gleaned its most powerful figural metaphors. As Jean's transformative experience in the heart of the M'Kraan Crystal attests, the comic book's invocation of "Tiphareth," a Kabbalan term denoting the universal order of all things (literally, "the tree of life"), simultaneously uses spiritual myth for the purpose of articulating alternative social bonds. To invoke Haraway's figural politics, in "The Phoenix Saga" the X-Men, the M'Kraan Crystal, and the Phoenix Force become companion species whose interactions redefine the identities of all the actors involved while expanding their network of relations beyond the purportedly all-inclusive sign of a "universal humanity" toward a cross-species kinship more properly described as a "queer" mutanity.

Whether depicted in the mutated bodies of superhuman outcasts, the visual politics of gay and feminist public cultures, or the iconic

figures of ancient myth, the narration of mutually transformative encounters between unlikely allies in "The Phoenix Saga" was also the central concern of a variety of stories across the *X-Men* series. The *X-Men*'s cultural purchase, then, lay in its ability to visualize alternative solidarities at a moment when traditional political affiliations, notions of normative family life, and heteronormative sexual relations were being radically reorganized in U.S. culture. Rather than rail against such changes and the loss of formerly "stable" binding categories of political and social identity, the *X-Men* sought to engage the contradictions, labors, and potential pleasures of fantasizing new modes of relationality. At the same time, its visual experiments in representing these previously ignored relations tied the creative production of science fiction, fantasy, and myth to the political requirements of everyday survival for all those who did not conform to mainstream representations of the ideal humanist subject or the proper citizen. In so doing, the *X-Men* figured popular fantasy as the site for revitalizing a cosmopolitan world-making project in the age of identity politics.

In Issue #119, one year after saving the universe from annihilation, the X-Men convene in Japan at the home of their former teammate Sunfire to celebrate the Christmas holiday. Struck by the intimacy of the scene, Storm thinks to herself, "So much has changed between we six since we became X-Men . . . we began as loners. And have grown into a family." Filled with emotion, she turns to Nightcrawler and says, "Kurt? I just wanted to tell you . . . that I love you very much." In the following panel, Storm confronts Colossus, brooding apart from the group; he admits, "I feel as close to you, to the X-Men, as to my own family. And that's the problem. I have a family. I think I am the only X-Man with roots, and tonight, I miss them." This moment of shared intimacy impressed upon readers both the powerful connections the X-Men had developed and the ongoing struggles they face to honor the diverse bonds that have made up their individual lives. Just as the Phoenix saga offered a political myth for describing cosmopolitan networks of kinship and affiliation, so too was the desire to reconcile the competing demands of varied loyalties a kind of myth making, a fantasy of unity amid stunning heterogeneity. As a new decade of threats to the survival of mutantkind appeared on the horizon, this was one reality the X-Men dared not dream away.[42]

George Washington University

Notes

This essay stems from a larger book project titled *Heroic Measures: Comic Book Superheroes and the Cultural Politics of American Popular Fantasy*. I thank the following colleagues and mentors for their scholarly insights, exacting critiques, and willingness to hear countless stories of superheroic adventure: Elisabeth Anker, Joseph Kip Kosek, Melani McAlister, Robert McRuer, Aaron Potenza, Stephanie Schulte, and Damon Young.

1 Saul Braun, "Shazam! Here Comes Captain Relevant," *New York Times*, 2 May 1971, SM32. As Bradford W. Wright points out, the article included a "college poll conducted by *Esquire* [that] revealed that student radicals ranked Spider-Man and the Hulk alongside the likes of Bob Dylan and Che Guevara as their favorite revolutionary icons (*Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2001], 223).

2 "O.K., You Passed the 2-S Test—Now You're Smart Enough for Comic Books," *Esquire*, September 1966, 115–18; Robin Green, "Face Front and Clap Your Hands! You're on the Winning Team," *Rolling Stone*, 16 September 1971, 28–34; Joanne Edgar, "Wonder Woman Revisited," *Ms. Magazine*, January 1972, 52–55.

3 Throughout this essay, I use the terms *fantasy* and *enchantment* interchangeably to describe cultural expressions of scientifically impossible phenomena. On the use of enchantment as a key term in the study of modernity, specifically as that which is opposed to or in tension with secularism and enlightenment rationalism, see Michael Saler, "Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review" *American Historical Review* 3 (June 2006): 692–716.

4 A genealogy of key texts in the theory of literary fantasy might include: Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (1919; reprint, New York: Penguin, 2003); Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (New York: Vintage, 1975); Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975); Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (New York: Routledge, 1981); Marina Warner, *From The Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1995); Fredric Jameson, "Radical Fantasy," and Mark Bould, "The Dreadful Credibility of Absurd Things: A Tendency in Fantasy Theory," *Historical Materialism* 10 (winter 2002): 273–80, 51–88.

5 Bould, "Dreadful Credibility," 75–81.

6 On the political dimensions of desire, see Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 14–16, 28–30. On "articulation" as a strategy of radical politics, see Chantal Mouffe, *The Return of the Political* (1993; reprint, New York: Verso, 2005), 18–19. My definition of popular fantasy resonates with Linda M. G. Zerilli's conception of "radical imagi-

nation" in her book *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*. Radical imagination describes the faculty through which one forges connections between previously unrelated real-world phenomena to produce a political relationship between them; this faculty necessarily demands that one imagine what it is like to see the same object or phenomena from a variety of other standpoints. For Zerilli, this is essentially the practice of *doing* politics, here understood as the ability to project something previously considered outside the realm of public discourse into a space where it can be taken up as the subject of debate in relation to collective political life. One example of this might be second-wave feminism's attempt to politicize the private lives of women—namely housework, the nuclear family ideal, and reproductive health—by making the very category of the "private sphere" a subject of contention that could be open to public debate and redefinition. Although popular fantasy and radical imagination both seek to expand what might count as part of the realm of legitimate political life, they are distinguished by the former's necessary use of impossible or magical phenomena as a vehicle for articulating new political relations. In this way popular fantasy accounts for the cultural aspect of politics by exploring the imaginative or fantastical sites where figures of political possibility are created and circulated. See Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005), 22–23, 87–91, 141–63.

7 Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 29.

8 See Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* (St. Paul: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2008), 4–27; and *The Haraway Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 1–46.

9 See Judith Butler and Susan Babbitt, "Feminism and Objective Interests: The Roles of Transformation Experiences in Rational Deliberation," in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993), 245–64.

10 See Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 1–8, 60–73.

11 I am referring to the feature film *Them!* (Gordon Douglas, 1954), Ira Levin's novel *The Stepford Wives* (1972) and its film adaptation (Bryan Forbes, 1975), and the comic book series the *X-Men* (beginning in 1963), respectively.

12 For an example of the use of fantasy to describe scientific realities, see *Time* magazine's "Men of the Year" issue, 2 January 1961, which celebrated the accomplishments of American scientists through an array of science-fiction metaphors equating them with intergalactic "explorers of the unknown" (www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,895239-1,00.html). Similarly, in his support of Project Plowshare, a government initiative to fund innovative applications of atomic power, Atomic Energy Commission chairman Glenn Seaborg claimed that nuclear power might exponentially enhance a man's strength, making him as "powerful as a forklift," and compared the physical strength of folk heroes like Paul Bun-

yan to nuclear energy (quoted in Michael Smith, "Advertising the Atom," in *American Technology*, ed. Carroll Pursell [Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001], 225).

13 On the bodily fantasies of the mutant superhero, see Scott Bukatman, "X-Bodies: The Torment of the Mutant Superhero," in *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Supermen in the Twentieth Century* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2003), 48–80.

14 See Kelly Moore, *Disrupting Science: Social Movements, American Scientists, and the Politics of the Military, 1945–1975* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press: 2008), 96–129; and Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring* (1952; reprint, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 8–37.

15 See *The Fantastic Four* and *The Avengers* (New York: Marvel Comics, 1961, 1963).

16 See Stan Lee (w) and Jack Kirby (p), *The X-Men Omnibus, Vol. 1* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2009); collects *X-Men* #1–31, originally published 1963–1967.

17 For the introduction of the new *X-Men*, see Len Wein (w) and Dave Cockrum (p), "Second Genesis," *Giant Size X-Men* #1 (February 1975), Marvel Comics.

18 On the heterogeneous alliances enabled under the sign of "gay identity" in the 1970s, see Robert McRuer, "Gay Gatherings: Reimagining the Counterculture," in *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and 70s*, ed. Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (New York: Routledge, 2002), 215–40.

19 See Wein (w) and Cockrum (p), *Giant Size X-Men* #1.

20 See Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 1–29.

21 On the superhero as an embodiment of New Deal liberalism, see Wright, *Comic Book Nation*, 24.

22 The history of government critique of the comic book industry is well documented in a variety of studies, including Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1998); Bart Beaty, *Frederic Wertham and the Critique of Mass Culture* (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 2005); and David Hadju, *The Ten-Cent Plague: The Great Comic Book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York: Picador, 2009).

23 Marilyn Brogdon, letter published in "X-Mail" section, Chris Claremont (w) and Dave Cockrum (p), "The Fall of the Tower," *X-Men* #103 (February 1977), Marvel Comics.

24 Mouffe, *Return of the Political*, 18–19.

25 See Chris Claremont (w) and John Byrne (p), "Home Are the Heroes!" *X-Men* #109 (February 1978), Marvel Comics.

26 On disco's gay and multiracial character, see McRuer, "Gay Gatherings"; Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2002), 72–75; and Alice

Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (New York: Norton, 2010).

27 See Chris Claremont (w) and Dave Cockrum (p), "Who Will Stop the Juggernaut?" *X-Men* #102 (December 1976), Marvel Comics.

28 See Chris Claremont (w) and Dave Cockrum (p), "Like a Phoenix from the Ashes!" *X-Men* #101 (October 1976), Marvel Comics.

29 See Claremont (w) and Cockrum (p), *X-Men* #102.

30 See Chris Claremont (w) and Dave Cockrum (p), "Greater Love Hath No X-Man . . ." *X-Men* #100 (August 1976), Marvel Comics.

31 Claremont (w) and Cockrum (p), *X-Men* #101, reprinted in *The Uncanny X-Men Omnibus, Vol. 1* (New York: Marvel Comics, 2006), 181.

32 Sam Binkley, *Getting Loose: Lifestyle Consumption in the 1970s* (Durham, N.C.: Duke Univ. Press, 2007), 3.

33 See Jane Gerhard, *Desiring Revolution: Second-Wave Feminism and the Re-writing of American Sexual Thought, 1920–1982* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2001).

34 Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 3–8.

35 Both scholarly and fan analyses of the Phoenix almost exclusively focus on the canonical 1980 storyline "The Dark Phoenix Saga," which narrates Jean Grey's loss of control over the Phoenix Force and her subsequent transformation into the malevolent Dark Phoenix, a villainous manifestation of the cosmic entity bent on consuming the energy of the universe. Scholarly commentators traditionally read the story as a feminist backlash narrative that punishes Jean for her extraordinary power and the sexual and emotional autonomy afforded her by the Phoenix Force. While I am sympathetic to a critical feminist reading of "The Dark Phoenix Saga," my sense is that this later story is often misread when considered outside of its context as a narrative counterpart to the original "Phoenix Saga." In my own work, I argue that the depiction of Jean possessed by the "evil" half of the Phoenix Force in "The Dark Phoenix Saga" is better understood as a frustrated lament over the failures of left world-making and alternative kinship projects in the 1970s rather than a conservative critique of feminist politics. See Chris Claremont (w) and John Byrne (w, p), *The Uncanny X-Men* #129–137 (1979–80), Marvel Comics.

36 Chris Claremont (w) and Dave Cockrum (p), "Where No X-Man Has Gone Before!" *X-Men* #107 (October 1977), Marvel Comics; reprinted in *Uncanny X-Men Omnibus*, 303.

37 See Chris Claremont (w) and Dave Cockrum (p), "Phoenix Unleashed!" *X-Men* #105 (June 1977), Marvel Comics; Claremont (w) and Cockrum (p), "Where No X-Man Has Gone Before!"; and Chris Claremont (w) and John Byrne (p), "Armageddon Now!" *X-Men* #108 (December 1977), Marvel Comics.

38 Claremont (w) and Byrne (p), *X-Men* #108; reprinted in *Uncanny X-Men Omnibus*, 323.

39 The key political text working to articulate a radical feminist worldview to a critique of the interlocking oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality in this period is "A Black Feminist Statement" by The Combahee River Collective (1977). The collective's formation in 1974 and publication of their statement in 1977 historically bookends the relaunch of the *X-Men* series and the publication of "The Phoenix Saga," arguably Marvel Comics's feminist statement of the 1970s.
40 Claremont (w) and Byrne (p), *X-Men* #108; reprinted in *Uncanny X-Men Omnibus*, 327.
41 McRuer, "Gay Gatherings," 231–32.
42 Chris Claremont (w) and John Byrne (w, p), "'Twas the Night before Christmas," *X-Men* #119 (March 1979), Marvel Comics; reprinted in *Uncanny X-Men Omnibus*, 540.