

REFRAMING NORMAL:
THE INCLUSION OF DEAF CULTURE IN THE X-MEN COMIC BOOKS

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ABSTRACT

Jeremy Wallach, Advisor

During the over fifty-year history of *The X-Men* comic books and the numerous stories told within the various series, the mutants have been intentionally written as metaphors for how ethnic, racial, sexual, religious, and cultural minorities are treated in the United States. During that same time, the writers also unintentionally mirror deaf individuals and Deaf Culture in their portrayal of mutants and X-Men. Considering the vast number of stories in existence, I focus on the early works of Stan Lee, Grant Morrison's time as author of *New X-Men*, Joss Whedon's time as author of *Astonishing X-Men*, and Matt Fraction's time as author of *Uncanny X-Men*. In this thesis, I perform a close reading of these four authors' works and compare them to the history of the deaf and Deaf in America.

In this close reading, I found three recurring themes within *The X-Men* comics that paralleled Deaf Culture: Geography, Colonization, and Culture. Both groups' origins lie in the residential schools that were founded to provide a supportive educational environment. From this environment, a culture developed and spread as students graduated. These same schools and cultures came under similar attacks from the dominant culture. They survived the attacks and have grown stronger since. Throughout, I use theorists such as Gramsci and Althusser alongside Deaf Studies scholars such as Lennard Davis and Douglas Baynton to analyze these themes, parallels, and events. These parallels potentially allow readers to be more accepting and understanding of Deaf Culture because they introduce Deaf Culture to the reader in the familiar setting of the superhero comic narrative.

“When you talk to people who can hear and you ask them, what do you think it would be like to be a deaf person? Then all of their thinking is well, I couldn’t do this. Can’t, can’t, can’t, can’t, can’t. They would start listing all the things they can’t do. And I don’t think like that. Deaf people don’t think like that. We think about what we can do.”

-I. King Jordan, former President, Gallaudet University

“Woman called me a disease. You know how that feels to me? I can’t even sheathe. My claws won’t go back. She said we were a disease.”

“She said the mutant strain was a disease.”

“Think she knows the difference?”

-Logan and Kitty Pryde, *Astonishing X-Men* #2

To Connor.

Thank you for believing in me more than I did sometimes.

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INTRODUCTION

The first time I set foot in a comic book shop, I was a sophomore in college. I grew up hearing “Comic books are for boys!” and lived in towns where there were no comic shops. But, thanks to watching *Batman: The Animated Series* and *Spider-Man: The Animated Series*, as well as having access to the Internet, I knew about some of the titles. Eventually, I decided to pick a few up, some of the “classics” in my opinion: *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *Uncanny X-Men*. I very quickly discovered that their stories stretched across many other titles, which is how I got introduced to *The Avengers*, *Excalibur* Vol. 3, and many others.

Around that same time, I began taking classes to work toward a Disability Studies minor. It was a new program and greatly appealed to me as a student in Speech and Hearing Science with the intent of becoming a speech therapist. I was taking American Sign Language classes for the enjoyment of it, since they did not count toward the foreign language requirement at the time. I knew being a speech therapist would involve working with the D/deaf and the disabled, so it made sense to learn as much as I could about both communities. In my “Introduction to Disability Studies” class, my instructor was teaching us about the social model of disability and took a creative approach to getting us to think more deeply about it. He had us move our desks into a circle and pulled out a plush hat that looked like it could have come out of the movie *A Bug's Life* and put it on. He said that as the hat passed around the circle, the wearer would have to come up with a new example of someone who fits under the social model of disability. I was vibrating in my chair, anxiously waiting for the hat to get to me because I had a unique example.

Before telling you what my example was, allow me to explain the social model of disability. The social model of disability, put simply, states that disability is not a product of a person's body, but the barriers that society puts in place that make it hard for them to live their

lives as easily as those who are not disabled. Many people would say that those without disabilities are “normal,” but, as Lennard Davis states in *Enforcing Normalcy*, the concept of “normal” did not apply to the human body until the 1800s when statistics was also first applied to the human body. It was also at that time that the concept of a person being disabled came to be introduced as well. This concept of disability was the medical model of disability, which looks at the body and states that because it does not conform to the “norm,” physically or mentally, it is disabled.

The hat finally made its way down to me. My seat was not far from the instructor, but it felt like forever. I felt silly putting the hat on, so I put it on my desk, which was fine, and gave my example: The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. My instructor, probably everyone but I only remember seeing him, gave me a look of interest and curiosity, and asked me to explain. I had grown up watching the cartoon series on Saturday mornings in the 80s and 90s, so I was very familiar with them. I explained that per the social model of disability, they were disabled because they were not able to live “normal” lives because they were anthropomorphic, human-sized turtles with masks. When they were out fighting crime, they would not hide their appearance, but would disappear as quickly as possible after the fight was over to avoid humans. The disabling aspect came into play when they would go to pick up the pizza they would order over the phone. I cannot remember how, but they had developed a taste for pizza while living in the sewers. In order to pick up their order with as little fuss as possible, they would don hats, trench coats, and masks that would make them look human. They felt they had to hide their appearance because they were not human, thus not “normal,” and thus avoid the fear and violent reactions they experienced when people saw them. It was disabling.

The feedback I received was positive. My instructor said it was a different way of approaching the topic, but an accurate one. Soon after I realized that this could apply to anyone with superhuman abilities in the comic books, hero or villain. I wrote about this further for the final paper of the class. Soon after that, I started to notice something about the mutants of the *X-Men* universe specifically: they could easily be read as a metaphor for disability in addition to race and being part of the QUILTBAG¹ community. I started focusing more of my research on those similarities, some of which were experimentation on because of who they were, living together in neighborhoods, and targeted genocide. I also started to notice aspects of mutant life and culture that more directly related to American Deaf Culture and the American Deaf Community: residential schools, ideology, and the ways dominant society tried to make them “normal”.

After graduating from college, I kept doing research on the X-Men in my spare time. As I began reading more titles and became familiar with more of the past storylines and the first comics, I began to see a stronger correlation between the Deaf and mutants than I did between the disabled and mutants. This correlation is the focus of this thesis: I offer a Deaf reading of the *X-Men* and mutants. Since the first issue of *The X-Men* went on sale in September 1963², combined with the fact that there are around one-hundred different titles in the comics alone, most with a minimum of five issues each, not including the movies, television series, and video games³, I will not be looking at all things *X-Men*.

¹ Queer/Questioning Undecided Intersex Lesbian Transgender/Third Gender Bisexual Asexual/Ally Gay

² Darowski, *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor*, 19.

³ *Ibid.*, 1.

Scope of the Study

I have selected three authors as well as two trade paperback⁴ collections to look at. Over the course of this study, I looked at Grant Morrison's time as author of the *New X-Men*, Joss Whedon's time as author of the *Astonishing X-Men*, and Matt Fraction's time as author of the *Uncanny X-Men*. I also looked at *Marvel Masterworks: The X-Men Vol. 1* by Stan Lee, which collects the first ten issues of *The X-Men*, and *X-Men: Days of Future Past* by Chris Claremont. I chose the first three authors named above for a few reasons.

First, they all pick up on the same storyline, picking up where the other left off in many respects. There is a sense of continuity present, despite there being years between titles, because all three focus on Scott "Cyclops" Summers as he leads the school and the community, as well as Emma Frost, Logan "Wolverine," Kitty "Shadowcat" Pryde, Piotr "Colossus" Rasputin, and Hank "Beast" McCoy as the team based out of the school.

Second, all three authors focus on the X-Men ideology, and the culture and community that formed around it. Grant Morrison focused his stories more on the school and the students than the typical fights with the villains. He shows more of the struggle that the students have with adapting to their new life with their new abilities and the hate they are subjected to from humans. Joss Whedon introduced the creation, by a human scientist, of a "cure" for being a mutant, and the reaction to it from mutants and humans alike. Matt Fraction focused mostly on their struggle to find a place where they could live in harmony with humans, which had always been a major goal.

⁴ Trade paperbacks are collections of issues printed in one collection, without the advertisements found in single issues.

The two trade paperback collections I include are due to the specific events each covers. *The X-Men* Vol. 1 collects the first ten issues that were ever written about or including the X-Men or mutants as characters. This is important because it is where the story begins, but also because of how the story is set. The foundations that Lee set in those first ten issues are still influencing the stories told today. This will become much clearer in the following chapters. The *Days of Future Past* includes a two-issue story that involves a dystopian future inspired by prejudice and legal actions against mutants. While these two trade paperbacks fall outside the work of the three authors on which I focus, they include information vital to my argument.

There are three overarching themes, I notice, consistently present in the stories of the *X-Men* comic books that have correlations to Deaf Culture and the Deaf community. They are cultural geography, colonization, and culture. First, I look at their use of cultural geography. Both communities construct physical boundaries to create a space in the real world where their members can be themselves without fear of discrimination or prejudice. More specifically, members of both communities use residential schools as centers of their communities as well as centers of research and outreach to the rest of the world. Second, I look at how dominant society continually attempts to colonize these groups. It is not simply that both have been the targets of colonization; any minority group has been subject to colonization or attempted colonization. Where the similarity lies is in *how* the dominant culture has attempted to colonize both groups and how both groups have fought against it. Finally, I look at the ideologies and cultures that have grown around both groups. I look at how these ideologies have developed due to the use of geography and the attempts at colonization.

Terminology

Before I move on, I will explain a few terms and how I use them throughout this study. First, there are specific ways in which I will refer to both groups. In both groups, there is a medical and social way of identifying individuals. The precedent I will be working from is one based on academic writings regarding the American Deaf community and the ways in which it distinguishes between two ways of identifying. The medical condition of deafness or being deaf is written with a lowercase “d.” Individuals who view their deafness simply as a medical condition are also referred to in this way. Individuals who identify as a part of the culture and community are referred to as Deaf, with an uppercase “D,” no matter where in the sentence the word falls. When referring to both, it is typically written as D/deaf, including all individuals, whether they identify with the culture or not.

Based on this, I have broken down mutants in a similar way. In the comics, individuals who have an active x-gene are referred to as mutants. This condition or individuals who view it as such will be written consistently with the lowercase “m”. Individuals whose personal opinion about their mutation aligns with the ideals of the culture created and cultivated at Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters, which is also the home base for the X-Men, tend to associate with the school. Throughout this work, I will refer to those individuals as X-Men, whether they are students at the school or graduates. It will depend on the context which I use to refer to both. Either “mutants” or “X-Men and mutants” will be used as is appropriate.

Second, as I mentioned earlier, Lennard Davis has pointed out the root of the word “normal” in his book *Enforcing Normalcy*. The word “normal” was a carpentry term for something being square. It was not until 1840 that the term was used to refer to individuals. Soon

after that, the words “average” and “abnormal” began to be used in the same way⁵. Therefore, I will use more specific language than “normal” whenever possible as well as always putting it in quotation marks whenever I use it. The idea of “normal” is a subjective one, as will be made clear in chapter three of this work.

Why is This Important?

Most of the time when I explain what my thesis is looking at, people pause, think, and respond with something along the lines of “Wow, I hadn’t thought of it like that!” But every once in a while, I get asked “Why? What’s the point?” My first reaction was “Does there need to be a point? Isn’t it amazing that this is present and no one has looked at it yet?” As I did more research and got farther into working on it, I realized I had a rejoinder to those questions that was not more questions.

The messages that audiences decode from popular culture are not always the ones that are intended by the writers. But there is always a message that the audience takes away from it.⁶ The dominant reading shows that the *X-Men* comics have always been a metaphor for minority. They have intentionally been written as a metaphor for race, gender, sexuality, religion, and being a teenager with a changing body. This is the message the authors intend for the audience to take away from the text.⁷

My reading of the comics, and the basis for this work, is a negotiated reading of the text.⁸ While the authors have not intentionally put elements of Deaf Culture into their stories, I see it present from issue #1. Whether or not readers decode the comics in this way,⁹ they are still being

⁵ Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 24.

⁶ Hall, “Encoding/Decoding.”

⁷ Darowski, *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor*.

⁸ Hall, “Encoding/Decoding.”

⁹ Ibid.

exposed to elements of Deaf Culture. It makes them more familiar with these elements and helps them seem less foreign when they encounter them in real life. It is an unintentional, but positive, inoculation of Deaf Culture, one that helps readers become more accepting of differences that are both intentionally and unintentionally written into the stories.

If nothing else, my goal is that this work highlights how Deaf people are not people who cannot hear, but people who have a unique language and a culture that is as unique as their language, the same way that X-Men are not people with a disease that needs to be cured, but people who have unique abilities and culture.

CHAPTER I: IT STARTED WITH A SCHOOL

The first similarity I saw between X-Men and Deaf Culture was their use of geography. Both cultures can trace their history back to a specific location, a residential school just for their population. Residential schools are institutions where children live in dormitories during the school year while attending classes during the day, similar to boarding schools. They are prominent in different populations, including the Deaf community. The X-Men also use residential schools to instruct their children. Two schools, Gallaudet University in the Deaf community, and the Xavier Institute for the X-Men, have evolved to become something more. Both institutions are a “base” for their community and Culture. They provide a place where individuals can feel “normal” and do not have to hide who they truly are. These institutions are also centers of research and outreach to the dominant community.

There is one other correlation between the two Cultures and their use of geography. A minimum of once in their respective histories, the community has looked at establishing borders that would create a separate state of some degree for the members of the community. In the Deaf community, it was a state in the western frontier of the United States. In the X-Men community, the separate country of Genosha was established and later destroyed, resulting in the largest genocide in the recorded history of mutantkind. More recently, the remaining X-Men seceded from the United States on an island off the coast of San Francisco they named Utopia.

In this chapter, I will be examining the correlations between residential schools, specifically the Xavier Institute, the American School for the Deaf, and Gallaudet University. I will also be examining the correlation between the Deaf State movement and Utopia, as well as why the former never manifested while the latter did. These are examples of how the Deaf and the X-Men use geography to create a place of their own in the world.

Residential Schools

The first issue of *The X-Men* introduces us to the concept of mutants, Professor Charles “Professor X” Xavier, and his “exclusive private school in New York’s Westchester County.”¹ At first, there are only four students: Scott “Cyclops” Summers, Bobby “Iceman” Drake, Henry “Beast” McCoy, and Warren “Archangel” Worthington III.² They are introduced to us while in uniform and about to start their specialized lessons focused on each one’s unique abilities, guided by Xavier. Their lessons also use equipment and machines designed to challenge their abilities and help them improve their skills³.

Within these first seven pages of the comic, I see residential schools for the Deaf prominently displayed in a way that could not have been known by the author, Stan Lee. At that point, Deaf culture was still fairly unknown by mainstream society.⁴ The fact that it is named Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters, until the mid-1990s, alludes to the boarding schools established for more well-known groups, like the wealthy or the intellectually gifted. But it is the specialized training and reasoning behind founding the school that point to residential schools for the Deaf.

The first school for the Deaf opened its doors on April 15, 1817 in Hartford, Connecticut. The Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons, renamed the American School for the Deaf (ASD) in 1885, became the model for Deaf education that is still used today by many state schools for the Deaf. It was founded by the partnership of Thomas Hopkins (T.H.) Gallaudet, Dr. Mason Cogswell, and Laurent Clerc.⁵ T.H. Gallaudet saw the

¹ Lee and Kirby, *The X-Men #1* reprinted in *Marvel Masterworks: The X-Men Vol. 1*, 1.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., 2.

⁴ Nomeland and Nomeland, *The Deaf Community in America*, 90.

⁵ Ibid., 35.

need and ability to teach the deaf, something that ran against dominant thinking at the time. After encountering Dr. Cogswell's young daughter and teaching her the connection between objects and the written words that represent them,⁶ he went to Europe to learn teaching methods from well-established schools there. Eventually he found his way to the Royal National Institution for the Deaf-Mutes in Paris, France. He spent two months learning both the methods used by the instructors to teach as well as the language used not only to teach, but communicate, at the school: *langue des signes française*, French Sign Language.⁷ When he returned to Connecticut, he not only had some fluency in French Sign Language, but brought Laurent Clerc to become the first instructor at the school. Clerc was a deaf instructor, former student, of the Institution who agreed to come with T.H. Gallaudet to establish the school.

The school was established as a residential school to allow students from across New England, slowly expanding to include much of the eastern United States, to attend the school. It allowed the school to teach a wider population of deaf children in the United States. As part of its founding charter, the state of Connecticut granted the school five-thousand dollars, in addition to the five-thousand that Cogswell and colleagues had raised, to support the school.⁸ This meant that students could attend the school without having to worry about paying for room and board. Other states provided financial assistance to students who wanted to attend the school which brought the cost down to “a fee still below that of private schools or tutors”.⁹

This meant that deaf children were now able to receive an education specialized for them; everything was taught using sign language. The students would receive an education on par with

⁶ Ibid., 33.

⁷ Ibid., 35.

⁸ Van Cleve and Crouch, *A Place of Their Own*, 44.

⁹ Ibid., 47.

their hearing peers in reading, writing, arithmetic, and religion, as well as skills in trades they could use after graduating to be successfully employed, for the boys, and keeping a house and family, for the girls.¹⁰

While ASD is the foundation for Deaf education in America and was the center of the community for about forty years, the center has shifted south to Washington, D.C., soon after a new school was founded: The Columbia Institution for the Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind, known today as Gallaudet University. As the only university in the world for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing, Gallaudet has become the center of Deaf Culture and the community in America, as well as around the world.

It was founded during the increase in deaf schools across the country as individuals graduated from the ASD and went back to their home states,¹¹ and through another partnership: Amos Kendall and Edward Miner (E.M.) Gallaudet. Kendall was a former postmaster general of the United States as well as friend and business partner of Samuel Morse. Through Morse, he found out about the Deaf community and the need for a school for the deaf in the D.C. area¹². He donated a house and two acres of land to start the school, in addition to getting a bill introduced into Congress to support the school in a similar way to other state schools, defraying the cost of attendance for the students.¹³ The bill passed, making the Columbia Institution a federally chartered institution, which meant Congress had a controlling interest in how money was spent at the school. It also meant that the cost of attending the school was either greatly reduced or was completely covered, making it affordable for students to attend. While Congress' influence is

¹⁰ Ibid., 71.

¹¹ Ibid., 47.

¹² Armstrong, *The History of Gallaudet University*, 1.

¹³ Nomeland and Nomeland, *The Deaf Community in America*, 40.

greatly reduced today¹⁴, the cost of attendance is still reduced for deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

E.M. Gallaudet was the youngest son of T.H. Gallaudet,¹⁵ was fluent in ASL thanks to his father and mother, a graduate of the ASD, and strongly believed in the education of the deaf.¹⁶ When Kendall approached E.M. Gallaudet to be superintendent of the school, they became fast friends, bonding over their similar educational goals, and he agreed to take the position.¹⁷ The elementary school opened its doors on June 13, 1857 with E.M. Gallaudet as superintendent and Kendall as president of the board.¹⁸

Almost immediately E.M. Gallaudet wanted to establish a college for the deaf.¹⁹ He worked to get a bill introduced in Congress to expand the school to include a college as well as funding for the college and its students. On April 8, 1864, President Abraham Lincoln signed the bill, establishing the first college for the deaf in the world. Two changes were made soon after. The first was to make EMG the president of the entire institution²⁰. The second was to relocate the blind pupils to the nearby Maryland School for the Blind²¹. The opinion was they would be better served there, where their needs were the entire focus of the school. That also allowed for the Institution to fully focus on the needs of their deaf students.

A few years after the college opened its doors, the number of students enrolled increased in size and the students were coming from farther away. Students were beginning to come from the Midwest as well as the East Coast. A few years after that, students began traveling from

¹⁴ “Congressional or Federal Charters: Overview and Current Issues - PolicyArchive.”

¹⁵ Van Cleve and Crouch, *A Place of Their Own*, 38.

¹⁶ Armstrong, *The History of Gallaudet University*, 2.

¹⁷ Nomeland and Nomeland, *The Deaf Community in America*, 40.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁹ Van Cleve and Crouch, *A Place of Their Own*, 82.

²⁰ Nomeland and Nomeland, *The Deaf Community in America*, 42.

²¹ Armstrong, *The History of Gallaudet University*, 9.

much of the nation. By the 1880s, international students began enrolling in the college.²² In 1894, it was decided to change the name of the college to Gallaudet College, in honor of T.H. Gallaudet²³. Ever since, Gallaudet has been the only university in the world designed for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. This has led it to be more than just a place of higher education, but a place where deaf people can come to from all over the globe and feel like they are at home, despite being surrounded by people they have never met.

At Xavier's the focus and training are not based on language, but on each student's abilities and powers, as well as using those powers together successfully as a team. But it is like Deaf residential schools in the other respects. On page 7 of issue #1, Xavier concludes their training session by announcing that a new student will be arriving shortly, "a most attractive **young lady!**" As Jean Grey enters, she is greeted by Xavier who explains that the school is a "most exclusive" school for mutants. After meeting the boys, and demonstrating her powers to end their arguing over who gets to be a gentleman to her, Xavier explains further to Jean, as well as the reader, about the school and mutants.²⁴

Xavier explains that he was born with what is eventually referred to as the x-gene. Individuals with this gene "possess an **extra** power...one which ordinary humans do **not!!**"²⁵ When his mutation presented itself as telepathy, the ability to read and control others minds as well as project his thoughts into them to communicate, he was feared and not trusted because of his abilities. After being out in the world, he came to the decision to create a school where mutants could not only receive an education in the same subjects that their peers learned in

²² Ibid, 8.

²³ Ibid, 16.

²⁴ Lee and Kirby, *The X-Men* #1 reprinted in *Marvel Masterworks: The X-Men Vol. 1*, 9.

²⁵ Ibid, 8.

school, but also a place to learn how to control their mutant abilities.²⁶ The fact that Xavier founded his school as a haven speaks to the times in which the events take place, something that will be discussed later in chapter three.

On page 16, it is revealed that the school is a residential one as Jean Grey looks at herself in her new uniform in the mirror. This, along with the training sessions and equipment, are the two basic aspects of the school that never change over the years. The school is demolished and rebuilt numerous times, expands to accommodate more students, and upgrades the technology used, but always remains a residential school for mutants. This follows the same logic as residential schools for the Deaf.

Being a mutant is not limited to one area or even one country in the same way that being deaf is not limited. When *Giant-Size X-Men #1* debuts in 1975, reviving the title after five years of reprinting existing stories, a new team of mutants have been recruited by Xavier from Germany, Canada, Kenya, Japan, Siberia, and a reservation in Arizona.²⁷ This inclusion of mutants from across the globe continues to this day, like the international student population at Gallaudet University. In Grant Morrison's *New X-Men*, Xavier is shown using the Cerebra machine to enhance his telepathic abilities to locate mutants across the globe.²⁸ Over the course of his time as writer, we are introduced to mutants from Australia, China, Afghanistan,²⁹ and France³⁰.

²⁶ Ibid, 10.

²⁷ Darowski, *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor*, 61.

²⁸ Morrison, *New X-Men #114* reprinted in *New X-Men by Grant Morrison Ultimate Collection, Vol. 1*.

²⁹ Morrison, *New X-Men by Grant Morrison Ultimate Collection, Vol. 1*.

³⁰ Morrison, *New X-Men by Grant Morrison Ultimate Collection, Vol. 2*.

Why Residential Schools?

Students benefit from living at their schools on multiple levels. First, they can stay in this accepting environment unless they choose to leave to go into town or to go home for break. This allows them to be free of any prejudice or discrimination they would encounter in the dominant society. For those students who are the targets of this in their own home, being in this environment is even more important.

For Deaf students, much of this lies in their freedom of language. Living at a residential school, students have a community wherein they can communicate easily and consistently. This is due to living with the other students and the instructors and staff, all of whom use sign language. When the ASD first opened, French Sign Language was the only sign language used.³¹ But some students, mostly those from Martha's Vineyard, had sign languages of their own and brought them with them to the school.³² The students began to mix these sign languages with the French Sign Language they were being taught.³³ This led to the creation of American Sign Language, ASL, which became the language used by the deaf, both in and out of the classroom, as it spread with the students when they returned home for vacation and holidays, and after graduation. This visual language allowed them to communicate clearly with others without having to be restricted to only using written language or trying to use spoken language. When the oralism movement gained popularity in the late 1800s, this freedom of language began to be questioned and restricted. I will be discussing this in depth in chapter 2, but, because of oralism, by 1900 sign language was rapidly becoming something that needed to be hidden, both at home and at school.

³¹ Nomeland and Nomeland, *The Deaf Community in America*, 38.

³² *Ibid*, 28.

³³ Baynton, *Forbidden Signs*, 12.

Second, students are given specialized education with respect to their abilities. At Xavier's, most of this happens in what is termed the Danger Room.³⁴ The Danger Room is a large room at Xavier's that is full of automated equipment to test each X-Man's specific skill set, including trap doors, weapons, and gymnastics equipment. It is where all the training of their abilities takes place in the early comics. Professor Xavier sits near the control panel to make sure the equipment is working properly, as well as to guide their training. He instructs them in how he wants them to use the equipment as well as use their abilities on each other.³⁵

The Danger Room evolves and grows as time goes by. By modern times, the Danger Room has been upgraded to include holographs to provide simulated environments as well as opponents to work against. For example, in *New X-Men* #117, Hank is shown training a new student in what appears to be a snow-covered forest. When the new student voices disappointment over his performance, his inability to fly, Hank is very supportive and positive as the environment around them melts away to reveal the steel walls and floor of the Danger Room: "You're here at Xavier's to learn, and to develop your mutant gift."³⁶ This is a phrase that is used, if not in the same words, with the same intention, throughout the series.

Later, in *Astonishing X-Men* #7, the Danger Room has been disabled after an attack. But that does not mean that it is unusable. Logan has brought his combat class to the room for training. When a student points out that the room has been disabled and asks what the danger is, he responds by smiling and turning out the lights.³⁷ While technology is an asset for training, it is never a necessity.

³⁴ Lee, *Marvel Masterworks: The X-Men Vol. 1*, 73.

³⁵ Lee and Kirby, *The X-Men* #1 reprinted in *Marvel Masterworks: The X-Men Vol. 1*, 2.

³⁶ Morrison, *New X-Men by Grant Morrison Ultimate Collection, Vol. 1*.

³⁷ Whedon, *Astonishing X-Men, Vol. 2*.

Deaf education in America takes a different approach to teaching students to use their gifts to the best of their ability. T.H. Gallaudet set a precedent when he opened the American School for the Deaf: use American Sign Language as the form of communication both inside and outside of the classroom. Students who arrive at the school not knowing the language were taught it and could pick it up quickly due to their complete immersion in it. This continued to Gallaudet University, which is what makes it so unique. It is the only university in the world designed to be barrier free for the deaf and hard-of-hearing, which has been the goal of the institution since it was founded.

Finally, many of the instructors at the schools understand the world the students are living in because they are a part of that world as well. At Xavier's, the instructors we see are usually a part of the X-Men. They are mutants who have had experience in combat and diplomacy and other interactions with the outside world. They typically teach the subjects that are unique to the school: combat, ethics, medicine, leadership, etc. They teach the students how to use their mutant abilities "[t]o teach you the skills necessary for survival in a world which sees us as freakish and threatening" to quote Emma Frost, and "to use [their] powers for the benefit of mankind" to quote Professor Xavier.

In the beginning, Professor Xavier is the only instructor seen at the school. After the first class of X-Men graduated, some stay at the school to become instructors for the next group of young X-Men. In Morrison's *New X-Men*, the X-Men instructors are Scott, Jean, Hank, Logan, and Emma Frost. In Whedon's *Astonishing X-Men*, Scott, Hank, Logan, Emma, and Kitty Pryde are the instructors. Notice that Scott, Jean, and Hank are all part of that original class, and Kitty is a later graduate of the school. It is a recurring theme that students stay to become teachers at the school.

This approach of having graduates teach echoes the faculty and staff at residential schools, from the founding of the American School for the Deaf through today. Laurent Clerc is the earliest example. While he was not a student of ASD, he was a graduate of the National Institution for Deaf-Mutes and was an instructor there before coming to America with Gallaudet. He was also a model to his successors of how to be a Deaf instructor at the school and role model for the students. He not only taught the students sign language and other subjects, he taught them that a deaf person can be successful, educated, social, and hard-working. He taught them through example in the same way that Professor Xavier did for his students, simply by being himself.

Many graduates of ASD followed in Clerc's footsteps and became teachers themselves. Some stayed at ASD and added to the faculty to teach the ever-growing student population. Others took the education that they received back to their home state and either founded a school for the deaf for their state or taught at newly-founded schools. By 1843 there were six other state-supported or state-operated residential schools for the deaf. All of them used the manual approach, using sign language, to teaching their students, with many staff members being graduates of residential schools. This continued at Gallaudet University, starting with the first graduate of the National Deaf-Mute College, who immediately joined the faculty of the college.

However, in a rare instance of characters discussing other instructors, readers of the *Astonishing X-Men* find out that the entire teaching staff is not made up of X-Men. When addressing the students at the beginning of the school year, Emma reminds the students that “respect for your teachers, mutant and human alike, will be expected of all of you”³⁸. It is not surprising that instructors from outside of the school would come in to teach more traditional school subjects like math, English, history, etc. Yet, we never see them in the comics. Even when

³⁸ Whedon, *Astonishing X-Men* #1 reprinted in *Astonishing X-Men. Vol. 1: Gifted*.

the school comes under attack, there is no mention of getting them to safety. I realize that the comics are focusing on the X-Men, but showing the human instructors who go there to teach these young X-Men would be a positive image. With students not required to hide their abilities or appearances, I highly doubt that these instructors would be anti-mutant. I imagine that most of them would consider themselves allies to the X-Men.

Including allies on the teaching staff is still common in schools for the deaf today. T.H. Gallaudet was the first example by founding the school and acting as its first superintendent. The original teaching staff was hearing, with the exception of Clerc, for two reasons. First, Clerc could not teach all the subjects to all the students. Second, there were no deaf instructors at the time.³⁹ This trend continued to the founding of Gallaudet University. Both E.M. Gallaudet and Kendall were allies of the deaf. E.M. Gallaudet felt there were no deaf individuals qualified to teach at the college, and hired hearing instructors.⁴⁰ At both institutions, instructors were taught ASL and would teach their students using ASL.⁴¹

Their Place in Culture

One of the more visible ways in which these institutions are more than just schools is the fact that they are also research centers. Individuals at both the Xavier Institute and Gallaudet University constantly work on research that is beneficial to their respective communities and research that gives the world a better understanding of who they are, building bridges between their world and the outside world.

At Xavier's, much of the research is headed, if not completely done, by Dr. Henry "Hank" McCoy. In the early *X-Men* comics, he was portrayed as the intellectual one, consistently

³⁹ Van Cleve and Crouch, *A Place of Their Own*.

⁴⁰ Armstrong, *The History of Gallaudet University*.

⁴¹ Van Cleve and Crouch, *A Place of Their Own*.

using a vocabulary that either annoyed his fellow students or went completely over their heads. When not training or out fighting as Beast, he was seen in his room reading at least one book while working on a science project.⁴² In the other titles within the scope of my research, he is often shown wearing his lab coat when he is not in costume or uniform.⁴³ At the beginning of *New X-Men* #114, the reader is introduced to Hank while he is working on building Cerebra, the successor to Professor Xavier's Cerebro technology, which enhances Professor Xavier's telepathy and allows him to find mutants all over the globe.⁴⁴

After the destruction of Genosha, which Professor Xavier witnessed through Cerebra,⁴⁵ they come across one survivor: Emma Frost. Soon she is back at Xavier's at Hank's lab so he can figure out what happened to allow her to survive the genocidal destruction that occurred. Hank is able to determine that she has gone through a secondary mutation that has given her the ability to turn herself into an organic diamond. She can turn herself into a diamond yet retain the ability to move and function as she usually would.⁴⁶

In *Uncanny X-Men*, Hank assembles a team of genius scientists to help him work out what has happened to mutants in the wake of M-Day. M-Day refers to the world changing effects of the "House of M" storyline. Wanda Maximoff is a mutant whose powers give her the ability to change reality. She had a breakdown and changed the world so that X-Men were the dominant species and humans were subordinate, but still treated better than mutants were before she changed things. In the end, a group of superheroes and X-Men reach her to convince her to put the world back as it was. Her last words before the world was "reset" were "No more mutants."

⁴² Lee, *Marvel Masterworks: The X-Men Vol. 1*, 63.

⁴³ Whedon, *Astonishing X-Men* #3 reprinted in *Astonishing X-Men. Vol. 1: Gifted*.

⁴⁴ Morrison, *New X-Men by Grant Morrison Ultimate Collection, Vol. 1*.

⁴⁵ Morrison, *New X-Men* #115 reprinted in *New X-Men by Grant Morrison Ultimate Collection, Vol. 1*.

⁴⁶ Morrison, *New X-Men* #116 reprinted in *New X-Men by Grant Morrison Ultimate Collection, Vol. 1*.

Less than two-hundred mutants retained their powers. The rest were “depowered” either leaving them without their powers and human, or presumably killing those whose mutation was keeping them alive.⁴⁷

Ever since M-Day, Hank has been studying mutants at a genetic level to try to determine what effect it has had and if it is permanent. Since M-Day there have been no mutant births, there has been no awakening of x-genes. His hope is that by gathering a group of scientists from various disciplines, they will be able to work together to find out the answer from a scientific standpoint.⁴⁸ He dubs them the X-Club, in honor of “a regular dinner club” of Charles Darwin’s “that shared a belief in his theories”.⁴⁹ The X-Club becomes an important part of the remaining mutant community, helping with problems that arise outside of their main research goal.⁵⁰ While the group consists of five individuals, not all of them are mutants. Two of the five are human scientists whose research interests include mutants.⁵¹ The X-Club is a productive alliance of humans and mutants, possibly the first.

Gallaudet University is a research institution, in the same way that all colleges and universities are research institutions. The faculty and students are working on research to contribute to the advancement of their respective fields. In the 1950s, a sustained and organized approach to research began⁵². By 1964, there was a variety of research activities going on. The Office of Institutional Research focused on creating instructional materials. The Office of

⁴⁷ Bendis, *House of M*.

⁴⁸ Fraction and Brubaker, *Uncanny X-Men* #508 reprinted in *Uncanny X-Men: The Complete Collection* by Matt Fraction - Volume 1.

⁴⁹ Fraction and Brubaker, *Uncanny X-Men* #507 reprinted in *Uncanny X-Men: The Complete Collection* by Matt Fraction - Volume 1.

⁵⁰ Fraction, *Dark Avengers* #8 reprinted in *Uncanny X-Men: The Complete Collection* by Matt Fraction - Volume 2.

⁵¹ Fraction and Brubaker, *Uncanny X-Men* #506 and #507 reprinted in *Uncanny X-Men: The Complete Collection* by Matt Fraction - Volume 1.

⁵² Armstrong, *The History of Gallaudet University*, 73.

Psychological Research, later renamed the Office of Demographic Studies, started demographic studies of the deaf population and developing tests. Eventually their studies included an annual survey of students across the country. The Hearing and Speech Center focused on hearing loss, speech, and speechreading. The Sensory Communication Lab researched how deaf people perceived sound. The Linguistic Research Laboratory did research into the structure of Sign Language, as it was known at the time, that led to the recognition by linguists of ASL as a distinct language of its own, not simply a series of gestures⁵³. Since then, research has expanded to include genetics and how the brain works. But the focus and the drive have always come back around to language and education. The same two things that motivated T.H. Gallaudet over 200 years ago.

This focus has led Gallaudet to gain something that very few institutions have: A National Science Foundation Science of Learning Center. The Visual Language and Visual Learning Center (VL2) is one of six NSF Science of Learning Centers across the nation. The staff of VL2 come from multiple disciplines and institutions to gain a better understand how deaf individuals learn and use language visually⁵⁴. They look at how deaf people from across the globe learn language as well as how to read. The hope is that their findings will lead to a better understanding of ASL that will benefit all of those who are learning it as well as those teaching it. Ultimately, their goal “is to improve the education and lives of all visual learners”⁵⁵ and that it will have an influence on language as well as how knowledge is acquired through visual communication instead of aural communication.

⁵³ Ibid., 74, 76.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 87.

⁵⁵ “VL2 :: Overview and Mission,” 2.

Within the lab there are four resources hubs: Brain and Language Laboratory for Neuroimaging (BL2), Early Education Literacy Lab (EL2), Motion Light Lab (ML2), and Transition in the Science of Learning Lab (TL2). Each hub focuses on a different aspect of the overall goals of VL2. BL2 uses neuroimaging and behavioral studies to better understand how individuals are able to become skilled bilinguals and the impact that being bilingual has on the brain. EL2 studies the differences how individual children in early education settings learn how to read. They also provide support through volunteers, data, and ASL assessment tools to other areas of VL2. ML2 brings art and science together to further investigate how bilingual interaction through the visual affects the learning process. TL2 “provides an important gateway between the Center’s research discoveries” and general society. TL2 is where the results and information discovered in the rest of VL2 is put in ways that the public can fully access. They are there as a bridge between the outside world, comprised of both the deaf and hearing communities, and VL2.

By extension of their research centers, Xavier’s and Gallaudet also serve as a kind of embassy for their respective cultures. In *New X-Men* #123, as acting headmistress of the school, Jean holds a press conference at the school with a group of around twenty reporters attempting to encourage understanding and cooperation between mutants and humans.⁵⁶

At Gallaudet, anyone is welcome to visit the campus. To be a student, you should have some level of ASL fluency. But to visit, you can have no idea what a sign is and be welcomed. Gallaudet is not just a place where Deaf individuals can go to get a college education, but a place where the Deaf and the hearing can meet and the hearing can learn more about the Deaf community. If one contacts the visitor center before arriving, an interpreter will be provided for

⁵⁶ Morrison, *New X-Men* by Grant Morrison Ultimate Collection, Vol. 1.

campus tours during which visitors learn about the history of Gallaudet University, Deaf Culture, as well as today's Gallaudet.

The visitor center itself has a small museum of artifacts and information about Deaf Culture that helps to further inform individuals of the history of Deaf Culture. A small museum of university-related artifacts is on the tour, located in the area outside of the president's office. It includes the old "doorbell" used before electricity allowed for flashing lights. A knob is pulled back, raising a weight inside the walls. When the knob is released, the weight falls, causing vibrations to be felt throughout the floor, alerting individuals to the presence of someone at the door.

Borders and States

Fences as Borders

Another thing that both Xavier's and Gallaudet, as well as many residential schools, have in common: fences. Fences are a common way to create a border between two areas. They could be between two areas of a room, two private properties, public and private space, countries, etc. But for X-Men and Deaf, these fences demarcate something more. They stand for a division between two cultures: human and mutant, hearing and deaf, dominant and minority. When you cross the border, you are not simply entering school grounds, you are in a new world.

The Xavier Institute started out as the home of Professor Xavier's family, a mansion in quiet Westchester County, New York. As with homes of that size and type, it has a fence around the perimeter and a front gate to indicate where the property line is. As a private school, Xavier kept the boundary. Over time it grew to indicate more than the difference between private and public. It grew to indicate where human culture ended and mutant culture began.

Over the years, it has also helped to protect those at Xavier's, whether there as students, faculty, X-Men, or mutants seeking sanctuary. One example is from *New X-Men* #118 when, after Professor Xavier declares on national television that he is a mutant, a crowd of anti-mutant protesters gather outside the front gates of the school. They have defaced the plaque with the name of the school and the brick around it with graffiti. But, the gates and fences keep them outside the school's grounds, keeping those inside safe.⁵⁷

At Gallaudet University, there is a fence that runs around the entire perimeter of the grounds. There are gates to allow individuals to enter and exit the grounds. When you cross through the gate and step onto campus, you are in a different world, a Deaf world. It is a world where not knowing sign language makes you the minority. You become the person who needs an interpreter to be able to communicate. It is a unique experience as this is the only place in the world where this occurs. Sure, there are places where Deaf people will gather that hearing people can come to as well, but the Deaf are still in the hearing world. The responsibility for making sure communication happens clearly falls upon them.

Not the case at Gallaudet. For Deaf individuals who have never experienced being in a place where everyone can understand you, where you no longer need to worry about not hearing something, where the architecture is built with your visual communication in mind, it is a very positive experience. For hearing individuals, it can be a disorienting experience. Whether you can communicate in sign language or not, there is the lack of sound that you need to adjust to. Yes, there are environmental sounds, but there is no music, no spoken language. Just the breeze in the trees, the birds, and any sounds from the outside world that drift in. If one has signing skills, they will quickly see that campus is far from quiet. Everywhere you look, people are

⁵⁷ Ibid.

chatting away with each other, placing orders for lunch, or just asking for directions. All in sign language. Campus is far from silent.

A Separate State

“Minorities often believe their culture will flourish and their aspirations will be achieved if they separate themselves politically and geographically from the majority.”⁵⁸ This is not a new concept. American history is littered with examples from the Pilgrims moving to America to the Mormons moving west to Utah. This concept is not new to X-Men or the Deaf, either.

In modern mutant history, there have been two instances of living in a place completely separate from human society. The first predates the scope of my study, the island nation of Genosha. Genosha was an island nation off the coast of Africa that went from a nation of mutant apartheid⁵⁹ to a nation run and populated by X-Men. It was an entire nation where being a mutant was “normal” and no one had to fear discrimination for being a mutant or X-Man. It was wiped off the face of the Earth, killing all but one of the over sixteen-million mutants living there. The person responsible had intentions that have no connection to this work⁶⁰.

The second occurrence happened during Matt Fraction’s time as writer of *Uncanny X-Men*. After the destruction of the Xavier Institute, the X-Men decided to relocate to San Francisco instead of rebuilding. In San Francisco, mutants experienced acceptance like they never had before, creating a new base from existing structures which they named Greymalkin Industries, in reference to the street the institute used to be on.⁶¹ But, as things seem to be destined in this universe, things changed drastically. A well-known businessman began to stir up

⁵⁸ Van Cleve and Crouch, *A Place of Their Own*, 60.

⁵⁹ Darowski, *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor*, 99.

⁶⁰ Morrison and Quitely, *New X-Men* #115 reprinted in *New X-Men by Grant Morrison Ultimate Collection, Vol. 1*.

⁶¹ Fraction and Brubaker, *Uncanny X-Men* #500 reprinted in *Uncanny X-Men: The Complete Collection by Matt Fraction - Volume 1*.

anti-mutant sentiment and urged the government to “start legislating *mutant reproductive rights*”⁶². His campaigning gained support and became known as “Humanity Now!” This divided San Francisco into two groups: those who sided with the mutant community and their right to be treated the same as anyone else, and those who supported “Humanity Now!” The two sides clashed when the mutant community and their human allies peacefully protested the “Humanity Now!” march through the city. It sparked violence on both sides, as well as riots throughout the city.⁶³

It was decided by H.A.M.M.E.R.⁶⁴, the government agency that replaced S.H.I.E.L.D.⁶⁵ as the agency in charge of monitoring all superhuman activities, to send in the Avengers, currently comprised of villains, to control the situation. One way that the Avengers decided to “control the situation” was to place the entire city under martial law and place a curfew on mutants living there. Adding this to the rising anti-mutant sentiment, Scott realized that he needed to do something to save mutantkind as the de facto leader of the dwindling group.⁶⁶

At the bottom of San Francisco Bay was a former asteroid base of Magneto’s that had fallen to Earth in the not too distant past. Club-X worked, along with a select few mutants to keep things quiet, to bring this base to the surface as a small island 1.2 miles off the coast of San Francisco. Once this was achieved, a massive evacuation of Greymalkin Industries was orchestrated, relocating everyone there to the new island.⁶⁷ This island was named Utopia and

⁶² Fraction and Brubaker, *Uncanny X-Men* #505 reprinted in *Uncanny X-Men: The Complete Collection* by Matt Fraction - Volume 1.

⁶³ Fraction, *Dark Avengers/Uncanny X-Men: Utopia* #1 reprinted in *Uncanny X-Men: The Complete Collection* by Matt Fraction - Volume 2.

⁶⁴ There is no explanation for what the acronym stands for.

⁶⁵ According to the Wikipedia entry, the acronym stands for Strategic Hazard Intervention Espionage Logistics Directorate in the comics at this time.

⁶⁶ Fraction, *Dark Avengers/Uncanny X-Men: Utopia* #1 reprinted in *Uncanny X-Men: The Complete Collection* by Matt Fraction - Volume 2.

⁶⁷ Fraction, *Dark Avengers* #8 reprinted in *Uncanny X-Men: The Complete Collection* by Matt Fraction - Volume 2.

declared a separate state, and a sanctuary for all mutants, by Scott Summers at the end of *Exodus* #1:

“This ground -- the city we live in, just off your shores -- this fortress we occupy -- this ground is sacred. No mutant or their family will be harmed here. No mutant blood will be spilled here. Our children shall not be hunted or harmed. They shall not be prejudiced against, legislated against, or ever go to sleep for a single unsafe moment. We may have paid the ultimate price for our safety tonight. But I am here to promise you, unequivocally, we mean you no harm. In spite of the decades of harm inflicted upon us personally, privately, or as a matter of law. We have been, and always shall be, sworn to protect a world that hates and despises us, only now...we shall all be free.”⁶⁸

On Utopia, they sever ties with the mainland. Aside from the physical distance, they planned to govern themselves and produce their own energy through solar and water power. But they were not able to be fully independent from the mainland. Scott soon meets with Mayor Sinclair to discuss Utopia’s need for food and medical supplies, two important needs that they are unable to produce on the island. It is a small island that used to be an asteroid. It is not possible to manufacture the supplies they need let alone grow anything. Also, due to the necessity of the quick evacuation, they were not able to stock the island with supplies ahead of time. In their discussions, Scott makes it clear to the mayor that they are not avoiding everyone in San Francisco and the US, just H.A.M.M.E.R. and their discriminatory actions. He is trying to save what is left of his people and keep them safe while attempting to keep what human allies he and mutantkind have.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Fraction, *Uncanny X-Men: The Complete Collection by Matt Fraction - Volume 2*.

⁶⁹ Fraction, *Uncanny X-Men* #515 reprinted in *Uncanny X-Men: The Complete Collection by Matt Fraction - Volume 2*.

A few months later, a massive battle occurs and the X-Men save San Francisco, if not the world, again.⁷⁰ This results in Scott being awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom and they are all welcomed back as heroes. There is celebration as they return to San Francisco. Utopia becomes their new base, instead of the separate nation, now that they are welcome on the mainland again. They are once again able to live with humanity, instead of having to hide from it or separate themselves from it.⁷¹

A separate nation or state is something that the Deaf community has not been able to make reality. The only time they came close was in the mid-1800s when there was a proposal to start a separate state for the Deaf on the West Coast. While Deaf individuals attended residential schools that separated them from hearing society during their schooling and would have social gatherings that excluded those outside of their community, they lived in the hearing world. They lived as a part of the larger American society. Some were content if not successful living their lives in the hearing world. Others felt that they were being discriminated against and limited by society's views of them.⁷²

John Flourney was one of the latter. He had graduated from the American School for the Deaf as well as from the University of Georgia. He was a major supporter of the founding of the Georgia School for the Deaf. But he felt that he was being discriminated against because he was deaf. He had applied for multiple government positions and was rejected. In 1855, he sent out a leaflet to the deaf in America, as well as Europe, explaining his frustrations with the treatment he felt the deaf, as a community, were experiencing. He felt that they were suffering from

⁷⁰ Wells et al, *X-Men: Second Coming* #2.

⁷¹ Fraction, *Uncanny X-Men: The Heroic Age #1* reprinted in *Uncanny X-Men: The Complete Collection by Matt Fraction - Volume 3*.

⁷² Van Cleve and Crouch, *A Place of Their Own*, 61.

“rejections and consignments to inferior places”⁷³. As a solution, he proposed that those deaf who wanted to should consider moving as a group to the American West where they could settle and “assume all governing responsibilities”⁷⁴.

There were mixed reactions to his proposal. Those who had suffered discrimination and felt alienated in society were very supportive of it. It would allow them to have a state where everyone spoke the same language, no one would be unemployed due to being deaf, and they would be free from discrimination. Others pointed out the problems with this plan. A former teacher of Flourney’s from ASD, who was hearing, was one of the first. He had no doubt that deaf people could found and run this separate state successfully. But he felt that there would not be enough individuals to support it to justify this resettlement. He also pointed out that it is common for deaf couples to have hearing children. Flourney’s response was that the children would have to leave the state and live with hearing relatives. Many did not receive this idea well, including the teacher.⁷⁵

There were also two very influential opposing opinions from firmly within the deaf community. The first was from Edmund Booth. Booth was another graduate of ASD. He was a successful businessman and was highly respected in both the hearing and deaf communities. He felt that living in hearing society was beneficial for the deaf. It required them to use written English in addition to speaking ASL, which kept their minds sharp and able to read works produced by numerous individuals, deaf and hearing alike. He felt that being bilingual and bi-cultural was better for the community than shutting themselves off from the rest of the country.⁷⁶

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 62.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 62.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 65.

The second was from Laurent Clerc. While retired and aging, he was still regarded as an elder of the community and many heeded his opinions. When this plan was brought to his attention, he agreed with Booth's opinion that it was beneficial to live with hearing individuals instead of excluding them. He also felt that the Deaf State would be too remote and secluded, opening its inhabitants up to the dangers that awaited anyone who settled in the West at the time, including threats from other countries, wildlife, nature, and Natives. Clerc's negative opinion of the plan put the final nail in the coffin of Flourney's idea. It has not come up again.⁷⁷

While both the fictional Utopia and the proposed Deaf State had similar goals, one succeeded where the other failed. The fundamental difference in these lies in the communities themselves. Utopia succeeded, if ever so briefly, because all of the X-Men were behind it. The entire community was experiencing the discrimination and violence in San Francisco. The entire community looked to Scott to lead them and did not question his plan to move out to the island to escape.

The Deaf state never succeeded because the entire Deaf community was not behind it. Most individuals who had voiced opposition to the idea were individuals who had successfully integrated themselves into the larger American society. They did not share Flourney's feelings of discrimination and isolation. The pamphlets that were circulated mainly reached that part of the Deaf community. Those who felt as Flourney did, discriminated against, isolated, miserable in the dominant hearing society, were not hearing about this plan; sometimes because they were isolated from the rest of the Deaf community, sometimes due to lack of education. Those unable to read were unable to access the information that was circulated. If, somehow, the entire Deaf

⁷⁷ Ibid., 67.

community were informed of the idea, Flournoy might have gained enough support for his plan to succeed. But we will never know.⁷⁸

From Separation to Haven

Starting with the goal of providing specialized education for those who have different abilities than the majority of people, Charles Xavier and Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet did not simply establish schools. They carved space out from the dominant world and created a place where X-Men and Deaf could have a place of their own, a place where they could not only receive an education, but a place where they could learn who they are away from the opinions of a dominant culture that wants to make them “normal”. They created places where their own culture had space to come into being and was able to thrive, away from discrimination; places where research centers could exist to build bridges from their communities out to the dominant culture. They created places that brought together disparate groups who had no place to call home. These places became more and more important as dominant culture increased their efforts to colonize them and try to force them to become “normal”, as we shall see in chapter 2.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 68.

CHAPTER II: COLONIZATION

Discrimination, prejudice, hate. These are all things that minority groups have experienced from dominant culture. Mutants have been the target of hate crimes, genocide, attempts to “cure” them, and anti-mutant legislation, including mandatory registration and controlling their reproduction. Deaf individuals and the Deaf community have been the target of prejudice, attempts to control language, and anti-deaf laws including those controlling reproduction. All of this can be summed up with one word: colonization.

People tend to think of colonization as when one state or nation or government goes to another part of the world and claims it for itself, forcing anyone who is living there to become subject to the nation/state/government. Another way to define colonization is when two groups are in a relationship where “One not only controls and rules the other, but also endeavors to *impose its cultural order* on the subordinate group.”¹ When defined in this manner, colonization happens *within* a nation/state all the time. Name a minority group and they have experienced colonization or at least the attempt at colonization.

It is not simply that mutant and deaf people have been colonized by the dominant culture. It is how they have been colonized that makes them similar. The dominant cultures have attempted to colonize these groups using the same tools: hegemony, laws, and medicine. Some individuals have accepted this colonization, the deaf and mutants. Some refuse to be colonized and resist it – the Deaf and X-Men. This relationship with the dominant has been a major influence on each culture.

¹ Ladd, *Understanding Deaf Culture*, 79.

Normalization

Society looks at the body as binary: good and bad, “normal” and “abnormal”. Every aspect of the body falls into one category or another.² But this depends on the person making the judgement. For some, big is good, while others see it as “abnormal.” The same logic is applied to D/deaf and mutant bodies. Having hearing levels that are “abnormal,” using sign language, having abilities beyond most people, and looking different are all considered “abnormal” by dominant society.

There are a multitude of examples throughout history of humanity’s awareness of differences in individuals and separating them from the rest of society. There are examples of the blind, lame, deaf, and lepers in the Bible. They were subjects of pity and seen as not whole, unclean, and in need of a cure. But, linguistically and hegemonically, these individuals were simply kept to the periphery of society for most of human history, allowed to live as they were as long as they did not bother anyone.³ This also left many – deaf, blind, mutant – isolated from others like them, scattered, living in the dominant society. This allowed their difference to be overlooked instead of placing them under a blazing spotlight.⁴ Mutants were in the same position. In issue #1 of *The X-Men*, Professor Xavier explains to Jean Grey that he is “possibly the first such mutant.”⁵ Since then it has been established that a number of mutants are older than him, including Logan. But their presence was not noted as being mutant because there was no “mutant” at the time.

² Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 129.

³ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁵ Lee, *Marvel Masterworks: The X-Men Vol. 1*.

In the mid-1800s, things began to change and the “spotlight” started to notice the deaf and the blind and the different. Science and medicine had begun to advance and gain new insights into how the body worked. In 1829, the methods developed in statistics to study numerical data were first applied to the human body.⁶ By around 1840, the idea of a “normal” body had entered the English language and western thought. Before then, the term “norm,” the root of “normal”, referred to a carpenter’s square, and “normal” to something that was perpendicular or squared off. But because of the increasing use of statistics to measure every aspect of the human body, from height and weight to mental acuity and physical ability, “normal” began to refer to something that conformed to “the common type or standardized, regular, usual.”⁷ It developed into an ideology, Normal. Anyone who deviated from that Normal became less of a person in Western society.

While this ideology of Normal initially impacts D/deaf and mutants differently, it has the same long-term effects. Because the shift in meaning of “normal” and formation of Normal happened in the mid-1800s, it had less of an initial impact on the Deaf community. The Deaf community had existed for at least twenty years before this change in hegemonic thinking and dominant ideology. They had time to establish a culture in which they had their own ideology and saw themselves as “normal” as the next person, they simply used a different form of communicating. This is something about which I will go into much more depth in chapter three.

Both deaf and mutants became targets of fear and discrimination because of an ideology to which they did not conform. They were not Normal Americans. For deaf, people focused on the fact that they did not speak English, but used signs. For mutants, people focused on the fact

⁶ Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 26.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

that they could do things that human beings could not *and* it was because they were born that way. Both groups began to create community in times when the national identity was being questioned and redefined.

The deaf community gained strength and cohesion as the 1800s wore on. After the end of the Civil War, what it meant to be “American” came back to focus on the language a person used. While nationalism centered around language, it originally centered on *print* language, which both included and excluded the deaf.⁸ Once they were taught written English, they were able to share in the common language of the country. But after the Civil War, the focus shifted to the fact that they could not speak English.⁹ Much of this came from the influx of immigrants from countries where English was not spoken. Dominant society saw this as a threat to the American way of life, and began to see the deaf in the same light.¹⁰

When they were first created, Stan Lee saw *The X-Men* comics as a way to comment on racism, bigotry, and discrimination. They were created as a metaphor for the minorities who were fighting to be treated as equals in the eyes of the law and their fellow citizen.¹¹ They first came together during a time of tension and established hegemonic thinking which enforced Normal. Like the deaf community, mutants were “projection screens for the anxieties of their times.”¹² Unlike in the situation involving the deaf community, race and the Cold War were the anxieties projected instead of language skills. But the anxieties in both cases related back to the national identity and what was considered Normal. How these anxieties affected public opinions differed.

⁸ Ibid., 75.

⁹ Baynton, *Forbidden Signs*, 15.

¹⁰ Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 77.

¹¹ Darowski, *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor*, 34.

¹² Baynton, *Forbidden Signs*, 16.

In the case of the deaf community, those anxieties formed the basis of the oralism movement. Oralists saw the deaf as a strange, separate people who appeared to not want to be a part of the nation. They felt that this made the deaf community a threat to the national identity.¹³ Oralists saw themselves as freeing deaf people from isolation and working to bring them into hearing society as fully-engaged members.¹⁴ The key to bringing the deaf into hearing society was to change the language they used to communicate from signing to speaking. Sign language was the thing that made their deafness visible, but it was also what oralists saw as the element that made the deaf appear strange and isolated.¹⁵

Mutants have also been viewed as foreign and isolated. In *New X-Men #118*, Jean addresses a crowd of anti-mutant protestors outside of the school: “All this “*Mutants go home*” stuff is ridiculous. Go home *where*? We *live* here. I’ve lived here since I was a kid.”¹⁶ Also, many of the students who lived there were Americans. But this group of people who have isolated themselves because of the fear of discrimination and prejudice is seen as foreign and strange, just like deaf were. Unfortunately, with both the Deaf community and the X-Men community, this way of seeing people as needing to conform to the national ideology of Normal was only the start. Normal went on to influence both legislation and medicine.

Legislation

About twenty years after the oralism movement, a movement with broader views and legislative aims began: Eugenics. Oralism and eugenics are two separate movements, but with similar goals. There were many individuals who supported both, seeing eugenics as a way to

¹³ Ibid., 26.

¹⁴ Ibid., 31.

¹⁵ Ibid., 32.

¹⁶ Morrison, *New X-Men by Grant Morrison Ultimate Collection, Vol. 1.*

achieve the goals of oralism, but not everyone supported both. The ideology of Normal and shift of the medical gaze, supported by the application of statistics to the body, came together in eugenics.

The main goal of eugenics is to allow the state to legislate making the abnormal normal. Eugenics was based on the belief that selective breeding would erase negative traits from the gene pool.¹⁷ This approach was inaccurately based on the emerging scientific theories of evolution of Charles Darwin and Gregor Mendel, taking only what they wanted from the theories. They would then apply statistics to the body using the bell curve to map out specific traits. In following the model of the bell curve, the closer to the center one is, the more average, or “normal,” the farther away one is, the more “abnormal.” Eugenicians focused on bringing those on the left of the curve, those who fall below “normal,” as close to the center as possible. They wanted to eliminate various “defects” in human society, like deafness, blindness, feeble-mindedness¹⁸, alcoholism, and crime.¹⁹

Those who fall on the right side, with extremes that were termed positive – tall height, high intelligence, ambition, fertility, strength – were technically the same deviation, but they were not seen as ones that needed to be fixed. It depended on how your “errors” affected your contribution to society.²⁰ Mutants fall on this same side of the bell curve, as their abilities are higher than “normal” humans. But, despite being on the “positive” side of the curve, they are consistently treated the same as those who were subject to eugenics laws.²¹ The term “eugenics”

¹⁷ Nomeland and Nomeland, *The Deaf Community in America*, 65.

¹⁸ Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 31.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 33.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 32.

may not be used as frequently today, but the practices are still alive and well in the world. It is thoroughly alive in the *X-Men* comics.

In the two-part story arc “Days of Future Past,” published in 1981, we are given a glimpse of a possible future where those mutants who are still alive live in camps, branded with an “M” to indicate their genetics, and wear collars to inhibit their powers. It is 2013, and people have been divided into three classes: baseline humans, who wear an “H” on their clothing, have no mutant genes at all and are allowed to breed; anomalous humans, who wear an “A,” have potential mutant genetics and are forbidden to breed; mutants, who wear an “M,” are hunted down and either killed, the more frequent outcome, or sent to the camps.²²

This future occurs because of the assassination of Senator Kelly, an influential anti-mutant individual, by a mutant in 1980. The assassination leads to anti-mutant hysteria and the introduction and passage of the Mutant Registration Act in 1984 and the reintroduction of Sentinels²³ to the world.²⁴ The remaining mutants in the camp work to be able to send the mind of Kitty Pryde back to her body in 1980 so she can tell the X-Men about the assassination and what will happen if they do not prevent it. This news spurs the X-Men into action and to Washington, DC, where the assassination will happen.²⁵ They prevent Senator Kelly’s death and Kitty’s mind is automatically sent back to her own timeline, leaving us and the X-Men to wonder if it made a difference.²⁶ In 1984, Senator Kelly successfully introduces a new act to Congress:

²² Claremont, *Uncanny X-Men #141* reprinted in *X-Men: Days of Future Past*.

²³ Sentinels are towering robots designed and programed to hunt down anyone with the mutant gene and destroy them.

²⁴ Claremont, *X-Men: Days of Future Past*.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Claremont, *Uncanny X-Men #142* reprinted in *X-Men: Days of Future Past*.

The Mutant Affairs Control Act.²⁷ There is not much further mention of the Act in subsequent comics, but the further legislation of mutants is something that comes up later.

Unfortunately, the Deaf community was not as lucky as the X-Men community. Alexander Graham Bell is highly regarded in hearing culture, but in Deaf culture he is considered an enemy. He was an early supporter of the eugenics movement. He appeared to think that deaf people were defective, signing would impair the learning of English, and that intermarriage would lead to more deaf people being born.²⁸

Bell came to America from Scotland in the mid-1800s with the intention of teaching “Visible Speech,” a system that would allow anyone, deaf or hearing, to create the sounds of any and all spoken languages. He thought that it was a much more effective system of teaching the deaf speech than speechreading, known today as lipreading. His system was taught using the manual alphabet, also known as fingerspelling, and by writing on the board. He never used signs because he saw no value in them.²⁹ His success gained him support by oralists to continue his work with the deaf.³⁰

Bell eventually married Mabel Hubbard, a deaf woman who was able to successfully speechread and be understood by most people. This is most likely due to the fact that she became deaf at age five due to scarlet fever and had been exposed to spoken language. Seeing how successful she was in using speechreading to communicate with the hearing, Bell became a staunch supporter of oralism.³¹ He began to advocate for deaf children to attend school with their hearing peers. They would be integrated in classes where understanding speech was less

²⁷ Claremont, *Uncanny X-Men #181*

²⁸ Nomeland and Nomeland, *The Deaf Community in America*, 47.

²⁹ Van Cleve and Crouch, *A Place of Their Own*, 114.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 115.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 117.

important, like recess and art class. He felt that this approach would prevent students from developing a signing habit and feel more comfortable in the hearing world.³² These day schools gained support because it cost less for the state to run, and it kept students home with their families, who no longer needed to learn their child's language.

It was around this time that Bell gave his now famous speech titled *Memoir upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race*.³³ In it, he presented research he had done based on the assumption that individuals who were born deaf inherited it and those who became deaf later in life only did so because of accident or sickness. This reflected the medical and scientific understanding of deafness at the time. Now we know that this is not true. Mothers can become sick during pregnancy which can cause deafness. Accidents at or soon after birth or premature birth can cause deafness. Inherited deafness can occur any time during one's life as well. But at the time, deaf couples having children were seen as the main source of deaf children, which Bell felt was a threat to society and humanity overall.³⁴

According to Bell, there were three major facts about the deaf: deaf tended to marry other deaf; this intermarriage increased during the nineteenth century; it would continue unless something was done to stop it. He saw this intermarriage as eventually leading to "the formation of a deaf variety of the human race" and the existence of that race would be devastating to humanity. A similar fear of mutants displacing humans as the dominant race has been echoed over and over again in the *X-Men* comics. Bell goes on to cite seven elements that he felt accounted for this increase in intermarriage:

1. Residential schools

³² Ibid., 118.

³³ Ibid., 142.

³⁴ Ibid., 145.

2. Associations and organizations
3. Newspapers
4. Instruction in ASL
5. Writing in ASL (despite there being no written form of sign language)
6. The idea that the deaf cannot be taught to communicate orally/aurally
7. The attempt to found a separate state for the deaf

Basically, he blamed the existence of the deaf community.³⁵ His solution was not to ban intermarriage of deaf, but to dispense with residential schools, forbid teaching using ASL, and forbid deaf adults from teaching. He thought this would increase oral communication and lead to the deaf being more comfortable in the hearing community.³⁶

While this solution was applauded and firmly supported by oralists and eugenicists alike, there was no support at all from the deaf community. One argument against oralism was that it took more time and effort to teach deaf children using speech instead of signs. Others pointed out that trying to make the deaf hearing left them part of neither community. Speechreading cannot make a deaf person hearing. Likewise, without signs they are unable to communicate with the Deaf.

Both the deaf community and the teachers and principals at the schools pointed out the faults in Bell's thinking and research. The majority of deaf children had parents who were hearing. Deaf children having deaf parents was a rare occurrence. The principals also observed that couples that were both deaf were happier than when one deaf and one hearing person were together.³⁷ They were able to share their culture and values with their spouse. And, *if* they had

³⁵ Ibid., 146.

³⁶ Ibid., 147.

³⁷ Ibid., 149.

deaf children, they could raise them deaf from birth. But, as was pointed out when Flournoy suggested his deaf state, it was very common for deaf couples to have hearing children.³⁸ It was about as common as hearing couples having deaf children. This line of thinking comes up in the *X-Men* comic books.

There is not much talk in the comics about legal acts against mutants until the mid-2000s. In *Uncanny X-Men* #509, we are introduced to Simon Trask and his Humanity Now! coalition. Humanity Now! is an anti-mutant group that is responsible for introducing a ballot initiative called Proposition X. “Proposition X would require all humans that are x-gene positive to undergo mandatory chemical **birth control** procedures...”³⁹ Trask goes on to say that their intentions behind the proposition is to “ensure *everyone* gets to survive,” and by everyone he means humans. He believes that mutant procreation is what has led to the mutant population. But since most mutants we are introduced to over the course of the series have human parents, his assumption is faulty.

Much of the reasoning behind Proposition X is based on faulty assumptions and misinformation. Trask’s basis for preventing mutant births is based on the disaster that occurred in Alaska after the first mutant birth since M-Day⁴⁰. He blames the child’s birth itself for the disaster⁴¹, which is not the case. Nothing about her being born caused the devastation to the town. It was the clash of an anti-mutant group, who was out to kill her, and a group of mutant assassins, sent by a mutant villain to kidnap her. The X-Men arrived after the two groups had

³⁸ Ibid., 62.

³⁹ Fraction and Brubaker, *Uncanny X-Men: The Complete Collection by Matt Fraction - Volume 1*.

⁴⁰ See Chapter 1, page 21.

⁴¹ Ibid.

wiped out each other and most of the town.⁴² But, despite all of this information, Trask ignores it and places the blame on her birth, thus supporting his Proposition X through misinformation.

The other main issue with the reasoning behind Proposition X is in Trask's belief that preventing x-gene positive individuals from having children will prevent future mutant births. Even when the mutant population was at its peak, few mutants were ever pointed out to have mutant parents. Scott Summers has a son, Nathan, who grows up to be known as Cable. On an alternate Earth, Scott and Jean have a daughter Rachel, who has inherited her mother's abilities of telekinesis and telepathy. Logan has a son, Daken, and Magneto has a daughter, Polaris. But Scott, Jean, Logan, and Magneto, among many, have human parents. Scott even has a brother who is also a mutant. There is no scientific basis for Proposition X working.

Finally, like Bell, Trask is feeding on the fear of the other and the fear that the mutant race will take over humanity. But, unlike Bell, Trask has even less ground for this statement since Proposition X is proposed well after the events of M-Day, and the global mutant population is around 200 people, from hundreds of thousands around the world.

Luckily for mutants and X-Men alike, Proposition X received little support and did not become law⁴³. But, unfortunately for the deaf of America, oralism had taken root. By 1899, almost 40 percent of deaf students were attending oral schools where the use of sign language was banned. By the 1920s, that percentage had doubled to 80 percent.⁴⁴ The attitudes of oralists drove ASL and Deaf Culture underground, and supported the efforts of the medical and scientific professions in their work to "cure" deafness.

⁴² Brubaker et al., *X-Men*.

⁴³ Fraction, *Uncanny X-Men: The Complete Collection by Matt Fraction - Volume 2*.

⁴⁴ Baynton, *Forbidden Signs*, 25.

Medical Intervention

In the long history of medicine, those who work in the field have been elevated above the common folk.⁴⁵ Their opinions are regarded as wise, informed, and, sometimes, infallible. This extends to the medicines they create to cure formerly deadly diseases, like influenza and measles.⁴⁶ For a while, they viewed various physical impairment as simply part of living. But when statistics began to shift the medical gaze, impairments became something that needed to be fixed instead of left alone.⁴⁷ This stigma of difference has since extended to both the Deaf and X-Men, two groups who have no desire to be cured. To them, a cure is a threat to their culture, community, and identity.⁴⁸

Technology

The medical gaze that sees difference as something that needs to be fixed has been staring at the deaf for a long time.⁴⁹ The best-known attempt to “cure” deafness has been through technology. Frederick C. Rain established the first known hearing aid company around 1800 in London. Their initial products included ear trumpets and other instruments like it to amplify hearing using no electricity or moving parts.⁵⁰ But society attached a stigma to the use of amplification devices, as they marked the user as different. Users attempted to hide their devices or use them only when absolutely necessary. When electrical hearing aids were introduced in the 1920s, they were quickly designed to look like other objects, like radios, purses, and cameras. As they became smaller, they became easier to conceal because the stigma attached to using them had not diminished.

⁴⁵ Nomeland and Nomeland, *The Deaf Community in America*, 172.

⁴⁶ Blume, *The Artificial Ear*, 8.

⁴⁷ Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 74.

⁴⁸ Blume, *The Artificial Ear*, 15.

⁴⁹ Nomeland and Nomeland, *The Deaf Community in America*, 171.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Using technology to allow you to pass as “normal” is not uncommon in the mutant community. Kurt Wagner has been using a device called a “holographic image inducer” since he first joined the X-Men. It projects an image that allows him to look however he wants, instead of his blue-furred, demonic form. It allows him to hide his mutant appearance and be out among humans without fearing discrimination or hate.⁵¹ But it is simply a tool, like hearing aids. It is not a “cure.”

Finding a Cure

What is a mutant? They’ve been called angels, and devils... They’ve committed atrocities and been victim to atrocities themselves. They’ve been labeled monsters, and not without reason. But I will tell you what mutants are. Mutants are people. No better or worse by nature than anybody else. Just people. People with a disease. Mutants are not the next step in evolution. They are not the end of humankind. The mutant gene is nothing more than a disease. A corruption of healthy cellular activity. And now, at last...we have found a cure.⁵²

This is the speech Dr. Kavita Rao gives during a press conference at the end of *Astonishing X-Men #1*. Dr. Rao’s “cure” is the latest attempt to colonize mutantkind, but it is the first time medicine has provided something so permanent and life-changing. It disrupts and brings the divide between X-Men and mutants to the forefront. The students at the school, as well as the X-Men, are ambivalent about the announcement. “They’re terrified, confused – some of them are ecstatic. They don’t know how to deal with this,” Kitty reports to the rest of the team. The X-Men’s reactions are more focused. Logan is angry at being “called a disease.”

⁵¹ Darowski, *X-Men and the Mutant Metaphor*, 65.

⁵² Whedon, *Astonishing X-Men. Vol. 1: Gifted*.

Emma Frost, current headmistress of the school, sees the potential for governments or enemies to use this “cure” as a weapon against them.⁵³

The fact that Dr. Rao sees mutants as nothing more than people with a problem to be cured reduces an entire distinct group of people to a “corruption of healthy cellular activity.”⁵⁴ She reaffirms the validity of her “cure” in issue #2, stating that “[t]he mutant strain can be eliminated. Safely and irreversibly” while introducing the press to her motivation to find this cure: a young girl whose powers are uncontrolled, manifesting before the typical age and not a student at Xavier’s school.⁵⁵ But, her motivation is not important here; the fact remains that the only way she thought to help this girl was to “cure” her, to make her “normal,” instead of finding out existing ways to help her control her powers.

Researchers had similar motivations while working on the cochlear implant. In the 1960s, early work being done in France and California by separate researchers saw limited success⁵⁶ with volunteers who were deafened as adults and were looking for ways to restore their hearing.⁵⁷ Two of those researchers, William House and Blair Simmons, returned to their research in the late 1960s with the increase in support for other devices like pacemakers and artificial kidneys.⁵⁸ Seeing that there was support by the medical community and manufacturers for advancing medical technology, they felt that it was time to make an artificial ear successful.

House was the first to successfully implant a patient who could differentiate between speech and sounds. Other researchers continued their work and implantations separately. All of

⁵³ Whedon, *Astonishing X-Men. Vol. 1: Gifted*.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ Blume, *The Artificial Ear*, 30.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

them had the goal of restoring hearing to individuals deafened as adults.⁵⁹ But a French scientist had wider goals. After the press reported his success as “Hope for 2 Million Deaf and 17,000 Deaf Mutes” and “Victory Over Total Deafness,” he began to implant as many people as he could, including children. No other professional across the globe would perform the surgery on children, and this was looked down upon in French medical circles.⁶⁰ Part of that was due to the fact that the devices were built with adult physiology in mind, not children and infants.⁶¹ It is also an invasive procedure, involving threading electrodes into the cochlea and wiring the device so the brain can receive the signals. It is a very risky surgery with only a possibility of success.

That did not stop researchers from working on perfecting their devices for adults. The House/3M device was the first cochlear implant approved by the FDA for use in adults in November 1984. In their description of the device, the FDA did not guarantee “normal” hearing as a result of implantation. They were also forthcoming about not knowing what the long-term effects of implantation were.⁶² Other devices went through FDA approval with similar results: approval with descriptions that made it clear that implantation does not lead to “normal” hearing. There was still an emphasis on primarily using lip-reading and the implant as an assistive device.⁶³ But from the way the device was reported on by the media, hearing culture saw cochlear implants as a “cure” for deafness.⁶⁴ This selective hearing proved to be more damaging to Deaf Culture than they could have foreseen.

In 1983, there was a discussion at a conference about the implantation of children in France. Attendees agreed that in order for the patient to fully benefit from hearing aids, patients

⁵⁹ Ibid., 36.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 40.

⁶¹ Ibid., 58.

⁶² Ibid., 46.

⁶³ Ibid., 47.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 56.

needed to get them as soon as possible after diagnosis. Some researchers made the argument that early implantation would give the brain more time to adapt to and work with the implant. Others saw it as a way to give spoken language to children and relieve the burden of learning sign language from parents.⁶⁵

The emergence of cochlear implants was happening parallel to the rise of Deaf Culture's consciousness and voice.⁶⁶ As more Deaf individuals felt confident in their identity and language, there was less demand for cochlear implants.⁶⁷ There was a limited audience for adult implantation, which inspired implant teams and manufacturers to turn their focus toward children. Or more appropriately, the parents of deaf children.⁶⁸ At the time, Deaf Culture was generally unknown to hearing society, which was part of why the medical community was surprised at the lack of interest. This is also why so many hearing parents of deaf children were in favor of implantation. They wanted their children to attend "normal" schools and be a part of their society. They were unaware of the community and culture that existed where their children could belong and thrive.⁶⁹ By 1990, the FDA approved the implantation of a specific device in children ages 2-17.⁷⁰

Implantation received a boost from the implementation of Newborn Hearing Screenings (NBHS) across the nation. As early as 1988, states were implementing the screening of all newborns in the hospital as soon as possible. The reasoning behind NBHS are to diagnose hearing loss as soon as possible to allow for early intervention.⁷¹ This has had two negative

⁶⁵ Ibid., 53.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 67.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 61.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 58.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 72.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 55.

⁷¹ Mauldin, *Made to Hear*, 30.

impacts on the Deaf community. The first is the further medicalization of deafness and the reinforcement of it to hearing parents of deaf children. If an NBHS test is failed, the infant will be retested within a small window of time. The audiologists allow for some time to pass to make sure that it is an actual fail and not due to some complication due to the infant being a day old at the most.⁷² When mothers are told of a failed test, it is couched in medical terms, focusing on retesting and pointing out medical options available if their baby fails a second test.⁷³ The second are the medical options, one being cochlear implants. Rarely do professionals refer patients to the Deaf community, ASL resources, or other Deaf Culture options available to them and their infant.⁷⁴

While neither cochlear implants nor the “cure” are designed to be physically lethal, they are lethal on another level, culturally. In the case of mutants, by taking away their abilities, their identity as a mutant is taken away as well. In issue #4, Ord, the alien revealed to be working with Dr. Rao on the creation of the “cure,” goes to the school in search of the X-Men. When he finds out that they are not there, he decides to leave a message for them. Despite their best efforts to get away, Ord catches up with a student named Wing in flight and injects him with the cure.⁷⁵ Hisako, another student and friend of Wing’s who was with him when Ord first arrived, caught him after he fell, using her powers to cushion the blow, and took him to the resident healer. The healer is able to heal Wing’s physical injuries. When Wing wakes, up he utters “Oh God. Oh no. My powers...oh God. I’m cured,” with tears brimming in his eyes. His identity as a mutant has been stripped of him, unwillingly.⁷⁶

⁷² Ibid., 33.

⁷³ Ibid., 36.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 53.

⁷⁵ Whedon, *Astonishing X-Men. Vol. 1: Gifted*.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

Who is to say that testing infants for the x-gene would not also be implemented, allowing infants to be given the “cure” and prevent them from being mutants? This is how the Deaf community sees cochlear implants: a disrespect of and attack upon their culture. Due to the high incidence of deaf children being born to hearing adults – over 90% - hearing parents of deaf children are the top consumers of cochlear implants. This removal of agency from the child is the main criticism of the device.⁷⁷ The child is not given the choice to have a device wired into their brain in an attempt to make them hearing, further marking them as different. No amount of speech therapy and early intervention can achieve “normal” speech in implanted individuals. Without access to sign language, they are unable to fully be a part of either community, hearing or deaf.⁷⁸

Lasting Effects

While eugenics is no longer actively used, in large part due to its use in Nazi Germany’s acts during World War II, its effects are still felt today. Grant Morrison, Joss Whedon, and Matt Fraction all wrote their respective narratives in the *X-Men* universe in the early-to-mid 2000s. In all of their narratives, the dominant see only one group, mutants. They see no distinction between mutants and X-Men, which extends to their colonizing views. According to some, they are a race that needs to be wiped off the face of the earth. Others see them as a people with a disease in need of a cure. Still others see mutants and X-Men alike as needing to have their procreation policed by the government.

While those in the X-Men community vocally object to these views and do everything in their power to stop these actions from being taken whenever possible, they still do not account

⁷⁷ Mauldin, *Made to Hear*, 9.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 154.

for all mutants. Some mutants saw themselves as being humans in need of a cure, and lined up to get it when it was announced as successful. Following that logic, others, despite the lack of mutant births and drastically dwindling numbers, probably would have lined up to willingly have their reproductive rights controlled by the government.

In our world, while we may no longer be advocating for the mass castration of those in prison, mental asylums, and the physically disabled, the stigmas of who is “normal” and who is not are still alive and well. One of those ways the stigma has survived regarding the Deaf community is through oralism. Oralism has declined in popularity, but it still exists. Deaf children are increasingly attending public schools alongside their hearing peers, being fitted with hearing aids and cochlear implants, and only have access to English, both spoken and written.

Human parents and hearing parents alike are still acting as colonizers when their child is not like them. They have been taught by the hegemony of the dominant culture that their child needs to be like them. They are readily given the tools of colonization by the experts in the dominant society. Rarely are they given the information about the alternative: letting their child be who they are and accepting them without any alterations or changes or hiding their difference. Today, both the Deaf and X-Men communities are being heard alongside the dominant more and more often. Through the use of their respective voices they are able to more effectively spread their cultures and their ideologies, which is beginning to dispel the effects of colonization.

CHAPTER III: REFRAMING “NORMAL”

“Culture.” One of the trickiest words to define in the English language. We have given it so many different meanings, it has become hard to describe. It has been used to describe the types of culture that we consume – high, low, elite, popular, mass, folk. We use it to define the culture of one nation or another. It is used to describe groups that exist across borders – QUILTBAG, ethnic, diaspora, geek. Then there are the cultures that develop around a specific item – drugs, sports, media, music. But when you ask someone to define what a specific culture is, they may have trouble finding the right words to describe it.¹

I have that same problem when it comes to describing Deaf Culture or the culture of X-Men. I find myself looking to the places that have been created for the culture to live in and be passed along, the sense of community that the culture creates, and the language and jargon that is used within the culture. But I always feel like it falls short of really describing the culture. Which is why before describing the culture of the Deaf and the culture of the X-Men, I am going to break down the ideologies of Deaf and X-Men that are at the core of these two separate yet similar cultures.

In chapter 1, I explained how and why the American School for the Deaf and the Xavier Institute were established. But I did not go into much detail as to how much these institutions played a role in the creation of the central ideology and culture of their respective groups. Both institutions provided a place that had not previously existed: a place where the students could not only be themselves without worry or fear, but a place where they could meet and be with others like them. Before the opening of the school, deaf people largely lived isolated lives among the hearing. It was at the American School for the Deaf where many encountered their first deaf

¹ Bennett et al., *New Keywords*, 63.

person. It was also there that many were first exposed to a language that they could access, sign language. For many, it was the first place where they felt like they were not an outsider trying to fit in; instead, they found other outsiders like them. The same thing could be said of mutants and the X-Men. Mutants have existed throughout the history of humanity, according to the comics, but they were isolated from each other. They were trying to blend in among the humans around them or they risked being viewed as demons or witches or monsters.

The reason the students no longer felt like outsiders is because they were not treated as such. The first issue of *The X-Men* opens with the students in full training mode: dressed in full uniform, using their mutant powers without fear of discovery, and being challenged and guided by Professor Xavier to control and improve those powers. We are not introduced to four teenage boys and then to their powers, we are introduced to four powerful mutants who are training to use their powers to benefit the world around them. The fact that Scott can shoot powerful beams from his eyes and Bobby can turn himself into snow as well as create objects out of snow and ice from thin air are treated as nothing out of the ordinary. Professor Xavier does not view having “x-tra ordinary” powers to be strange and wrong. He sees them as gifts that need to be used to make the world better, helping human and mutant alike.² This belief - having superhuman abilities because you were born with an x-gene that activated is a gift, not a curse - is the core of the X-Men ideology.

The same thing can be said of the Deaf. When T.H. Gallaudet realized that the deaf could be taught, he knew he needed to find a different way to communicate with them. Yes, they could be taught to understand written English, but that was not the most efficient way to communicate. He went to Europe in search of a way to visually communicate with the deaf. He did not see

² Lee, *Marvel Masterworks: The X-Men Vol. 1*.

them as people in need of fixing, but a people who needed a visual spoken language. This attitude was shared by Laurent Clerc and thus carried over to the instructors and staff of the school. Because this was a fundamental part of the school from the beginning, it was instilled in the students from the moment they came to the school. By the time they graduated, they had internalized it and took it with them back to their homes or wherever they decided to go after finishing their education.

Creation of a Culture

Deaf people have a “different center,” a world view of our own. It is a world view that, depending on age of onset, type of deafness, and experience can differ in some personal ways. But as members of a group, as a culture, we share many similarities. Our world view – our center – is visually-based. It is a center that has been passed from one generation to the next by hand, through American Sign Language.

Our world view is shaped by what we have learned through Deaf experience and what we have been taught both formally and informally. As Deaf people, how we see ourselves and how we view the world, what we have learned and been taught, have changed in profound ways. The center has shifted – from disability to ability, from handicap to culture, from silent individuals to a vibrant community, from primitive gestures to American Sign Language.

- Harvey Corson, 1991 Deaf Studies for Educators conference³

While he was clearly talking about Deaf culture, so much of what Corson said applies to X-Men culture. Let me take the above quote and change words so it applies to X-Men culture, with the changes made in **bold**:

³ Nomeland and Nomeland, *The Deaf Community in America*, 91.

X-Men have a “different center,” a world view of our own. It is a world view that, depending on age of onset, type of **mutation**, and experience can differ in some personal ways. But as members of a group, as a culture, we share many similarities. Our world view – our center – is **ability**-based. It is a center that has been passed from one generation to the next by hand, through **the Xavier Institute**.

Our world view is shaped by what we have learned through **X-Men** experiences and what we have been taught both formally and informally. As **X-Men**, how we see ourselves and how we view the world, what we have learned and been taught, have changed in profound ways. The center has shifted – from **curse** to ability, from **freaks** to culture, from **hiding in the shadows** to a vibrant community.

The last line “from primitive gestures to American Sign Language” does not apply to X-Men since their culture is not language-based. Yet notice how few changes were made to the quote so it applied to the X-Men culture. This speaks to how similar the two cultures are, which is not surprising when you look back at how similar the experiences of the two communities were that led to the formation of their respective cultures.

This central ideology is something that Professor Xavier is familiar with. In issue 127 of *New X-Men*, while talking to a new member of the teaching staff and the team, he makes the following observation:

One of the ways [humankind] survived was by forming themselves into groups or **tribes**, gathering around flags and books and laws...a shared ideal is one of the best ways to hold a tribe together in the face of chaos.

While Xavier is referring to humans in the past, it is still true today. Mutants came together as a “tribe” at his school, held together by the X-Men ideology. The Deaf came together as a “tribe”, mostly at the residential schools, and are held together by the Deaf ideology.

While the initial ideologies of Deaf and X-Men developed at the schools, the cultures developed as people graduated and took the ideologies out into the world with them. The more students that went through the school, the more the ideology spread. In the case of the Deaf, as they spread out across the country, they began to establish newspapers and newsletters, churches, and organizations, where the ideology of Deaf was taught, reinforced, and set as the center of the culture, in addition to the residential schools.

The spread of the X-Men ideology also followed the students as they returned home over break and after they graduated from the Institute. They also established their own additional locations to spread the ideology in the form of teams in locations across the globe. They would go out and publicly help those in need, using their powers and showing the public that they are no threat to humanity, but are instead another group of super-powered beings who want to help. But, unlike the Deaf, they had to hide their true identities from the very beginning. Sadly, the Deaf had to go underground with their culture as well.

Underground Culture

Within a page of arriving at the school, Jean exclaims “Now, I must admit it’s a pleasure to be able to practice *teleportation* openly, without fear of being discovered!”⁴ Unlike the deaf, mutants needed to hide that they had abilities that surpassed human beings. Even before that, when we are first introduced to Professor Xavier and his existing students, there is a mixed message represented: use your powers for good, but only when you are wearing your uniform to

⁴ Lee, *Marvel Masterworks: The X-Men Vol. 1*.

hide your true identity. Even in the school, their practice is conducted in full uniform. Soon after Jean arrives, Xavier says of other mutants that “Some *hate* the human race, and wish to *destroy* it! Some feel that the *mutants* should be the real rulers of earth! It is our job to protect mankind from those...from the *evil mutants!*”⁵ The true nature of Xavier’s School for Gifted Youngsters and those who reside there is kept from the general public because their opinion of mutants has been influenced by the evil mutants, most prominently Magneto, and their actions. They make broad generalizations about mutants, painting them all with the same brush.

This is much like the oralism and eugenics movements, as discussed in chapter 2. Members of those movements felt that being able to speak was superior to signing, and that in order to stem the increase in deaf individuals and the growth of their community, the centers of that community, the schools, needed to be dismantled. But it did not work. Despite the fact that by 1919, nearly 80 percent of deaf students were being taught without any sign language, the community, culture, and language were thriving. By the time oralism rose to dominate the education system, there were schools in most states and multiple communities across each state. Deaf culture, and Deaf, were not confined to one location. That is one important part of why the culture survived the attempts of oralists to suppress and extinguish it and its language.

As I mentioned earlier, as deaf graduates of schools for the deaf spread out across the country, they not only founded more deaf schools, but churches where sign language was the language used, clubs where they could gather and socialize after work and on the weekends, and various print media. These locations, along with the few schools who resisted oralism – including Gallaudet University, are where Deaf culture was kept alive during the decades of the oppression of and banning of sign language from the schools. Deaf parents of deaf children

⁵ Ibid.

would teach sign language and use it at home. Those children would go to oral deaf schools and teach their classmates in the dark and behind teachers' backs.

There were also more tangible efforts to preserve sign language, including a book describing various signs – a predecessor to modern ASL dictionaries – and films.⁶ George Veditz, president of the National Association of the Deaf, raised money to be able to use the new technology of film to fully capture and preserve sign language. From 1910 to 1920, poems, lectures, and stories were all presented by individuals who were considered masters of the language and captured on film, fully preserving this visual language.⁷ Many of the films were lost to time, but some have survived to this day, allowing us a glimpse into the past to see ASL from 100 years ago.

Yet, out of fear of discrimination, in the workplace as well as in public, the deaf kept their language to themselves. That is until William Stokoe, a hearing professor at Gallaudet College, began to notice, in the mid-1960s, that the students were not simply using a series of gestures to communicate, but a language complete with its own grammar and syntax. He was the first individual to see this language who had influence and began to change people's minds about – what he called – American Sign Language. His studies of the language led also to noting that ASL users had specific cultural and social characteristics. Partially because of this outside validation, the students began to recognize and note how they interacted in their own community. This recognition spread and led to an internal recognition of the existence of Deaf culture. With recognition from and a sense of validity fostered by hearing allies, the community began to gain

⁶ Van Cleve and Crouch, *A Place of Their Own*, 139.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

confidence and started to step out of the shadows. They began to use their voices and regain agency for themselves.⁸

X-Men followed a similar path for much of the comics until the early 2000s. They constantly hid their own identities behind masks and costumes and by avoiding being seen by the press or cameras or humans whenever possible. This is part of why these stories are not included within the scope of my research. There was much hiding from the public and keeping to the shadows. But even X-Men began to realize they needed to step out into the light.

From the Shadows to the Spotlight

In issue #114 of *New X-Men*, it is revealed that they will no longer be wearing their spandex uniforms and will be wearing matching jackets, shirts, and pants that resemble streetwear more than costumes. Also, there is a notable lack of masks in the new uniforms. A brief exchange gives us insight into why the change:

Hank: I was never sure why you had us dress up like super heroes anyway, Professor.

Scott: The Professor thought people would *trust* the X-Men if we looked like something they understood.

Xavier: That's correct, Scott. However...I've been working on *better* ways to encourage people to trust mutants.

Morrison sets the tone for his time as writer with this exchange, an attempt to start to come out from the shadows and be themselves in the hopes that it will lead to a better understanding of and less fear toward mutants.

Within two issues, they are unexpectedly thrust into the spotlight from the shadows:

⁸ Nomeland and Nomeland, *The Deaf Community in America*, 90.

-- with that in mind, I feel that it's finally time to put an end to **masks**. An end to hiding our gifts behind "secret identities" and ill-fitting clothes.

Ladies and gentlemen. My name is Charles Xavier, also known as Professor X. And I am a mutant.⁹

This unexpected statement by Professor Xavier, during a televised interview in the wake of the destruction of Genosha, caught the X-Men off-guard. Very quickly, it led to the opening of a dialogue between humans and mutants.

Soon after, a press conference is held at the school to address questions that have come about due to this revelation by Xavier. Xavier is away from the school for a time, leaving Jean Grey as acting headmistress and in charge of the press conference. It is there that she delivers the following speech:

Here, we still believe in the future. We're not training mutant terrorists, but mutant artists and scientists. We're giving the world mutant musicians, mutant politicians, mutant doctors and athletes. Our telepaths can voyage into the depths of the human mind and free people from ancient, destructive behavior patterns. Humans and mutants are branches on the same evolutionary tree. Our roots are planted in the same soil, we breathe the same air and the very idea that we should fight each other is absurd; it's like one finger fighting another. We're tired of **hiding** and **running**. We've endured the **worst** the world can offer and we've **survived**. **All** of us, mutants and humans, have to spend the rest of our lives in the **future**. Let's get together and make it a nice place to live.¹⁰

⁹ Morrison, *New X-Men by Grant Morrison Ultimate Collection, Vol. 1.*

¹⁰ Ibid.

This speech reached countless individuals because the press conference was being televised. This was the first time that the X-Men ideology was shared with so many individuals at one given time. It turned out to be a positive step forward for mutant-human relations.

A similar event that ended up getting national attention from the news media also led to a large, positive step forward for Deaf-hearing relations. The Deaf President Now! protests of March 1988 thrust Deaf culture into the spotlight from the shadows, where it had been lingering for a couple of decades. On August 24, 1987, Jerry Lee, the sixth president of Gallaudet University, announced that he would be resigning from the position on January 1, 1988.¹¹ Lee was the sixth person to be president of the only university for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing in the world. He was also the sixth hearing person to hold that position.¹²

About a month later, a search committee for the next president was formed. By the deadline, sixty-seven people had applied for the position. Of those sixty-seven, nine were deaf. Of those sixty-seven, twenty-five moved on to the second round of considerations. After that round, the pool was reduced to twelve. After interviewing the twelve, six semifinalists were announced in January, half of whom were deaf.¹³

During that time, there were growing efforts to support the appointment of a deaf person to the position; something that was never considered before. Many of the early efforts came from Deaf and hearing faculty, alumni, and prominent Deaf individuals in the community. They wrote letters and submitted petitions signed by hundreds of individuals supporting the appointment of a

¹¹ Christiansen and Barnartt, *Deaf President Now!*, 1.

¹² *Ibid.*, 38.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

Deaf president.¹⁴ There was activity on campus, but it typically consisted of meetings and included few students, due to their lack of interest in the issue.¹⁵

As the search committee continued to interview candidates, one group that had been lobbying for a Deaf president, known as the Ducks, continued their efforts and began to be one of the most vocal of the groups. They organized a rally for March 1 on campus to rally support for the selection of a Deaf candidate to become the next president of the university. They began involving students after the broad strokes of the rally were in place, bringing them in to make posters, get the word out, and control the crowds.¹⁶ The flyers for the rally read as follows:

It's time

In 1842, a Roman Catholic became president of the University of Notre Dame

In 1875, a woman became president of Wellesley College

In 1886, a Jew became president of Yeshiva University

In 1926, a Black person became president of Howard University

And in 1988, the Gallaudet University presidency belongs to a DEAF person

To show OUR solidarity behind OUR mandate for a deaf president of OUR university,
you are invited to participate in a historic RALLY!¹⁷

Despite the efforts of the Ducks and their flyers, there was still little interest in the situation or the rally by the student body.¹⁸ But the students who were listening and involved were fully committed to the efforts and took the information they had learned from the Ducks to lead their fellow students.¹⁹

¹⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹⁵ Ibid., 16.

¹⁶ Ibid., 21.

¹⁷ Ibid., 22.

¹⁸ Ibid., 24.

¹⁹ Ibid., 28.

By the time the rally began on March 1, over a thousand faculty, staff, students from the university, secondary school, and elementary school, and Deaf community members had assembled. Individuals expressed their support for a Deaf president by wearing stickers and buttons handed out by organizers, as well as by bringing their own signs.²⁰ Speakers from organizations around campus, as well as the nation, all expressed their support for a Deaf president, supported every time by the gathered crowd.²¹ The rally began to gain energy and moved to various points around campus and listened to more speakers – in ASL. They began to chant “Deaf President Now” as they moved from place to place, gaining energy and support as they went.²²

The next day, Greg Hilbok, student body president and emerging student leader in the movement, sent a letter, after gaining overwhelming support by the student body, to the only hearing candidate of the three finalists, Elisabeth Zinser, asking that she withdraw.²³ This would have left the committee with two candidates, both Deaf. That same day, students began to pitch tents and camp outside of the administration building to show their support for a Deaf president. This drew the attention of local news media, which drew a crowd of students which prompted an impromptu rally. This was the first time their efforts and message were relayed out to the general community.²⁴

A few small protests occurred in the remaining days of the week, one of which was again covered by local news media.²⁵ Supporters waited patiently for the announcement of who their

²⁰ Ibid., 30.

²¹ Ibid., 32.

²² Ibid., 36.

²³ Ibid., 39.

²⁴ Ibid., 41.

²⁵ Ibid., 42.

next president would be on Sunday, March 6. As soon as the committee made their selection, word was sent back to the campus and relayed to the gathered supporters. No one came to officially inform them, but it was announced that the board had chosen Zinser to be the seventh president of Gallaudet.²⁶ Initially, people were shocked. Some decided that was that. Others did not give up so easily. After getting past the shock, many of those gathered moved to the main entrance of campus and, after finding out where the board was at the time, decided to march down to their location and confront them.²⁷

This began a week-long protest at the university that included barring all the entrances to the campus, speeches by Deaf and hearing members of campus and Washington, D.C., including prominent politicians. After a week, the protestors' demands were met, the first of which was the appointment of a Deaf president who was one of the three finalists, Dr. I. King Jordon. Over the course of the week, the media attention they received expanded to include national television networks and news programs, including the *MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour* and *Nightline*. This spread word of their protest to the hearing community, many of whom were unaware of Deaf culture and the existence of Gallaudet University.²⁸

Like the press conference at the Xavier Institute, Deaf President Now! opened up a dialogue between the two communities and has led to more understanding and acceptance of the Deaf. After the press conference, one of the reporters says to Jean, "However it might have seemed in the *past*, I can tell you that there are *a lot of human beings* who support everything

²⁶ Ibid., 49.

²⁷ Ibid., 52.

²⁸ Christiansen and Barnartt, *Deaf President Now!*

you're doing here. Maybe not all of us, but a *growing few*." Jean replies, "Well then, why don't a few of us *talk*. It'll be a start."²⁹

A few years after Deaf President Now!, the Americans with Disabilities Act was passed and signed into law by President George H. W. Bush. The ADA, which has since been amended and expanded, ensures protections against discrimination due to disability. It works to remove many of the barriers constructed by society that lead to individuals not being able to fully participate. In it are many provisions for the Deaf as well, despite not seeing themselves as disabled. The dialogue that led to this has been, in part, attributed to the actions of Deaf President Now! It was the step that brought the Deaf, and later the disability community, out from the shadows and into the spotlight, vocally making themselves known.³⁰

Perception and Membership

There's a young man down there in Montparnasse thinking about how *cool* those "X-Men" looked on TV. It's hard to believe. They're finally listening -- the world is finally *listening* to us, Jean. And all we had to do was take off our frightening *masks* and step from the shadows. – Professor Xavier³¹

Now that they have stepped out from the shadows, X-Men are now not only more visible to mutants and better able to provide them with assistance and sanctuary as needed,³² but they are more visible to humanity as well. A humanity that is still largely afraid of mutants, as evidenced by the speech Emma Frost gives to the student body of the Xavier Institute at the beginning of the school year, in issue #1:

²⁹ Morrison, *New X-Men by Grant Morrison Ultimate Collection, Vol. 1*.

³⁰ Christiansen and Barnartt, *Deaf President Now!*, 219.

³¹ Morrison, *New X-Men by Grant Morrison Ultimate Collection, Vol. 2*.

³² Ibid.

We have learned the first lesson. They will always hate us. We will never live in a world of peace. Which is why control and non-violence are essential. We must prove ourselves a peaceful people. We must give the ordinary humans respect, compliance, and understanding. And we must never mistake that for trust.³³

While much of what she says echoes what Xavier teaches his students in those early issues of *The X-Men*, there is a different tone to it. Even though the masks have been dropped, the hate and the fear did not go away. She reminds the students of that, partially due to the fact that the student population has grown, yet again, probably due to the accepting nature of the school.³⁴

Later, addressing only the team/faculty, Scott demonstrates his understanding of how little coming out of the shadows has changed things, and how much it has changed things.

It's about everything. Truth, perception... We've saved the world -- worlds, even -- time and again. That's the truth. That's what we do. But the perception is that we're freaks, or worse. That we're Magnetos waiting to happen. We've been taking it on the chin so long, just trying to keep from being wiped out, I think we've forgotten that we have a purpose.³⁵

He goes on to say that they need to go back to the costumes and the spandex, despite Wolverine's objections, because people trust the costumes. They see the costumes and think "super hero" and are comforted by the sight. The hope is that by portraying an image that people

³³ Whedon, *Astonishing X-Men. Vol. 1: Gifted*.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

are more comfortable with, they will gain the people's trust and dispel the fear and misinformation about mutants and X-Men.³⁶

Later, when they relocate to San Francisco, they have the opportunity to “know safety and protection our kind has *never known*.”³⁷ They are able to be themselves freely, without having to hide any visible mutations or even their powers. As the mayor of San Francisco put it in issue #505,

This is San Francisco. The hated and misunderstood have always had a home here. Let your people know -- here, you can live and love and have as many damn mutant babies as you like. They. Will. Be. Welcome.³⁸

But for many, it is a bit of a culture shock. Many of the X-Men living in San Francisco have been part of the community for a long enough time that this freedom is welcome and a little disorienting. Danni Moonstar, a depowered³⁹ X-Man, puts it best in issue #503,

I can't get used to the fact that so many -- that so many mutants -- are just *here*. Are living here. Out in the open. Think back to when we were kids, y'know? This is what we were fighting for.⁴⁰

For Deaf people, this experience of acceptance and no longer needing to hide has been similarly welcomed and disorienting. But there is one important difference: their freedom and welcome-ness extends across the country. American Sign Language is now being taught by colleges across the country and counts toward foreign language requirements. Interpreting programs have increased in number and the requirements for becoming a licensed interpreter

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Fraction and Brubaker, *Uncanny X-Men: The Complete Collection by Matt Fraction - Volume 1*.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ “Depowered” refers to mutants who lost their powers after M-Day. See chapter 1, page 21.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

have increased from simply finishing the required training to also needing a Bachelor's degree. Deaf individuals are opening and running their own businesses and restaurants. Individuals in service industries are more and more aware of Deaf culture and/or have some knowledge of ASL. This has given Deaf people more freedom to participate in the world around them.

This freedom and acceptance has also led to the expansion of who is and is not considered a part of the community. At the end of issue #500, Scott's telepathic call to join them in San Francisco includes family and loved ones. Later in issue #506, depowered mutants and their human families are seen asking for sanctuary at the newly opened Greymalkin Industries.⁴¹ Later, when they flee to Utopia, these depowered mutants and their families are included in the evacuation.⁴² They are considered a part of the community, a part of the culture. Throughout the time Fraction writes the series, the mayor of San Francisco is a politically powerful ally to the X-Men community and constantly does everything that she can to defend them.

The Deaf community has also expanded its definition of who is a part of the community and the culture. Charlotte Baker-Shenk and Dennis Cokely best describe the different ways in which one can be a part of the Deaf community and Deaf culture. They outline four main ways: audiological, political, social, and linguistic. The more ways a person identifies with Deaf culture, the more a part of the culture they are.⁴³ This allows for hearing individuals, who may have no audiological avenue, but participate in and support the political, social, and linguistic aspects, to be a part of the Deaf community. It has also allowed, in more recent years, for those who identify as Deaf with cochlear implants to be able to find a home in the Deaf community.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Fraction, *Uncanny X-Men: The Complete Collection by Matt Fraction - Volume 2*.

⁴³ Baker-Shenk and Cokely, *American Sign Language Green Books, A Teacher's Resource Text on Grammar and Culture*, 56.

While both groups started out as exclusive to those with specific traits, they have evolved and expanded to include anyone who supports their ideology. By coming out of the shadows and dropping the masks of the dominant they had been hiding behind, they are able to enjoy a freedom they had never experienced before. They are also able to share their culture and ideologies with the dominant culture and begin a dialogue that leads to greater understanding and reduces, but does not eliminate, fear and discrimination.

Conclusions

At the center of many cultures, there lies an ideology that brings people together and gives them a common way of thinking to unite them. In the case of X-Men and Deaf, these ideologies are very similar, which is not surprising considering the many similarities between the two cultures that formed around them. Both were first established when schools for mutants and deaf individuals, respectively, opened their doors and treated the students as “normal”, instead of the outsiders they had been treated as up to that point. As the ideology spread with the students after graduation, the community grew, slowly evolving into a culture. A culture that was tested by colonization attempts and discrimination. A culture that decided to step out from the shadows and make itself known to the world.

Both cultures, Deaf and X-Men, see their deviation from Normal not as something negative or something to be fixed. They see their differences, using a visual language to communicate and having abilities beyond those of humans, as just as normal as lacking those differences. This view of normal is the core of their respective ideologies, which is the core of their respective cultures. Despite attempts to colonize them by the culture of Normal, through medicine, the legal system, and education, they continued to exist. In coming out of the shadows, they found allies in the dominant society that believed that their ideologies were valid and that

Normal is not the universal ideology is it thought to be. By sharing their ideologies, they have allowed the outside in, and, hopefully, are having a positive impact on people's views of difference.

CONCLUSION

For over fifty years, mutants have been a part of the Marvel comic universe. They have intentionally been written as a metaphor for racial minorities, sexual minorities, and religious minorities. But from the first page, they have been written as a metaphor for the Deaf in America. From the nature of the Xavier Institute for Gifted Youngsters to establishing a separate state to escape persecution, from the attempts by humanity to make them “normal” to resisting them, much of what happens on the pages of the many titles in the *X-Men* comic books are easily related to Deaf culture in America.

Throughout this work I have pointed out the strongest parallels between Deaf culture and X-Men culture. But, why is it important to notice the parallels? Why is the inclusion of Deaf culture in the interpretation of X-Men culture something that needs to be discussed? First, because mutants have been written as a broad metaphor for so many minority groups, *The X-Men* has given its readers a sense of belonging within their own skin. It has taught readers of all backgrounds that what others may see as a difference to be discriminated against, they should be proud of. This also extends to how the readers see others who may be different from themselves. It has affected how the readers go out and interpret and interact with the world around them.

Second, because of the specific ways in which the differences are portrayed in the *X-Men* comics, they unintentionally are familiarizing the readers with Deaf culture. The idea that people who have different abilities living at a school with others like them suddenly seems cool instead of strange. It makes sense that they would want to be separate from everyone else so they can learn how to use their abilities – powers for the X-Men, ASL for the Deaf – without having to worry about discrimination or prejudice. Seeing how X-Men react to having their entire identity and culture referred to as “a disease” and is something that needs to be fixed makes the

resistance to cochlear implants and hearing aids in the Deaf community not so mystifying. Their difference is a part of who they are, not a problem that needs to be fixed. By showing that individuals who have been depowered, whether it was Wing who was cured against his will or the millions of mutants who were depowered after M-Day, are still a part of the culture and the community can help readers understand how a person can have a cochlear implant and still be a part of the Deaf community. Part of being a part of the community – X-Men or Deaf – is more than just biology, it is a shared ideology and a shared culture.

Unfortunately, it is becoming harder and harder to use X-Men as a metaphor for the Deaf because of the dwindling mutant population. The *X-Men* comics are a product that Marvel is looking to profit from. In their more recent efforts to entice readers back to the titles, they have continued to reduce the number of mutants in existence – first through the events of M-Day, and more recently with previously unknown effects from another Marvel race, the Inhumans. Marvel has turned mutants into an endangered species instead of a minority. In America, there are few groups that can identify with such small numbers. Even the parallels with the Deaf are harder to see because, despite the steady decrease in congenital deafness, being able to be a part of Deaf culture no longer solely relies on being audiologically deaf, while being a full part of the X-Men culture, not an ally, does still appear to require some experience with having an active x-gene at some point in one's life.

There is so much more to explore in the pages of the *X-Men* comic books. There are over 50 years of stories written by hundreds of people across hundreds of titles. I mainly looked at three different titles with three specific authors whose works were written in the 2000s. There are many more titles to explore the different ways in which Deaf culture has been included in the

development of the X-Men. Clearly this would be a much larger task that would require much more time to undertake thoroughly, but one that is well worth it.

The pages of the *X-Men* comics address other topics that have not been investigated or have received little attention before now. One is the parallels between mutants and disability in general. The social, medical, and religious models of disability have all been used in the stories over the years. The history of disability includes many instances that are similar to those in the comics, including experimentation and institutionalization. There is also the more direct topic of how disability is represented through Professor Xavier's use of the wheelchair and the many times his disability has been erased. Still another topic of discussion is the intersections of race, gender, and Deaf or disability. The way these play out in real life may or may not be the same as how they are played out in the comics.

In all of these cases, it comes back to the topic of representation of identities in popular culture. How they are represented is important because misrepresentation gives the readers a false idea of how these identities are viewed in the real world. The fictional metaphor of the mutant as the ultimate minority is a canvas on which the writers can paint accurate representations of real-life in a setting that most people may not see as applicable, but we internalize the messages the writers include, both explicitly and implicitly.

Despite the changes to the overall narrative of the *X-Men* in the past ten years, over forty years of stories are still available for readers and scholars to experience. With the changes in technology, people can now become familiar with the X-Men culture and Deaf culture more easily. More and more, the stories that have been published are being made available to read online. More and more, Deaf people are telling stories, sharing their culture, and talking about their experiences through video on sites like YouTube. While the paths of the two cultures may

be diverging now, that does not change the interconnectedness that has led to today and to the conclusions drawn here. My hope is that in reading this, it has inspired you to look at comic books, especially *The X-Men* series in a new light, and see that we are not so different from one another after all.

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