

## This, That, Both, Neither: The Badging Of Biracial Identity In Young Adult Realism

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*Editor's Note: **This, That, Both, Neither** was accepted for the peer reviewed paper session at YALSA's third annual Young Adult Literature Symposium held November 2-4, 2012 in St. Louis.' ' The theme of the conference was "Hit me with the next big thing." □*

Only in the lifetime of the Millennial generation has it become legally acceptable to mark more than one race on a federal form. In the 2010 Census, 2.9 percent of respondents indicated that they were two or more races, with even more assigning themselves other designations that speak to the many types of multiracial identities common today. As this population grows in real life, it also flourishes in young adult literature, where ever more protagonists identify with more than one racial or ethnic group and must decide how to assert themselves and what to call themselves. This paper explores some of these novels and tracks each character's progress towards creating a "badge" □ of identity.

### ' Introduction

Every year when I was a student, my school district held awards ceremonies to honor distinguished students of color from all grade levels. There was an African American ceremony, a Hispanic ceremony, and presumably an Asian American and Native American one as well. High-achieving students were invited to their respective ceremonies as well as any students of color, although I'm not entirely sure. I didn't even know the awards existed until seventh grade, when two girls in my homeroom asked me why I hadn't been at the African American ceremony the evening before.

I hadn't been invited.

“Oh.” □ It hit me. “The district has me down as white.” □

If you'd been looking at me when I said that, you would be confused. I don't exactly look like a character in a Nella Larsen novel. But it wasn't a lie. I *am* white. I'm also black. And I'm adopted, so I also share a second mixed identity with my sister, one in which we are ethnically Jewish and Latina.

My mother knew that her children were mixed, and she wanted us to have the advantage of going to a diverse magnet elementary school, so when we started kindergarten, she checked the box marked "white." □ This was the

late 1980s and early 1990s, when you were only allowed to be one race. And so, without having to lie, my mother helped me and my sister pass as white—at least on paper.

Ironically, of course, her reason for checking the box marked “white”<sup>□</sup> was different than the reasons that motivated many African Americans and multiracial or multiethnic individuals who have chosen to pass. They did so in order to have more career opportunities or to avoid racism and its acts of violence. For me, it was my mother’s way of ensuring that I would be given a spot at a school that boasted great diversity and thus would give me the chance to meet people who shared my background, or at least pieces of it. And it worked, to an extent, as the various types of people I met often assumed I was like them. My surname, my color, or my Yiddish expressions made me an insider in multiple groups that I could say I had ties to. If questions came up as to how I was mixed, my complicated life story was deemed interesting and then the conversation would move on.

For my last five years of school, I attended a private secondary school where my mixed identity was considered too complicated. I was told to “just pick one,”<sup>□</sup> and it was assumed I was just trying to be interesting or difficult if I claimed multiple heritages. College courses in sociology and race helped me come up with my current preferred label, which is simply “mixed.”<sup>□</sup> And on the 2010 Census, I was able to speak for myself and for the first time check all the boxes that I belonged to.<sup>[1]</sup>

I share this story not because I’m writing my autobiography, but because this is an experience shared by other mixed-race individuals, an increasingly larger part of the young American population. These teens, I believe, are the future of young adult (YA) literature. For fifteen years now, Americans have been able to officially identify as mixed. As people who identify as mixed-race begin to publish novels that tell their stories, it seems natural that their fictional worlds will represent the worlds they see around them. As Michele Elam notes, “the census box represents the new nonviolent resistance, a finger in the eye of the racial status quo,”<sup>□</sup><sup>[2]</sup> ‘ and we all know YA literature to be about testing boundaries and making bold statements.

I wanted to explore what contemporary YA literature does with these characters: What do they identify as? How do they assert their identity to others? Post-civil rights movement, do teens continue to pass, do they choose one racial or ethnic identity over the other, or do they find a way to identify with both?

My research differs from current research in a few ways. First, I did not examine traditional “passing novels,”<sup>□</sup> like those of Larsen and others. Instead I looked at contemporary literature about contemporary teens, because today’s social mores discourage passing for white and consider such an act to be a rejection of one’s family.<sup>[3]</sup> ‘ Second, little literary analysis deals with individuals whose mix differs from half-black and half-white, and so I looked also at characters who encompass a broader range of racial and ethnic identities. Third, since multiracial people are finally allowed to identify as such, I wanted to explore sociological and psychological research and Census data for clues as to why we might be seeing more biracial teens in YA literature in the coming years.

I created a spreadsheet of possible titles to examine using three sources: NoveList Plus, WorldCat, and GoodReads. Using WorldCat allowed me to search using Library of Congress headings such as “Racially mixed people in literature”<sup>□</sup> and “Racially mixed people—Fiction.”<sup>□</sup> NoveList and GoodReads use more varied and user-defined keywords, such as “Eurasian,”<sup>□</sup> “Blasian,”<sup>□</sup> “Blaxican,”<sup>□</sup> and “multi-ethnic”<sup>□</sup>; this allowed me to identify novels whose characters used more colloquial or specific mixed epithets. My initial list was 95 titles long but included some middle grade and adult fiction titles, as well as novels that had fantasy or science fiction

elements. After the list was whittled down, I was left with approximately 40 potential titles that were published as YA literature and labeled as realistic, novel-length fiction. My selection of specific titles was random, based on availability of the titles in libraries and bookstores.

I constrained myself to realistic fiction only for two reasons. First, mixed-race identity becomes more complicated in science fiction and fantasy, where an individual might be metaphorically biracial by being half-vampire and half-werewolf, and it was too large of an undertaking to unpack the fantastic metaphors alongside the racial ones. Second, I wanted to investigate whether multiracial authors would use fiction to explore, revisit, or rewrite their own experiences to fit into today's world, and this seemed to require a certain level of verisimilitude.

I focused my theoretical and historical research in psychology and sociology rather than literary studies because I feel that this new trend in YA literature is based on the mixed identities of the roughly 20- to 40-year-old generation of YA authors and their post-civil-rights-era upbringing. If more people in the general population are identifying as mixed-race, it follows that more YA authors are as well, especially as interest in reading and writing YA literature continues to grow. Texts used in this part of my study were found using WorldCat and the resources at MixedRaceStudies.org.

## ‘ Findings

Adolescence is about personal development and the forging of identity. In my reading of these novels, I identified what seemed to be the three main steps in the journey toward developing an identity as a mixed person, rather than just white or just as a person of color. My three-step process is informed by Kellogg and Liddell's[4] ‘ work with multiracial/multiethnic college students. First, the individual must be **confronted** with an event or situation in which they are required to associate or dissociate with a racial or ethnic group. This is adapted from Kellogg and Liddell's finding that many students “realized the relevance of race in their daily lives, and were faced with an awareness of racism, both intellectually and experientially.”□[5] Recognition of race as relevant to one's personal life is crucial to each mixed-race individual in defining an identity. As Kellogg and Liddell note, these experiences don't only have to be negative; they cite a student whose college sent invitations to join ethnic student organizations and social groups who was surprised there was such a push to identify racially in college.[6] Similar shock or surprise happens in fiction and serves as the catalyst for further exploration and assertion of identity.

Second, they must seek a **community** that does not require them to dissociate from one of their heritages in order to fit in. Kellogg and Liddell did not have a corresponding point here, but their interviews with the students indicated that experiences like coursework and class discussions in critical race theory, experimenting with campus ethnic societies, and sharing life experiences with other students contributed to a better sense of wellbeing. I found that the way these college experiences are most often mimicked in YA fiction was through creating personal relationships with other mixed individuals, which sometimes entailed similar sharing and learning.

And third, in the absence of an official racial label, they must develop one for themselves. To use Kellogg and Liddell's terminology, these “critical incidents”□ in young adults' lives can be “powerful, emotional, and often negative,”□ but they can also lead to empowerment for the individual who experiences them.[7] This empowerment is what allows for a successful “**badging**,”□ or identifying of oneself with a created or adopted label that rejects monoraciality.

Also informing this study is the burden Michele Elam calls “genealogical debt,” [8] in which a multiracial person feels obligated to adequately identify with, support, or participate in the racial or ethnic group of each parent.’ This requires the individual to tread carefully, to consider the impact their identity has on their family, and to always be ready to renegotiate or redefine themselves depending on their context.

While each novel in this paper deals with issues of identity, community-building, and naming, I placed each one in a certain section to act as a representative sample for each point in the process.

### ‘ Confrontation

The mixed-race community knows all too well the intrusive and dehumanizing question, “What are you?” [9] When an unsatisfactory answer is given, the questioner often assigns an identity to the individual, generally based on physical appearance. Often even if the question is not explicitly asked, individuals of one race will confront the mixed-race individual in some way, indicating that they are uncomfortable with mixed identity, usually because it has no standard definition and does not allow a person to fit easily into one social group. This phenomenon was found in several of the books included in this study, with antagonists more likely to act this way than tertiary characters.

In Mariko and Jillian Tamaki’s *Skim*, [9] a graphic novel, the protagonist has been given the titular nickname because of her half-Japanese, half-white heritage, not because she chose it. When her teacher asks her about her nickname, her explanation of it is offhand and complaisant, indicating that she has not given much thought to it and allows others to define her. Since the text deals more directly with Skim’s romantic relationship with her teacher, the nickname is a confrontation with which Skim declines to engage, disallowing her to continue through the process.

While Skim’s confrontation experience is passive, Asha of Sarah Jamila Stevenson’s *The Latte Rebellion* opens her story with a more troubling experience:

The jeering male voice came from somewhere behind me, waking me up from a heatstroke-induced doze.

“Hey, check it out–Asha’s a towel-head.” [10]

The term, presumably meant to be a joke because Asha is at the pool and has a towel wrapped around her head, hits close to home because Asha is part Indian. She is also part Mexican and part white. When the bearer of the insult, Roger, follows up by telling Asha she has no right to be offended because she is “barely Asian,” [10] Asha and her friend Carey, also mixed-race, are inspired to create a label for themselves–latte–in order, ostensibly, to be prepared for the next time such a confrontation occurs. Interestingly, by calling her “barely Asian,” [10] Roger implies that Asha has been passing for white, even though she has not done so intentionally. Since passing for white is not en vogue these days, and since the Millennial Asha lives in a world where being mixed-race is at least legally acceptable, if not always socially, this is a confrontation that makes it necessary for her to look in the mirror–literally and figuratively–to assess who she is and where she places herself racially, culturally, and socially. She responds by using her Millennial generation to her advantage–she and Carey utilize viral marketing and e-commerce to turn their identities not just into badges but also a brand. As the popularity of the Latte Rebellion grows, Asha and Carey are invited onto college campuses to meet with other students starting clubs based on their cause, placing a strong emphasis on step two, community, as well as confrontation.

Violet Paz of Nancy Osa's *Cuba 15*<sup>[11]</sup> comes to this from the opposite direction. Having no strong associations with any one group, the half-Polish-Jewish and half-Cuban 14-year-old decides that if she is going to be forced to have a *quinceañera* (a big party and coming-out for a young woman's fifteenth birthday), she needs to learn more about Cuba and Cuban culture to validate the event. Her father, however, keeps her from this knowledge because he is not ready to talk about the country he was forced to leave. In a sense, he forces her to pass as white, and she must take it upon herself to assert her identity as half-Cuban. It is this non-confrontation that is her confrontation, and her father's resistance to helping her feel more Cuban speaks, in part, to his belonging to another generation where non-white identity was less acceptable.

## Community

In a study of mixed-race college students, Kellogg and Liddell proposed that college is an especially useful time for individuals to explore racial identity because independence gives them the freedom, and academics—especially the humanities—gives them the space to learn about and assert racial and ethnic affiliations.<sup>[12]</sup> Just like the subjects in their study, these novels feature protagonists defining and redefining their ethnicities. YA literature, however, is primarily concerned with high school-aged protagonists, which means that the change in setting removes from reach a resource to which real-life students have access. In college, there are support services and social groups for students of color. In high school, this is less often the case. While the data from the study revealed that many multiracial students felt ostracized or out of place at ethnic student centers or groups, such spaces at least allow for experimentation and exploration. However, as most multiracial people will attest, there is nothing quite like meeting another mixed-race person, regardless of their specific heritages. It's an instant bond that isn't easily shaken even if personalities or interests don't click beyond that. Meeting more and more people like this begins to build a supportive community for an individual of mixed heritage.

In the novels I read for this project, community isn't offered as readily to the high school students featured. Danny of Matt de la Peña's *Mexican WhiteBoy* finds teens with similar experiences almost by accident.<sup>[13]</sup> This occurs when he spends the summer with the Mexican side of his family, after growing up with his Mexican father absent from the family. Danny has never spoken to Liberty, the girl he has a crush on, but he overhears people at a party talking about how she moved to California from her home in Mexico by petitioning her white American father who lives there. Danny, whose Mexican father has been out of the picture for years, wonders how he will communicate with the girl when they are so similar and yet so different: "It's weird that he and Liberty have been doing the same thing from opposite countries. And it's weird that she doesn't speak English and he doesn't speak Spanish. How would they ever communicate? It's almost like she's his exact opposite."<sup>[14]</sup> Danny also creates an unspoken bond with Uno, the second protagonist of the novel, who can feel the discrimination he gets in his largely Mexican neighborhood because his father is black. Without much discussion, the novel nonetheless shows how both of these young men struggle with wanting to fit in with their peers without insulting or failing to acknowledge one of their parents, the genealogical debt mentioned by Elam.

Half-white, half-black Jaz of Janet Gurtler's *If I Tell*<sup>[15]</sup> has had negative confrontations with racism her entire life, mostly at school. She is attracted to Jackson, a boy from school who keeps hanging around the coffee shop where she works, but she thinks he won't understand her experience because he is white. When she tells him so, she is surprised by his response: "My grandma is black. I guess my grandpa was a grumpy white guy, but Grams, not so much. My mom was like you. Well, lighter, but the same. She never let me forget it either. Whenever she was drunk, she told me I was 'stained by black blood.' And she was drunk a lot."<sup>[16]</sup> Though he, like Asha of *The Latte Rebellion*, has unintentionally passed as white, Jackson himself chooses to identify as mixed because of



genealogical debt. After she hears this, Jaz finds herself even more drawn to Jackson, and not just romantically. Knowing that he has a similar experience allows Jaz to express herself with less explanation and context, and she and Jackson together create a small community.

## The Badge

Elam suspects that mixed-race identity is becoming more accepted because it is a movement that allows for “the branding of multiracials as a distinct population associated with a hip, young, new people.”<sup>[17]</sup> ‘ After Asha and Carey start the Latte Rebellion, an online t-shirt company turned mixed-race advocacy movement, they are lucky enough to attract a huge community of members who become very vocal and choose together to call themselves “latte,”<sup>[18]</sup> moving the badge that much closer to universally accepted, just like traditional labels like “black”<sup>[19]</sup> or “Caucasian.”<sup>[20]</sup> They are able to literally wear their identity like a badge when they make t-shirts with the logo and name they design, which is something that arguably no other racial group can do without serious backlash or resistance.

In *Black, White, Other: In Search of Nina Armstrong* by Joan Steinau Lester, protagonist Nina literally bounces between identities by experimenting with which groups she sits with at lunchtime and by traveling back and forth between her two parents’ homes, since they are separated.<sup>[21]</sup> By the end of the novel, she chooses to identify as biracial and rejects those who would have her choose one identity or the other by rapping about it: “I’m big and bad and bold. Comin’ in from the cold. I be black and I be white. If you my friend, you all right.”<sup>[22]</sup> Later she coins the phrase “gheppies,”<sup>[23]</sup> a combination of “ghetto”<sup>[24]</sup> and “preppy,”<sup>[25]</sup> as a social extension of her biracial identity.

By creating these badges, literal or metaphorical, these multiracial protagonists can both shield and arm themselves for future confrontations. The badge is a ready answer, a retort, and a built-in community, whether made up of one person or thousands. By virtue of their being person-created, badges resist societal expectations—they are not Library of Congress subject headings; rather, they are user tags, defined by the person who identifies them, and changeable whenever the individual must renegotiate a racialized situation.

## ‘ Conclusion

The 2010 Census registered 2.9 percent of its respondents as having chosen one or more race.<sup>[26]</sup> ‘ In addition, 16.3 percent were listed as Hispanic or Latino , and many people who identify this way also acknowledge either known mixed heritage or the likely possibility of being mixed in some way with indigenous, black, and white heritage. Anecdotes from blogs, podcasts, interviews, and academic research further muddle these numbers by explaining that some people who acknowledge their mixed heritage prefer to choose only one race (their non-white one) on federal forms so as to assert their minority status or to ensure that the Census data is used for services and programs sorely needed in minority communities, so it is impossible to have exact numbers. But simply by viewing the ever-growing number of social groups, novels, research institutions, and publications dedicated to the exploration and assertion of multiracial identity, it is clear that this group, however they choose to identify or associate, is swelling in both number and in voice. As YA literature grows in popularity, more readers and writers contribute to the expression, expansion, and volume of the multiracial experience. As more and more individuals come of age in a nation that has always allowed them to designate as many racial categories as they feel necessary, I feel quite certain that novels depicting multiracial and multiethnic identity, especially in YA literature, will continue to grow.

## References

[1] Federal forms allowed this for the first time in 1997.

[2] Michele Elam, *The Souls Of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 13.

[3] Marcia Alesan Dawkins, *Clearly Invisible: Racial Passing and the Color of Cultural Identity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2012), 2.

[4] Angela H. Kellogg and Debra Liddell, "Not Half but Double"□: Exploring Critical Incidents of Multiracial Students, *The Journal of College Student Development*, (August 2012), 524-541.

[5] Ibid, 530.

[6] Ibid, 530.

[7] Ibid, 524.

[8] Michele Elam, *The Souls Of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 50.

[9] Mariko Tamaki and Jillian Tamaki, *Skim* (Toronto, ON: Groundwood Books, 2008).

[10] Sarah Jamila Stevenson, *The Latte Rebellion* (Woodbury, MN: Flux, 2011), 1.

[11] Nancy Osa, *Cuba 15* (New York, NY: Random House, 2005).

[12] Angela H. Kellogg and Debra Liddell, "Not Half but Double"□: Exploring Critical Incidents of Multiracial Students, *The Journal of College Student Development*, (August 2012), 535-6.

[13] Matt de la PeÑ±a, *Mexican Whiteboy* (New York, NY: Random House, 2008).

[14] Ibid, 68-9.

[15] Janet Gurtler, *If I Tell* (Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Fire, 2011).

[16] Ibid, 159.

[17] Michele Elam, *The Souls Of Mixed Folk: Race, Politics, and Aesthetics in the New Millennium* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 39.

[18] Joan Steinau Lester, *Black, White, Other: In Search of Nina Armstrong* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zonderkidz, 2011).

[19] Ibid, 88.

## About the author

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## Taking a Dip in the Crazy Pool: The Evolution of X-Women From Heroic Subject to Sexual Object

Posted on [April 22, 2013](#) by [Anna Lam](#)



**By Suzanne M. Stauffer**, Associate Professor School of Library and Information Science, Louisiana State University

The *X-Men* presents a unique opportunity for examining changing social attitudes toward women in the evolution of the personality and character of the female X-Men to reflect the social construction of women. Analysis reveals that they reflect and reaffirm traditional patriarchal gender hierarchies and traditional American middle-class values and norms. Nearly all of the X-Women, regardless of their individual personality, physical characteristics, or superpower, share the same pattern of development. They are hypersexualized and hyperfetishized physically, emotionally, and psychologically. They are emotionally submissive to and dependent upon their male partners. Their powers are physically weaker than their male counterparts and they are usually incapable of managing those powers without masculine assistance. Their stories suggest that women who attempt to assume and exercise immense power are a danger to the very fabric of existence and that they will be punished for this unfeminine act with insanity or death or both.

### Introduction

Teens read graphic novels. In recognition of this, YALSA has published the “Great Graphic Novels for Teens” list annually since 2007, and in that year awarded the Michael L. Printz award to a graphic novel, *American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yuang. The YALSA list includes works in every genre and every type: non-fiction, original novels in graphic form, graphic versions of classic novels, manga series, graphic novels in serial form, and traditional superhero trade paperback comic book compilations. There is no question that a teen collection should include a variety of graphic novels and comic books to meet the needs of its users. The teen librarian who is charged with creating a balanced collection of age-appropriate works and providing readers’ advisory may understandably feel overwhelmed when faced with the task of evaluating such a wide range of types and genres. When considering that superhero comic book series have been published continuously since the first Superman comic book in 1934 and proliferated into literally hundreds of titles in the ensuing years, the challenge can seem insurmountable.

This paper is designed to provide teen librarians with insight into one popular and long-lived superhero series, *X-Men*, particularly its depiction of women over the life of the series. The initial series has split into numerous series since its beginning in 1963, most of which are still in publication, so it is not reasonable to expect any librarian who has not been a fan of the series to read or have read every issue of every series. This article presents a summary and overview of the major female characters and themes in order to assist teen librarians with creating a

balanced collection of comic books/graphic novels and providing effective readers' advisory in that area. Understanding the image presented by this series will enable librarians to add to the collection titles which present a different image and thereby provide a more balanced view of women to the teens who use the collection for recreational reading. It will also allow librarians to provide more precise readers' advisory and to engage teens in more meaningful discussions of some of their favorite characters.

## Summary of X-Men Series

For those unfamiliar with the series, the titular X-Men are mutant teens and adults who have been recruited by the telepathic mutant, Professor Charles Xavier (Professor X), to join his private academy, Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters (later Xavier Institute for Higher Learning), and his team of crime-fighting superheroes, the X-Men. The initial team in 1963 consisted of five teens: Cyclops (Scott Summers), whose mutant power was firing a force beam from his eyes; Angel (Warren Kenneth Worthington III), who, as his name suggests, had wings and could fly; Beast (Henry Philip "Hank" McCoy), blessed with great strength and agility; Iceman (Bobby Drake), whose power allowed him to freeze the water vapor in the air; and Jean Grey, referred to nearly exclusively by her name rather than her sobriquet of Marvel Girl. Her power was initially telekinesis, the ability to move things with her mind.<sup>2</sup> Later she too would develop telepathic abilities.

They battled mutant supervillains, such as Magneto (Eric Lehnsherr), who had power over magnetism, Toad (Mortimer Toynbee), nicknamed for his appearance and powers, the psychic Mastermind (Jason Wyngarde), and Mystique, whose shapeshifting abilities allowed her to assume any form. Over the ensuing years, numerous mutants were added to both the ranks of X-Men and of villains, so many that in 2005 Marvel reduced the millions to a more manageable few hundred.<sup>3</sup> The original series also split into dozens of team series, individual series, limited series, and crossovers with other Marvel comic book series. Some of the titles take place in alternate universes or in alternate timelines within our universe.

Of the female X-Men characters who have been studied by researchers, the African weather witch Storm (Ororo Munroe) is the only one to have warranted individual treatment,<sup>4</sup> primarily in terms of her status and role as the first black female superhero. In general, scholarly explorations of the *X-Men* as a team have focused on the characters as metaphors for persecuted racial,<sup>5</sup> sexual,<sup>6</sup> ethnic, and other<sup>7</sup> minorities and marginalized groups. Other than brief references to a handful of female characters, the specific aspect of the representations of female X-Men in comic books when viewed through the lens of postmodern feminist theory and social constructionism has not been explored. These theories hold that gender is not defined or determined by biology but instead is a social construct which is created by a culture through language and imagery. Because it is a social construct, it changes as the society and culture which created it also evolve.

Postmodern feminist theory in particular argues that what we consider "feminine" behavior and appearance is really a reflection of what is constructed as "masculine"—in other words, it is feminine because it is not masculine. This paper will use these perspectives to analyze the way that "woman" is constructed within the X-Universe both in language (the way the characters are defined and the stories that are told about them) and images, which are as essential as language in graphic novels and comic books.

## Literature Review

Scholarly critiques of the representations of the female superhero in comic books are notably scarce. Most such works have focused on a single superhero, primarily Wonder Woman, with occasional references to Supergirl, She-Hulk, Invisible Girl, and a few others.<sup>8</sup> Despite the fact that the highly successful *X-Men* franchise included a female superhero, Jean Grey, in its first issue and has added dozens of female characters over its forty-plus year run, few scholars have included them in their analysis of comic book female superheroes.

As a medium of popular culture, comic books and comic book art are “a particularly useful way to measure the impact—or at least the wide recognition—of social change on the general population.”<sup>9</sup> As Larew notes, “images of women in comics tend to reflect social attitudes and perceptions of women during specific eras,”<sup>10</sup> attitudes and perceptions which, in turn, are shaped by their reflection of themselves.<sup>11</sup> Spanning more than forty years and including literally dozens of female characters, the *X-Men* presents a unique opportunity for examining the changes in existing characters as well as the introduction of new characters representative of changing social attitudes toward women. That is to say, the feminist exploration of the evolution of the personality and character of the female X-Men (X-Women) as a reflection of the changing social construction of “woman” from the 1961 through 2010. This paper will be restricted to a consideration of the recurring female characters who were official members of the X-Men team (also called the *Uncanny X-Men* and the *New X-Men*) founded, mentored, and directed by Professor X at his School for Gifted Youngsters in Westchester County, New York, and the major, recurring female villains in that series. However, it would be an almost impossible task to examine every one of the literally hundreds of minor characters who appeared over the years as members of the X-Men for a few issues. The recurring characters are those most likely to be remembered and so have the most impact on the readers and on society.

### **Female Superheroes as Hypersexual Object**

The most obvious presentation, particularly in a visual medium, is the physical. Nearly all who write on female superheroes explore this aspect of their representation to some degree. In writing about Wonder Woman, O’Reilly observes that the “depiction of female superheroes as both strong and beautiful underscores the binary of the masculine-subject/feminine-object relationship,”<sup>12</sup> while Emad interprets the hypersexualization of the character in the 1990s as a means for “directing the primary purpose...to be an object for male sexual pleasure.”<sup>13</sup> Brown notes, “The problem at its simplest is that this double bind [of being tough and sexual, violent but desirable] constructs these emerging roles for women as both a heroic subject and a sexual object.”<sup>14</sup>

Of the modern hyperfeminized comic book superwoman, Reynolds asks, “How can women who dress up in the styles of 1940s pornography be anything other than the pawns or tools of male fantasy?”<sup>15</sup> and further explicates the visual representation of female superheroes as the “reconciliation of all the conflicting demands of adolescent male sexual desire. Sexuality is domesticated (i.e., made safe) and yet remains exceptionally exciting. Women are visually thrilling, and yet threatening and dangerous only to outsiders and strangers.”<sup>16</sup>

The pattern of increasing hypersexualization set by Wonder Woman can be seen in the evolution of the X-Men’s Jean Grey (also known as Marvel Girl; later Phoenix) from the “girl next door”<sup>17</sup> teen in 1963, to the pouty-lipped, wide-eyed, hypersexualized mutant superbabe in skimpy, skintight clothing of the 1990s, and in the physical appearance of most female characters added over the years. “To point out that all modern comic book women are extremely fetishized is almost redundant. Nearly every female character in comics is illustrated as an adolescent fantasy of the perfect woman.”<sup>17</sup>

# The Symbolic Evolution of X-Women

## **Sexual Orientation/Gender Identity**

Underlying this rather obvious feature of the female characters is a deeper, more pervasive, and more meaningful pattern of psychological and social development shared by nearly all of the X-Women, regardless of their individual personality or physical characteristics. Without exception, the X-Women are constructed as heterosexual. All of them who are involved in a romantic or physical relationship are paired with male characters in what are essentially traditional gendered relationships; those who are not frequently express their interest in a particular male or their generalized desire for a relationship with a male.

## **Examples**

Jean Grey<sup>18</sup> began dating Scott Summers (Cyclops) within the first few issues of the original series and ultimately married him. Polaris carried on a long, complicated relationship with Scott's brother, Alex (Havock), to whom she was once engaged. Storm was in a relationship with fellow X-Man Forge for several years, and is currently married to the Marvel African superhero, Black Panther. Shadowcat was linked with a number of male characters over the years and is currently in a relationship with the X-Man Colossus; in the *Ultimate* series, she has been dating Spider-Man. Dazzler developed a relationship with the extra-dimensional yet male Longshot of Mojoworld; in the *Ultimate* series, she was paired with Angel. A continuing storyline for years was Rogue's relationship with fellow X-Man Gambit, and the question of whether he could be expected to remain faithful in the absence of sexual intimacy. Psylocke and Husk have both had relationships with Archangel, the current incarnation of Angel. Stacy-X was also in love with Archangel, and left the X-Men when it became obvious that he was in love with Husk; as a parting gift, she left him an erotic video of herself jumping rope in the nude.

Far from transgressing traditional gender roles, the X-Women reaffirm and support them, as they are all emotionally and sexually attracted to, dependent upon, and available to men, regardless of their mutant superpower. Even the character with the most transgressive promise, the one-time prostitute Stacy-X, with her snake-like skin and ability to create sexual euphoria through control of her pheromones, is revealed to be just as emotionally vulnerable as any of the more stereotypical females to the "right" □ man.

## **Superpower**

Nearly all of the X-Women's mutant superpowers are mental, psychic, or otherwise invisible and operate through indirect means. They allow the X-Women to affect others only indirectly and frequently without their knowledge, by subtly manipulating their minds, the physical world, or both. Such powers reflect the traditional stereotype of women as emotional creatures who use indirect, not to say insidious and pernicious, means to achieve their ends.

At the same time, the X-Women can be viewed as archetypal witches and as forces of nature; Storm is frequently referred to as "weather witch." □ They are able to affect and control humans and nature through "magical" □ or "supernatural" □ means, rather than physical force. Their control is based on deception and manipulation; they use a man's mind, emotions, and instincts against him. They are dangerous creatures who are subject to unexplained and violent outbursts as a result of their internal powers. However, when they willingly submit themselves to male control, they can be nurturing, noble, and self-sacrificing.

Like most other superwomen, X-Women have powers that they can use while remaining attractive and appealing to the male gaze. "But a heroine will look like a supermodel if she possesses what is known as 'strike a pose and

point' power...Just like posing for a picture in *Vogue*."□19 The particular pose referred to frequently involves an arched back and thrusting chest, emphasizing the woman's hypersexuality, and just as often includes sado-masochistic overtones of the dominatrix, such as black leather bustiers and thigh-high boots.

Not coincidentally, unlike many of the male mutants' powers, the female's powers seldom result in physical abnormalities or deformities which would make them unappealing to the male gaze. If they have any physical effect at all, it is one of exoticizing the female Other, as with Storm's blue eyes and flowing white hair, Psylocke's new, eroticized Asian body, or Stacy-X's phallic snakeskin.

### ***Examples***

This pattern was established in the very first issue of the comic book. Jean's power initially was telekinesis—she could move things with her mind. She utilized her power without making any direct physical contact with the target object or person. Later, it was revealed that she is a powerful telepath as well, another ability that does not operate through direct physical contact. Polaris manipulates magnetic fields. Storm controls and manipulates atmospheric elements, again indirectly attacking her foes. As an Earth Goddess/Mother, her powers are almost maternal, “embodying the forces of nature which are enveloping rather than explosive or lacerating in their effect.”□20

Shadowcat's power to pass through solid objects allows her to become essentially non-corporeal. She does disrupt electromagnetic processes as she passes through people or things, but she takes no direct physical action. Marvel Girl (Rachel Summers, the daughter of Scott Summers and Jean Grey in an alternate timeline) is a telepath, like her mother, and has the same telekinetic powers, while Dazzler converts music into light “in all its infinite variety,” which allows her to induce a coma or even kill without ever touching her target. When she uses it to protect herself against a villain, it floods “his eyes, his mind his soul. His brain can't cope with the sensory overload. It short-circuits—and turns itself completely off.”21 Rogue sucks the life force out of her victims merely by touching them.

Psylocke is a telepath, is able to perceive the future, and at some point acquires telekinetic ability. Jubilee exudes explosive energy, which was originally compared to firecrackers and sparklers. Later it was revealed that these were globules of plasma that are under her mental control. Emma Frost and the Stepford Cuckoos (quintuplet sisters) are also telepaths. The Stepford Cuckoos are able to combine their abilities and function as one, often speaking in chorus, “Combined we are a single, brilliant supermind. Without (any one of us), we're just four smart blondes.”22

This pattern continues into the 21st century, with the introduction of new X-Women and exemplified by Stacy-X's power to manipulate men through exuding sexually-arousing pheromones. Sage, introduced as the telepath Tessa, a member of the villainous Hellfire Club in 1981, was revealed in 2001 to have been a spy for Professor X and a virtual living computer. Later she was found to have the power to project an astral form, manipulate mutagenic fields, and serve as a catalyst for latent mutant abilities. She uses her power to heal other wounded mutants, serving essentially as a nurse to the X-Men.

Armor (Hisako Ichiki), introduced in 2004, “can generate a psionic exoskeleton around her entire body by drawing on the strength of the line of her ancestors.”□23 Pixie (also 2004), as might be expected from her name,

has butterfly-like wings which allow her to fly, causes hallucinations by sprinkling her “pixie dust,”<sup>23</sup> can teleport, and has the potential for other magical abilities.

### **Exceptions**

The three exceptions to this rule could be said to prove it. X-23 is a female clone of a male superhero (Wolverine) and has his powers and personality, rather than traditional female powers. However, she is a performer of masculinity, not truly masculine. Her killer instincts were activated only through repeated psychological and physical abuse, while Wolverine’s came naturally. She is as physically sexualized and fetishized as any of the X-Women, and is undeniably heterosexual. But because she is constructed as feminine, her possession of masculine powers has resulted in severe psychological and emotional damage and self-destructive behavior.

Marrow’s power is physical and deforming—she grows blade-like projections from her bones that she can then break off and use as weapons. Initially, the growth is not under her power and causes her excruciating pain, something no other X-Man’s physical power does. However, after being mortally wounded, she is returned to life as a beautiful young woman with the ability to retract her bone spikes, which no longer cause her pain, so that she can become appealing to the male gaze.

Husk’s power is ultimately more defensive than offensive, and more than a little voyeuristic. She removes her epidermis to reveal a skin of a different composition, frequently stone or metal. Along with her skin, she must remove her clothes, meaning that “regardless of whether her skin was stone or metal, Husk was actually naked when she went into battle,”<sup>24</sup> something readers could not fail to realize. After having performed her striptease, she is resistant to attack and possibly stronger, but her fighting skills have not been improved. As the character developed and the power was further explained, it was revealed that she must mimic a known substance, rather than become anything that she can imagine. She frequently chooses to blend in to her surroundings and, when under stress, will “shed”<sup>25</sup> repeatedly in patches. She can only hold the new form for about an hour, and when she returns to her human form, she is—naturally—nude. So although her power is more direct and physical than the other X-Women’s, it is as limited and it sexualizes her as much or more than their “strike a pose and point”<sup>26</sup> powers.

## **Power as a Danger for X-Women**

### **Loss of Control**

Despite having been given mental powers that do not require any physical strength to command and that would seem to be inherently feminine, all of the X-Women eventually lose control of those powers, either because of strong negative emotions, their powers have developed beyond their ability to control them, they have become intoxicated by power, or they have been brainwashed, corrupted, possessed, controlled, or driven insane by a greater force or power. They are punished for having transgressed the traditional gender binary of men as powerful and aggressive and women as weak and submissive. As Madrid puts it, “It seemed to be a requirement that the women who wore an ‘X’ on their costumes would eventually take a dip in the crazy pool at least once.”<sup>25</sup> They then become a danger to their teammates, to humanity, the world, the galaxy, or, in extreme cases, the universe. As the archetypal givers of life, women who become evil necessarily become bringers of death.

### **Suicide as a Punishment**

At this stage, their only hope is to submit to the control of a stronger, masculine force, usually in the person of



Professor X. However, they are frequently completely uncontrollable and cause immense destruction. They are self-aware enough to know what they are doing and to experience great grief and shame over their actions, and as a result, most have attempted, if not committed, suicide at least once.

Although male X-Men have been known to die to save others, “they tend to die heroically and are often commemorated and/or magically brought back from the dead on a regular basis.”<sup>26</sup> A classic example is when Colossus, in a Messiah-like act, sacrifices himself in order to save all other mutants from the deadly Legacy Virus, using his own blood to create the vaccine.

### **Loss of Physical Form**

Frequently X-Women lose their physical form and either exist on the astral plane or become purely elemental beings. They become literally as well as figuratively invisible and ineffectual. Ultimately, most of those who die or become bodiless are reborn, usually in a new, improved physical body, with new or enhanced powers, and with a new ability to control those powers and use them for the good of the team. Many suffer amnesia, a figurative death of the self, when they are restored to their physical form and continue to pose a threat until their memories are restored, usually with the telepathic assistance of Professor X.

### ***Examples***

Again, Jean Grey set the pattern in the first few years of the comic book history. In the original story, she apparently died when the shuttle she was piloting was subjected to cosmic radiation and crashed into Jamaica Bay. However, she had evolved into the “Phoenix”<sup>27</sup> force and was reborn out of the waters of the Bay. Then, like Eve in the Garden of Eden, she was deceived by evil—in her case, the Hellfire Club—and brought death into the world, this time in the persona of the Dark Phoenix, also known as the Chaos-Bringer. Drunk on power, she went on a rampage throughout the universe and destroyed an inhabited planet when she consumed its sun, D’Bari, for energy. She was finally brought under control by Professor X. Brought to trial by a cosmic court for the destruction of the D’Bari system, she eventually realized that she was incapable of controlling the Phoenix power and chose to commit suicide both to protect the universe and to atone for her actions. She explains to Cyclops, “I’d have to stay completely in control of myself every second of every day for the rest of my mortal life. Maybe I could do it, but if I slipped, even for an instant, if I...failed...if even **one** more person died at my hands...it’s better this way. Quick. Clean. Final.”<sup>27</sup>

She would be brought back to life through various means at least four times over the succeeding years and each time would chose death in order to save the universe from the uncontrolled power of the Phoenix.<sup>28</sup>

In a later retroactive continuity, it was revealed that Professor X had placed mental blocks on Jean’s power when she was a young girl because she was unable to control it at that age. He also wiped her memory of the event. Her parents sent her to his school when she was older so that he could teach her how to use and control her powers.<sup>29</sup> Although a powerful telekinetic, it is obvious that “Marvel Girl lets men dominate her life.”<sup>30</sup> In the X-universe, women are not capable of learning by themselves how to control their own powers and abilities.

Polaris has been hypnotized by Mesmero, possessed by Malice, deceived by Magneto and the sorceress Zaladane, and brainwashed by an alien. She was driven insane by the ghosts of those killed in the Genosha massacres and developed murderous tendencies, which she was able to control only through the assistance of Professor X, but not before she had become the epitome of the “psycho girlfriend”<sup>31</sup> of modern popular culture.

Storm has such an empathic connection with the forces of nature that she must maintain a strict control over her emotions to avoid creating violent weather phenomena, the duration and extent of which are in direct proportion to the intensity of her emotions. She is constantly aware of the threat her emotions pose and the need to continually suppress and deny them.

On her first mission as leader of the X-Men, she allowed her power over her fellow mutants to go to her head, declared herself an elemental goddess, and unleashed a hurricane on friends and foes alike. During a space encounter with the alien race known as the Brood, her powers flared out of control, due in part to the fact that she had been implanted with a Brood egg that would transform her into one of them upon hatching. In order to avoid unleashing that evil on her return to Earth, she channeled all of the surrounding stellar energy into her own body in a suicide attempt, thus destroying the Brood embryo and leaving her adrift in space. She was saved by an Acanti, a space-faring whale-like creature.

In an earlier storyline, she had been turned into a vampire slave of Dracula, and in a later one, she suffered a type of death and rebirth when she was physically regressed to childhood by the evil cyborg called “Nanny” and returned as an amnesiac. After regaining her memory, but while still physically a child, she was again brainwashed by her enemies.

Ultimately, she was rescued by the X-Men and restored to her adult form. Later she evolved into an elemental being while fighting Apocalypse in an alternate future.

Shadowcat becomes incorporeal and invisible every time she uses her powers and has several times been possessed or otherwise controlled by outside forces. She was first possessed by the spirit of the martial arts master Ogun in an attempt to kill Wolverine, and only managed to overcome Ogun and exorcise his spirit with Wolverine’s assistance. Injured by an energy spear in a battle with the Morlocks, she lost the ability to become solid and was only saved from fading away through the efforts of Doctor Doom and Reed Richards of the Fantastic Four.

When her fellow mutant and interdimensional sorceress Illyana died, her magic Soulsword bonded with Shadowcat and began to corrupt her, making her a danger to herself and others. She was only saved by surrendering the sword to a gypsy sorceress after much difficulty.

Dazzler was possessed at different times by Lightmaster, Doctor Doom, and Malice, and was controlled by Flynn and Silence. Galactus imbued her with the “power cosmic”; she has died and been resurrected at least three times.

In the future of an alternate universe, Rachel Summers was brainwashed and used to hunt and kill mutants. She risked her life to return to the past in an effort to change the future and atone for her crimes. In one alternate reality, she existed only on the astral plane after dying as the result of transporting her parents to the future to care for Cyclops’ son, Nathan.

Betsy Braddock (Psylocke) attacked her brothers while under the control of Dr. Synne, was later brainwashed, and lost her memory and then literally her mind. That is to say, her body lost its mind when her psyche and that of the Ninja assassin Kwannon’s were switched. Their psyches mingled, leaving each personality with some of the traits of the other. Psylocke, in Kwannon’s body and with her aggressive traits, was turned into the murderous Lady

Mandarin, a fetishized Asian sex object in the style of the classic Dragon Lady of the 1930s.<sup>31</sup> She learned to use her telepathic powers to create a “psychic knife” as a weapon. Using it against Wolverine, she regained her memories and joined the X-Men. Later, when Kwannon in Psylocke’s body (now called Revanche) learned that she was dying from the Legacy virus, she committed suicide (killed Betsy Braddock’s body) in order to fully restore Psylocke’s psyche, which remained in Kwannon’s body. Psylocke later died in battle protecting Rogue and Beast and was resurrected a year later by her brother, Jamie, who has the power to manipulate reality.

Prior to the revelation of Sage’s role as a spy for Professor X, she played a relatively minor role in stories involving the Hellfire Club. Shortly before that revelation, she came under the mental domination of another telepathic Hellfire Club member and was rescued by Storm. Afraid that she was not powerful enough to prevent future incidents, she created mental blocks that prevented her from using her telepathic power. This was not enough to prevent Lady Mastermind from trapping her in the illusion of being once again a member of the Hellfire Club, from which she was rescued by the X-Men. Later she was possessed by her “dark side” alter ego and killed two X-Men, was nearly driven insane by a massive download of information, and suffered from hallucinations. Ultimately, her alter ego sacrificed herself to save the universe and restore Sage to full sanity. Sage then merged with the Crystal Palace, “the Nexus of All Realities,” in order to stabilize those realities, and so sacrificed herself in expiation for her alter egos.

As was noted, Marrow was brought back from the dead as a beautiful young woman. Prior to joining the X-Men, she was a mutant terrorist who was responsible for numerous mass murders. She was invited to join the X-Men in an attempt at rehabilitation and reformation, which was partially successful. It was during this period that she was wounded in battle while fighting on the side of the X-Men, and returned to life. She symbolically died to expiate for her previous sins, and her new attractive body and ability to control her powers were the sign that her sacrifice was accepted. Ultimately, after a brainwashing, a suicide attempt, and a failed heterosexual love affair, she returned to her terrorist ways.

### ***Rogue: A Special Case***

The very fact of her existence makes Rogue a danger to others. Her power requires nothing more on her part than direct physical contact to injure, if not kill. Horrified at her abilities, she ran away from home after her powers manifested, was taken in by the female mutant villain Mystique, and became part of her crime family, the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants. During one of their battles, Rogue permanently absorbed Ms. Marvel’s powers of flight, superhuman strength, and invulnerability, as well as her thoughts and memories. Nearly driven insane and unable to control her growing powers, she finally sought help from Professor X and joined the X-Men. Later, she would have died protecting an innocent human if Wolverine had not risked his life by kissing her and so transferring his healing power to her. At one point, her psyche and that of Carol Danvers shared her body, each expressing her own personality during their time of dominance. During this period, it was suggested that Rogue’s lack of control over her powers was psychological, not physical. Eventually, Rogue’s psyche was purged of the remnants of Carol Danvers’ personality, leaving her to struggle primarily with the romantic implications of her own mutant powers. Currently, Rogue is in full control of her own powers, thanks to Professor X removing the mental blocks which prevented her powers from developing normally.

### ***Jubilee: The Exception***

Uniquely among the X-Women, Jubilee never completely lost control of her powers, despite the revelation that she has the ability to affect matter at an atomic level and potentially create nuclear explosions, nor was she ever

romantically involved with anyone. She is essentially an asexual character, “one of the guys.”□ Her long-standing relationship with Wolverine is one of father and daughter. Although introduced in 1989 as a young teen, she is currently in her twenties. Also uniquely, she has never committed suicide and has never been killed. She lost her mutant powers in 2005, as part of the purge of mutants by Marvel, but replaced them with high-tech devices that give her superhuman strength, flight, and invulnerability.

## **Summary**

Not only are the X-Women hyperfeminized physically, they are hyperfeminized emotionally and psychologically. Far from giving them “access to a position of empowerment,”□ their abilities “merely further fetishize them as dangerous sex objects.”□<sup>32</sup> Many represent modern versions of classic female archetypes, and all of them reflect very conventional patriarchal views of women as physically and psychologically weaker than men, ruled by their emotions and their hormones, possessors of a mysterious and non-rational “feminine intuition,”□ and able to subtly and deceptively manipulate men using their feminine wiles. The only male X-Man whose powers are wholly psychic is Professor Xavier, a paraplegic confined to a wheelchair. In other words, in a classic Freudian equivalence, X-Women are the equal only of a castrated (i.e., impotent) man.

## **A Closer Look at the Evolution of Three Characters**

### **Emma Frost’s Evolution**

Emma Frost’s transition from the White Queen of the Hellfire Club to Co-Headmaster of Xavier Institute validates this reading. Contrary to Brown’s contention that her color suggests “angelic images of white womanhood,”□<sup>33</sup> her name and her color bring to mind the icy cold of winter. She and Jean exemplify the classic Madonna/Whore binary, with Jean as the Madonna or an angel.

Although Emma was initially a villain, she is still a female, and so her telepathic powers are “feminine,”□ as is her secondary ability to transform into a diamond form in which she is virtually indestructible.<sup>34</sup> Diamonds, also called “ice”□ in popular slang, have long been associated with mercenary, heartless women who use men for their own selfish purposes; as Marilyn Monroe declared, “Diamonds are a girl’s best friend.”□ In this form, her emotions are suppressed and she is unable to feel pain or empathy, so that she is literally as well as figuratively cold and hard.

Because she was a villain, she successfully utilized all of her powers—psychic and physical—to manipulate men for her own ends. She was emotionally and financially independent, self-confident, and empowered. She exercised complete control over her powers as well as her emotions. She controlled others but was not controlled by anyone in return; she could be defeated but not dominated. She exploited the young, using her Massachusetts Academy as the training ground for the mutant supervillain team the Hellions. In the X-universe, this alone made her a villain.

However, as soon as she joined forces with the X-Men to oppose the mutant-hunting Sentinels, she was plunged into a deep, death-like coma. The Hellions were all killed and Emma continued to exist on the astral plane as a disembodied personality while Professor X merged the remnants of her Massachusetts Academy with his School for Gifted Youngsters, symbolizing his assumption of power over her. At his insistence, she resumed her physical form. Ultimately, she symbolically killed her old self when she killed the new White Queen, her evil sister Adrienne, in order to save the X-Men and students at the School.<sup>35</sup>

She became a teacher and mentor of Generation X in expiation for leading the Hellions to their deaths and served as a surrogate mother to the Stepford Cuckoos. When Emma's diamond form was found shattered, Jean reassembled her body and revived her using her increasing Phoenix powers, despite having telepathically discovered Emma in a psychic affair with her husband.<sup>36</sup> She explains her reasons to Beast, "She *loves* him, Hank. Emma has actually fallen *in love* with my husband. It's almost funny." And then to Emma, "Wake up, Emma. Scott *needs* you. Wake up."<sup>37</sup> Forty years later, Marvel Girl is still allowing men to dominate her life. Both Emma's love and Scott's needs justify and atone for her husband's emotional infidelity.

After Jean was killed (again) and reborn as the transcendent White Phoenix of the Crown, she was confronted with "a b/////adly wound//ed orphan un/////iverse" created when Scott succumbed to loneliness and doubt on her death. In order to mend it, she is told that she "must water it with her heart's blood," by giving her blessing to Scott and Emma before ascending to a higher plane of existence, an allusion to the Virgin Mary's assumption into heaven.<sup>38</sup>

It was later revealed that the Stepford Cuckoos were cloned from Emma without her knowledge, making her their literal mother and a less threatening maternal character. She was also possessed by the evil spirit, Cassandra Nova, who attempted to use her to destroy the X-Men. In the battle that followed, when it appeared that Cyclops has been mortally wounded, Emma in her diamond form shed a tear. Now that she knows true love and has the love of a good man, she is no longer impervious to emotion, regardless of her form. Emma also frequently expresses doubts about whether she deserves to be an X-Man. She recruits Kitty Pride to serve as a teacher because "I like to think I've evolved...but I wanted someone on the team that I hadn't really fought alongside. Someone who would be inclined to watch me, if I..."<sup>39</sup> As the self-confident White Queen, such self-doubt was unimaginable.

When Lady Mastermind took control of Emma's mind, Jean, like a fairy godmother or a guardian angel, once again appeared to rescue the now-helpless Emma using the Phoenix Force. At a later point, Emma was traumatized by the return of an enemy from her past, an emotional condition unthinkable when she was a villain. Her role is increasingly one of providing moral support for the man in her life and the students in her care. In order to become one of the "good women,"□ she had to submit to male control. Her sexual expression and activity were restricted to one man in a relationship founded on love. She became nurturing and self-sacrificing and ruled more by emotion than ambition. She had to figuratively and literally die and be born again. However, as a former villain, she is a more interesting character with more dramatic potential than the always-saintly Jean, and she still dresses like a pawn of male sexual fantasy.

### **Mystique: The Unredeemed Female**

In stark contrast is the development of the other primary female mutant villain, Mystique (Raven Darkholme). Although she served for a time as a secret agent of Professor X and claims to want to join the X-Men, she has never been accepted onto the team. She works with them on occasion for her own purposes, but she is not one of them. Her motives remain suspect and she continues to be viewed as a villain. She has never died and has never lost control of her powers. She has never submitted to control by any other power.

Like the X-Women, her power is a passive one of deception and manipulation. She can change into any form, animal, vegetable, or mineral, in an instant. She even creates the clothes that she appears to be wearing, meaning that she is essentially always naked. Her true age is unknown due to her ability to project any age she desires.

Like Emma, she has achieved success as an independent, empowered woman. As Raven Darkholme, she rose to the position of Deputy Director of the Defense Advanced Research Planning Agency (DARPA) in the U.S. Department of Defense and used the military secrets and advanced weaponry to which she was privy for her own criminal and subversive purposes.

She uses her sexuality for her own ends and feels loyalty to no one. She has frequently seduced unwary X-Men by assuming the form of their loved one. Although her power offers an opportunity for creating a truly transgressive character who embodies the concept of gender as performance, the writers (or editors) have not taken advantage of it. To date, Mystique has never, while in the form of a male, attempted to seduce either a straight female or a gay male. Regardless of her form, to the reader she remains inherently female.

In the guise of a beautiful young woman, she married an older, wealthy aristocrat in the Bavarian Alps while indulging in affairs with several others, including the demon Azazel, by whom she became pregnant. She murdered her impotent husband when he discovered her pregnancy. She also assumed at one time the identity of the wife of a U.S. senator and used his influence to gain access to secret government information. She has impersonated both Professor X and Jean Grey in order to deceive and manipulate the X-Men.

She is without natural maternal instincts or feelings. When her son was born and his demonic ancestry only too clear, she and the baby were driven out by a large mob of angry villagers in true Gothic horror story style. In order to make her escape, she threw the baby into a river. He was saved by gypsies and later became the X-Man known as Nightcrawler. She abandoned her other son, Graydon Creed, the outcome of an affair with Victor Creed (the mutant supervillain Sabretooth), when it became obvious that he was not a mutant. As a result, he became a mutant-hating politician, whom she assassinated when he was nominated as a presidential candidate.

Given that she can assume any form, masculine or feminine, it is not surprising that it has been established that she is bisexual, if not lesbian—a fact which was only recently explicitly stated in the comic books. As such, she is a woman who rejects all masculine control; she manipulates men sexually but is not dependent upon them for her own sexual fulfillment. Her only truly loving relationship was with the female mutant Destiny, which ended only with Destiny's death. According to Mystique co-creator Chris Claremont, "it was his original intention that Mystique and Destiny be Nightcrawler's biological parents by way of Mystique having transformed into a man for conception. However, given Marvel's attitude at the time, the idea was considered entirely too controversial."<sup>40</sup> Like Emma, she corrupts the young. Although she established a maternal relationship with Rogue, she did so only after Destiny foresaw that Rouge would be important to them. Her primary purpose was to recruit Rogue for her Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, which included other young, disaffected mutants.

In a long and convoluted storyline, Mystique was driven insane and attempted to destroy humanity with a lethal virus. When Rogue attempted to stop her, Mystique tried to kill her. After her sanity was restored, Mystique infiltrated the X-Men primarily to seduce Gambit in Rogue's form as revenge. Unlike the X-Women, she felt no compulsion to atone for her actions, even after regaining her sanity. To the contrary, she managed to deceive the X-Men into accepting her, then betrayed them and shot Rogue in a continuing search for revenge.

### **Wanda Maximoff: Force of Chaos**

No discussion of the X-Women would be complete without the inclusion of Wanda Maximoff, the Scarlet Witch. Although originally introduced in the *Avengers* comic book and appearing in the X-Men primarily as a member of



the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants, Wanda played a vital role in the revision of the *X-Men* universe in the 2005 mini-series *House of M*. Initially, Wanda had the ability to use magic, as well as “hex” people and events—that is, to control probability and cause the least likely outcome to occur. Later it was revealed that she and her brother, the mutant Quicksilver, were the biological children of Magneto, often billed as “the X-Men’s greatest foe.” Raised by gypsies after the death of their mother, they joined the Brotherhood of Evil Mutants only out of a sense of obligation to Magneto after he rescued them from an angry mob. After leaving the Brotherhood and joining the Avengers, Wanda fell in love with and married the android Vision.

Unlike the X-Women, when Wanda found that she had trouble managing her growing powers, she consulted not a man but the female witch Agatha Harkness, who taught her how to control them. She used her powers to become pregnant by her android husband and gave birth to two boys. They were later shown to be two shards of a demonic entity, and after they were reunited with that entity, Agatha Harkness erased all memory of them from Wanda’s mind. Despite this, Wanda fell into a catatonic state. She was at various times possessed by a demon, by Magneto, and by an alien entity before she was returned to sanity.

She and the other Avengers, along with the Fantastic Four, sacrificed themselves to save the universe from the mutant villain Onslaught. However, they continued to exist in a parallel universe until being returned to this universe a year later. After being kidnapped by the sorceress Morgan la Fey, Wanda developed the ability to channel “chaos magic” and change the very structure of reality. When a chance reference to her children restored her memory of them, she went insane and began changing reality in an attempt to recreate her children. After many changes and much destruction, including the de-powering of all but about one hundred mutants, Doctor Strange managed to shut down her mind. She was left with no powers and no memory, living what is depicted as a quiet, middle-class life in the suburbs.

### Adolescent Male Perspective

This presentation of women reflects in many cases “the conflicting demands of adolescent male sexual desire.”<sup>41</sup> From the adolescent male perspective, women are physically desirable, but emotionally threatening. They are unpredictable, controlled by mysterious hormonal forces that cause them to act irrationally at times, lashing out at those around them. Yet, paradoxically, they can be loving and nurturing. They frequently seem to be able to read minds, extrapolating the truth from very little evidence.

The teenaged Rogue in particular represents an archetypal fear that emotional commitment will result in loss of power and a loss of self for the male. Her relationship with Gambit reflects the conflict many teens feel between abstinence and sexual intimacy. It is noteworthy that, while the female might pay the price of emotional and psychological damage for engaging in sexual intimacy, the male could literally pay with his life.

X-23 is not only fetishized as a dangerous sex object, she is quite literally “a product of male design,”<sup>42</sup> bred and trained by a patriarchal institution and molded into “an obedient killing machine”<sup>43</sup> who wields her power “in a manner that suggest a fulfillment of the male’s own wish for perfection,”<sup>44</sup> in this case, the adolescent male who gazes at her as an object of his sexual desire. Having been bred, trained, and molded by male design, her character permits the adolescent male to fantasize reasserting that male control over her or to indulge in a classic rescue fantasy. It has also been suggested that X-23 provides young gay males with a socially acceptable outlet for their homosexual desire for the hypermasculine Wolverine.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the evolution of the personality and character of the X-Women over 40 years of comic book history. Sadly, the only evolution that could be discerned was one of increasing objectification, sexualization, and fetishization. Contrary to the assertions of some that, as female superheroes, the X-Women are transgressive figures who challenge our basic cultural assumptions about gender roles, a careful exploration and analysis of their personalities and their stories reveals that they in fact reflect and reaffirm traditional patriarchal gender hierarchies and traditional American middle-class values and norms. It is instructive to note that, in a world where a human woman can marry an android, the only black woman marries a black man.

There can be no question that physically they are constructed according to changing masculine gender fantasies and ideals and that they are situated within a traditional gendered power structure. They are called “X-Men,” □ and as members of that team they are subject to the leadership and control of Professor X or the male who has succeeded him. Storm was the only female to ever serve as leader of the X-Men, and her term was brief and has not been repeated.

As heterosexual women, they are emotionally submissive to and dependent upon their male partners; few, if any, of the relationships could be described as egalitarian. Their powers are physically weaker than their male counterparts and they are usually incapable of managing those powers without masculine assistance.

Being intangible, their feminine powers do not challenge the physical superiority of the male members of the team or even of the male villains that they encounter, and so affirm the binary of women as spiritual and men as physical. Being invisible, they support the binary of women as active in the private sphere and men in the public sphere. Being psychical and imperceptible, they validate the binary of women as emotional/personal and men as rational/scientific. The women can also be identified with archetypal witches, wielding mysterious, supernatural powers, and with the archetypal mother, nurturing the young and the weak and sacrificing herself for their benefit. They are the archetypal Eve, bringing both life and death to the world.

Their stories suggest that women who attempt to assume and exercise immense power are a danger to the very fabric of existence and that they will be punished for this unfeminine act with insanity or death or both. In classic mythological fashion, they are reborn, having expiated their sins. They remain, however, weak vessels capable of incalculable destruction. When the story called for a destructive power that would literally rewrite the previous several decades’ worth of storylines, the writers called not on an immensely powerful supervillain, but on a raging, insane Scarlet Witch who was suffering extreme postpartum depression. The resolution of her story suggests that society is safer and women are happier when they do not have to struggle with superpowers which are really beyond their ability to control.

It is tempting to conclude that this construction of “female” □ and of “woman” □ is a result of the fact that, in its fifty-year history, all of the authors, illustrators, and editors have been men. But the very absence of women among the creators makes this question one that cannot be answered, as there is no comparison. We cannot know how women would have constructed the characters, their images, or their stories. In addition, the fact that the series is designed for and marketed to adolescent males has a strong influence on editorial decisions, at the same time that the decision to market to adolescent males drives the images of women that are presented, regardless of

who the creators are. As was demonstrated, at least one male writer was prevented from transgressing gender in at least one story. What we can say is that these images and characters reflect social attitudes about women among at least one social group.

As was noted earlier, the images of women in comics both reflect and shape social attitudes about women. Teen librarians attempting to create a balanced collection need to understand the implicit message of this immensely popular comic book/graphic novel series in order to ensure that their collection provides examples of other female personality types, body images, and outcomes for strong, independent women. In evaluating works for inclusion, librarians should look beyond the immediately obvious to determine what the underlying message is and make an effort to select works that present a variety of images and role models. When offering readers' advisory and selecting works for book clubs, librarians can deliberately offer teens a choice of works that present varied images of female characters. A few suggested titles include *Girl Genius* by Phil and Kaja Foglio, Neil Gaiman's *Sandman* series and related titles, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* by Joss Whedon and others, *Fables* created by Bill Willingham, and Brian K. Vaughan's *Runaways* and *Y: The Last Man*, which presents numerous different female models.

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## Appendix

Name	Year	Power
Armor	2004	Psionic exoskeleton
Dazzler (Alison Blaire)	1980	Generate blinding light from sound
Emma Frost (formerly White Queen)	2001*	Telepathic ability; assume diamond-hard form at will
Husk (Paige Guthrie)	1984	Shed her skin for a different one
Jean Grey (Marvel Girl; Phoenix)	1963	Telekinesis; telepathy
Jubilee (Jubilation Lee)	1989	Plasma energy bolts
Marrow (Sarah)	1994	Blade-like projections of bone
Marvel Girl (Rachel Summers)	1981	Telepathy; telekinesis; psionic ability**
Mystique (real name unknown)	1994	Shapeshifting
Pixie (Megan Gwinn)	2004	Butterfly wings; “pixie dust;” □ teleportation
Polaris (Lorna Dane)	1968	Control magnetism
Psylocke (Betsy Braddock)	1987***	‘ Precognition, telepathy, mental bolts, mind control, and generating illusions
Rogue (Anna Marie)	1981	Absorb memories, abilities, personality and life force through touch
Sage (Tessa)	2001****	Virtual human computer with the ability to record, analyze, and recall vast amounts of information with incredible speed and accuracy
Scarlet Witch	1964	Control probability; chaos



Shadowcat (Kitty Pride)	1980	Pass through solid objects
Stacy-X	2000	Induce sexual euphoria through control of her pheromones; shed her snake-like skin
Stepford Cuckoos (Celeste, Esme, Mindee, Phoebe, Sophie)	2001	Telepaths; combine individual powers into single “supermind” □
Storm (Ororo Monroe)	1975	Control weather
X-23 (Laura Kinney)	2004	Clone of Wolverine; cellular regeneration; berserker rages

\* Originally introduced as a villain, the White Queen of the villainous Hellfire Club, in 1979. Joined the X-Men in 2001. [http://marvel.com/universe/Frost%2C\\_Emma](http://marvel.com/universe/Frost%2C_Emma)

\*\* “The ability to project her own consciousness or those of others into the timestream, causing them to arrive in another time period within the body of their divergent counterpart or closest living ancestor or descendant.” □

[http://marvel.com/universe/Marvel\\_Girl\\_\(Rachel\\_Summers\)#ixzz2NQmSkRc3](http://marvel.com/universe/Marvel_Girl_(Rachel_Summers)#ixzz2NQmSkRc3)

\*\*\* Originally introduced as Elizabeth “Betsy” □ Braddock in *Captain Britain* in 1976. <http://marvel.com/universe/Psylocke>

\*\*\*\* Originally introduced as a telepath and member of the Hellfire Club in 1981, but retroactively revealed in 2001 to have been a spy for Professor X. Her powers were also retroactively updated.

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## **YA Literature: The Inside and Cover Story**

Posted on [April 18, 2013](#) by [Anna Lam](#)



*Editor's Note: YA Literature: The Inside and Cover Story was accepted for the peer reviewed paper session at YALSA's third annual Young Adult Literature Symposium held November 2-4, 2012 in St. Louis. The theme of the conference was "Hit me with the next big thing." □*

**By Regina Sierra Carter**, Graduate Student, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

The faces of today's teens are undeniably transforming due to the changing faces and forms of today's families.' Although there are now more young adult (YA) books that feature minority/mixed race characters, help is still needed in the area of cover art to ensure that it accurately reflects the story within.' This paper explores questionable cover art with regards to the presence of racial minority and mixed raced characters.' Small-scale recommendations are offered for readers interested in where the future of cover art for YA literature may be headed.

### **Introduction**

Mixed messages marinate in the mind./  
Clues as to what's inside lie in a book's binding/  
Where falsities and truths are ripe for the finding./  
Art lovers of literature decry/  
Sales are the reason why/  
Covers sometimes speak the truth/  
Yet other...times...*lie*.

-Regina S. Carter, 2012

Cover art matters. Edward T. Sullivan, a Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) Best Books for Young Adults (BBYA) committee member, summed it up nicely when he asserted that "a book's cover is the reader's first impression" □ of a book.<sup>[i]</sup> It is critical that this impression be accurate because it impacts readers' expectations of the overall story as well as the story's characters. Unfortunately, as young adult author Mitali Perkins posits, "... cover art can...contradict the content of a story when it comes to race or culture." □<sup>[ii]</sup> This is exactly what happened with the cover art used for Justine Larbalestier's [Liar](#).

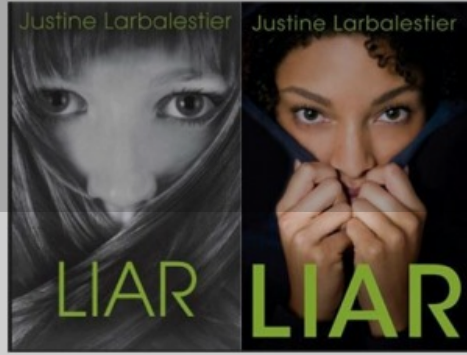


Figure 1: Larbalestier's *Liar*  
Original US cover left; updated US cover right[[iii](#)]

As is seen in Figure 1, the image on the left is the cover used on the first U.S. edition of *Liar*, and features Micah with fair or White skin and long brown hair. The updated cover shown on the right provides a more realistic representation of Micah, who is described in the book as mixed-race. Micah describes her mother, Maude, as being “White”<sup>[iv]</sup> and French, though Micah’s father, Isaiah, speculates she has some “black”<sup>[v]</sup> in her due to her “full lips”<sup>[vi]</sup> and supposedly “nappy”<sup>[vii]</sup> hair.<sup>[iv]</sup> Isaiah is described as simply being “Black”<sup>[viii]</sup> although he too is mixed—he has a White mother and a Black father.<sup>[ix]</sup> As such, Micah is indeed biracial as she expresses early on in the book: “...I’m undecided, stuck somewhere in between...half black, half white.”<sup>[x]</sup> It was only when readers raised a ruckus and pointed out the inconsistencies between these in-text descriptions and the actual depiction of Micah on the earlier edition of *Liar* that steps were taken to correct the cover art image. As Nancy Reynolds, author of *Mixed Heritage in Young Adult Literature*, notes:

Race remains an anxious and vexing topic in twenty-first-century America. Our need to know and apply the “right”<sup>[xi]</sup> racial label to those whose appearance is ambiguous to us persists even in the absence of any general consensus about what race is, or precisely how and where it differs from ethnicity and culture, whose definitions are also vague.<sup>[xii]</sup>

Racial minorities have not traditionally experienced widespread coverage in YA literature. According to the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC), of the estimated 5,000 children’s books published in 2011, 300 were about Africans/African Americans, American Indians, Asian Pacific/Asian Pacific Americans, and Latinos.<sup>[xiii]</sup> While this number is certainly an improvement from the statistics the CCBC reported in 1985 when only 18 books were published by Black authors and illustrators, the increase does not represent the rapid diversification of the American population noted by Reynolds:

Millions of Americans consider themselves multiracial, but no official effort was made to enumerate them until 2000. Then, for the first time, the U.S. census allowed respondents to identify themselves as belonging to two or more races, and 7,270,926 (2.6 percent of the total U.S. population) did so. Of American children under age eighteen, 2.85 million were identified as belonging to two or more races (4 percent of all American children). Thirty-nine percent of mixed-race individuals enumerated were under age eighteen, as opposed to 26 percent of the total population, indicating that the mixed race population is growing much faster than the mono-racial equivalent.<sup>[xiv]</sup>

As Reynolds points out, America is steadily becoming more diverse. So should YA literature. Writers of the CCBC *Choices* share a similar view. *Choices* writers express the importance of multicultural literature by emphasizing

that “...all children and teens need literature to illuminate the nation and the world in which they live.”□[x] To further drive home the idea the significance of having more books about racial minority groups, CCBC *Choices* continued to draw attention to multicultural publishing trends:

For quite a few years we have been commenting on how few books by and about people of color are published in the United States in relation to the overall number of books produced annually. As the population of the United States continues to not only increase but become more diverse, the output of publishing houses has not been a mirror of society, at least in terms of the numbers.[xi]

Another edition of *Choices* spoke to publishing trends of multicultural literature in relation to the continual diversification of America:

For years we have been documenting the number of books we receive annually at the CCBC by and about people of color. We don't do this out of habit, or as a meaningless exercise, we do it to add quantitative evidence to what is empirically obvious: in numbers, books published for children and young adults don't reflect the world youth inhabit and the lives they live. We do it in the hopes that these still-alarming statistics, which do not speak to who we are as a nation, will raise awareness of the continued need to seek out and publish books that accurately and authentically portray multicultural experiences, so that literature for children and young adults will collectively represent our diversity.[xii]

‘ Thus, the CCBC tracks the numbers of multicultural books published yearly because “represented in these numbers are two critical concepts that can have a huge impact on the relationship of children and teens to books and reading: choice and visibility. In our ever-more-diverse nation, we need books that provide all children the opportunity to see themselves and the world in which they live reflected.”□[xiii] When this occurs, books can serve as both mirrors and windows for young readers.

According to Rudine Sims Bishop, author of *Shadow and Substance: Afro-American Experience in Contemporary Children's Literature*:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.[xiv]

When books serve this dual purpose, readers are provided with a representation of the world and their lived experiences.

## ‘ **Research Questions**

As indicated from the above statistics, multicultural publishing trends have lagged in comparison to the ever-increasing numbers of racial minority and racially-mixed persons in the United States. This paper sets out to determine how different versions of YA cover art mimic the majority-view (or all-white world of publishing) and

which ones actually mirror the story of minority/mixed-race characters present in the books. The research questions that guide this paper include:

1) ‘‘‘‘ Has cover art for select YA titles been whitewashed?

2) ‘‘‘‘ How do (or have) later versions of cover art for these same titles matched more closely with in-text character descriptions?

3) ‘‘‘‘ Which version of cover art is truest to the text?

## ‘ **Methodology**

For this paper, three books were examined to determine how the character depictions on book cover art measured up against in-text descriptions. The titles examined included: Walter Dean Myers’ *Crystal*, Randa Abdel-Fattah’s *Ten Things I Hate About Me*, and Chris Crutcher’s *Whale Talk*. Each book met the following criteria: 1) it had at least two different versions of cover art available for the same title; 2) it had at least one mono or multiracial character cast in a central role; 3) it had cover art that showed a human body and/or face; and 4) it had been published or reprinted during or after the year 2000. Textual evidence was referenced to determine if the cover art remained true to in-text character description(s).

## **Findings**

### ***Crystal***

In Walter Dean Myers’ *Crystal*, the protagonist, Crystal, who identifies as a Black teen, is offered a chance at a life of fortune and fame as the next teen top model. Although readers understand that Crystal is Black, Myers provides few clues about her actual appearance; readers gain a sense of how Crystal looks primarily through other characters’ remarks and inquiries. For instance, Crystal’s fellow model and newfound friend, Rowena, expresses confusion about Crystal’s race. Rowena asks, “You Black or Chinese or something?” □ [xv] From Rowena’s inquiry, readers get the sense that Crystal may identify as Black, yet not necessarily fit her friend’s expectations for how Black females typically look.

As the story progresses, Myers continues to drop subtle hints about Crystal’s physical appearance. For example, fashion photographer Jerry candidly asks Crystal, “One of your parents White?” □ [xvi] To Myers’ credit, he does explicitly state that Crystal’s parents are both Black. Jerry’s remark is in stark contrast to the comment hot stuff fashion photographer Giovanni Croce makes: “Just try not to look too Black,” □ he instructs her. [xvii] From these two perspectives, it is difficult to determine exactly how dark or how fair-complexioned Crystal really is. Crystal’s actual appearance is a mystery in part because there are very few comments with regard to her eye color or her hair type, length, and color, which makes visualizing her as a character extremely difficult.

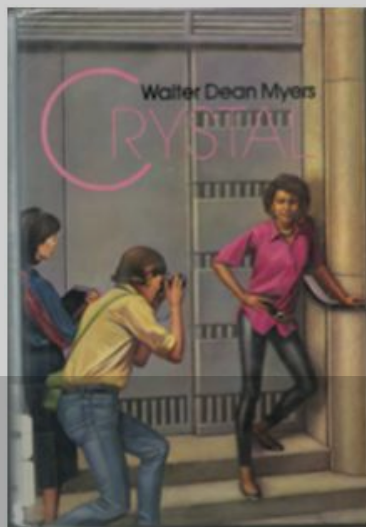
Since the text indicates that Crystal is indeed Black, yet does not provide any definite details about her skin tone, hair type/length/color, or eye color, affixing cover art that is true to Crystal’s character is a daunting task. One of the earliest versions of cover art for *Crystal* is shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2: Cover art for *Crystal*[\[xviii\]](#)

Although Myers does provide few details regarding Crystal’s appearance, it is somewhat unsettling that publishers made the conscious decision to feature on the cover a very light-complexioned young lady with wavy hair and what appears to be gray-black eyes.<sup>13</sup> It can be argued that this cover may indeed be of a young, fair-complexioned Black girl because “Black” □ people have a variety of skin tones: black, brown, tan, etc. Other arguments can also be made. For instance, when this cover was shown to a group of graduate students and no context was given about the storyline or the author, comments about Crystal’s race varied. A number of students thought Crystal was Latina. Others felt she looked mixed. One student commented that she was Black, possibly Creole. Another expressed that Crystal appeared “racially ambiguous” □ and was the “European equivalent” □ of what it meant to be “Black.” □ From those remarks, it seems that the cover does not remain true to the story’s character because readers could not express with certainty that Crystal was indeed a Black teen, which is how Myers describes her. Hence, this suggests that the cover in Figure 2 does contain elements of whitewashing.

Unlike the cover shown in Figure 2, the version shown in Figure 3 aligns more closely with who Crystal is and what she represents. It features Crystal as a confident, brown-skinned, slender young woman who is *working it* for the camera. This matches the story within because Crystal’s is shown as a young woman who is clearly Black and indeed a model.







Although Jamie struggles to make sense of herself, her life, and keep her Lebanese-Muslim background hidden, she does reveal parts of her true identity via an alias to someone outside of her family, via a chat room, who is known as “Rage\_Against\_The\_Machine@intermail.com.”□ She tells him that she has “big brown eyes and long eye-lashes,”□ “a bit of acne,”□ “curly hair that [she] often straighten[s] into submission,”□ is “Lebanese-Muslim,”□ “attend[s] madrasa (Arabic school) once a week”□ and is part of “an Arabic band.”□ [xxiii] It is evident that the double identity that Jamilah/Jamie assumes is central to the story and each cover examined.

In the cover shown in Figure 5, Jamie’s image is captured in snapshots. She is shown wearing a pink hijab in one shot and with long, blonde hair and blue eyes in another. It is interesting that Jamie is shown wearing a hijab because the author, Abdel-Fattah, never mentions her wearing one in the story. Shereen, her older sister, is the only immediate family member who does wear the hijab to help express her social-political beliefs. The fact that Jamie is identified in the text as Lebanese-Muslim may help explain why the artist chose to portray her wearing a hijab even if it is not entirely true of Jamie or the story itself.

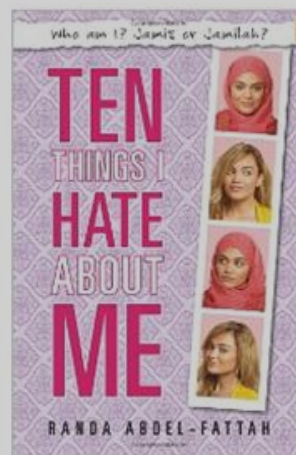


Figure 5: Cover art *Ten Things I Hate About Me* [xxiv]

Aside from this, it is important to note that the two snapshots of Jamie are placed on “equal”□ footing. The cover art artist shows Jamie wearing a hijab and without one an equal number of times. All snapshot images are also of equal size and proportion. As such, Figure 5 can be considered a fair representation with regards to Jamie’s physical appearance. However, it does not provide any indication about what goes on in the story. For instance, the cover does not show that Jamie is in high school, plays the darabuka (a type of drum) in an Arabic band, or struggles with identity issues.

The second cover shown in Figure 6, however, is somewhat misleading. Jamie is depicted as a blonde-haired, blue-eyed teen on the front cover. On the back of the cover, she is shown wearing a hijab, which, as discussed above, is something she never does in the story (photo not available). This is unsettling. Why is a picture with Jamie wearing a hijab on the back? Is it because readers are introduced to the blonde-haired version of Jamie first and this is how she appears to her peers? Or is it because the publisher believes readers may identify more with the blonde-haired teen? This is just speculation. Perhaps the two images of Jamie are separated in an attempt to show how Jamie struggles to keep her school and home life separate. Despite the publisher’s rationale for featuring the blonde-haired, blue-eyed Jamie on the front cover and Jamie with a hijab on the back, this cover does not get at the essence of who Jamie is as a person: a daughter, student, a band member, and so much more.



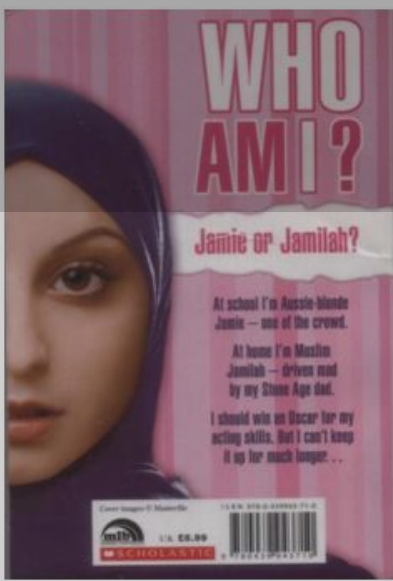


Figure 6: Cover art for *Ten Things I Hate About Me*[xxv].

The third [cover](#), shown in Figure 7, is a realistic photograph of two young women back-to-back—one with dark curly hair and another with straight blonde hair. The primary concern with this cover is that readers may mistakenly think that the images are of two different teens rather than the same one. Abdel-Fattah acknowledges that Jamie shifts between two identities and two worlds, which are well represented in the first two covers. Although readers may mistakenly think that the cover features two different women, it does remain true to the story in that Jamie is not shown wearing a hijab. Moreover, she is shown sporting blonde locks as well as dark curls, which aligns with the text and makes this the best representation of the three. However, like the covers shown in Figures 5 and 6, few clues are provided about who Jamie is beyond her appearance. ‘



Figure 7: Cover art for *Ten Things I Hate About Me*[xxvi].

### Whale Talk

In Chris Crutcher’s *Whale Talk*, The Tao Jones (better known as T.J.), is the protagonist. Readers know from the very beginning that T.J. is “...black. And Japanese. And white.”□[xxvii] He is also described as being “Mixed.

Blended. Pureed. [and] Potpourri.”□[xxviii] As a result of his multiracial identity, T.J. struggles daily with remarks about his race in his small, White, homogenous hometown.

Since Crutcher clearly acknowledges T.J.’s multiracial identity at the onset and throughout the book, it seems unimaginable that the publishers would use an image of what appears to be a White, male teen on the cover. However, this is precisely what happened in the 2001 edition of the book. On that cover, which is shown in Figure 8, T.J. is represented as a young, *very* fair-complexioned (or White) male with a brown buzz cut, running in a school sports jacket. Yet it must be noted that T.J.’s image on this cover is blurred so it can be argued that his race is difficult to discern. Although T.J.’s racial identity does not align with the text, his attire does: T.J. has his heart set on winning varsity letter jackets for the newly formed swim team at Cutter High School. Aside from the jacket, the image of T.J. running hints at his identity struggles and attempts to escape the discrimination and injustice he encounters in his small hometown.



Figure 8: Cover art for *Whale Talk*[xxix]

In contrast, the 2009 cover shown in Figure 9 portrays T.J. as being a tanned-skinned (or brown) youth with short black hair. This is an improvement from the cover in Figure 8 because it gives readers a sense of his Black, Japanese, and White racial identities. Unfortunately, aside from his skin tone and hair color, there is no other clearly visible indication of his multiracial identity. Similar to Figure 7, T.J. is running, though it is not clear from what. Furthermore, this cover provides no clear indication that T.J. may be affiliated with a high school or part of a sports team because he simply wears a red T-shirt and jeans. Hence, the cover in Figure 8 aligns more closely with the text with regard to T.J.’s role within the story. Yet the cover in Figure 9 provides a clearer image of who T.J. is with regards to his racial identity.



Figure 9: Cover art for *Whale Talk*[\[xxx\]](#)

## The Future of Cover Art

As the above examples demonstrate, cover art sometimes misses the mark. To help remedy this, there may be a move towards more abstract cover art in the future, which according to Cat Yambell was a trend from 2001 through 2004.[\[xxx\]](#) Returning to the use of abstract cover art may help curb controversies that arise from misrepresenting characters.

Although abstract art may be a step towards lessening the likelihood of problematic covers, this art form comes with its pros and cons. Some of the pros involve having readers rely more on their imaginations than a book's cover to construct images of the story's characters. Another positive of abstract cover art is that books may result in wider appeal and acceptance by both younger and older audiences. For example, adults may express dismay over being seen reading a YA novel, which is why some popular titles such as those in the *Harry Potter* series have had book cover makeovers geared toward older audiences.

Furthermore, abstract cover art may have more “cross-gender appeal.” [\[xxxii\]](#) For instance, male readers may be reluctant to pick up a title that features a female protagonist, yet may be more likely to read a book that has no clear visual indications of being geared towards a male or female audience. Although strategically designing cover art images to entice unwitting males into reading books featuring females as central characters is a noteworthy goal, gender-specific colors in abstract art may still keep them at bay. Along with abstract art, it may be wise to choose gender-neutral colors on covers, if appropriate. Finally, even if cover art images or colors are gender/age-neutral, the title may not be, which can also influence whether or not persons from certain demographic groups will or will not choose to further engage with the book.

Although adopting abstract cover art has its benefits, it also has its downsides. For example, publishers who have traditionally marketed books about racial/ethnic minority characters by purposefully situating racial/ethnic minority persons on the front cover may be lost to audiences if abstract cover art is enforced across the board. If books do not feature racial/ethnic minority characters on book covers, readers who seek these texts may be hard-pressed to find them and reduced to guessing which books are actually about racial minority/mixed/multiracial characters. This is especially true if readers do not read the inside flap or back cover for story synopses.

Donna Miller published a survey of one hundred randomly selected young adults and their perceptions of five types of cover art.[\[xxxiii\]](#) Survey results revealed that on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 1 being “least important” and 5

being “most important”□), 35 percent of participants rated cover art as a 3, which suggests that it was somewhat important, and 42 percent of those participants indicated that they preferred using their imagination to “visualize”□ characters instead of seeing pictures of a “book’s characters on a cover.”□[xxxiv] Another interesting finding was that when presented with five cover art options (“cartoon-like art,”□ “realistic, photograph-type art,”□ “high-tech, computer generated art,”□ “abstract, but colorful art,”□ and “plain, line-drawing art”□), participants’ top picks first included “realistic, photograph-type art”□ at 39.4 percent, and “abstract, but colorful art”□ came in second with 23.2 percent of the vote.[xxxv] “Plain, line-drawing”□ art received the lowest ranking with 5.1 percent of participants’ vote.[xxxvi] Although participants tended to privilege realistic cover art above all others, abstract cover art did come in second, which suggests that readers may be willing and ready to engage further with book covers that feature this type of art in the future.

In addition to abstract cover art, some have predicted a shift in cover art where faceless models are prioritized. Perkins argues that specific values and messages can be gleaned from marketing book covers with faceless models, which include a power shift from publishing houses to readers/writers with regards to character embodiment.[xxxvii] This encourages readers to rely on their imaginations to interpret and construct their own mental images of a book character’s physical appearance based upon textual evidence rather than accepting the art that publishing houses push for a particular book.

## ‘ Recommendations

As of now, there is little that lovers of YA literature can do about cover art that grossly misses the mark, which is unfortunate. However, in the future, readers may have more of a say in how cover art is constructed. When that time comes, there may be a move toward a more creative and reader-oriented approach to producing cover art. For example, in the future, cover art may be personally selected via pre-order services or created using kiosks.

### Pre-Order Services

At the basic level, cover art can be customized via pre-order services. For example, to reduce the hassle and headache of creating custom covers, publishing houses and/or major booksellers can devise a system where readers have the option to pre-order books online and select from a library of pre-existing covers. If this approach is used, readers may have a chance to select covers from a database of U.S. and international book cover art prior to placing their book orders online.

### Kiosks

Similar to greeting card and photo book kiosks, cover creation kiosks can be situated in major book and retail stores. Cover creation kiosks are designed for those readers who have already purchased a copy of their desired book and are familiar with the storyline. Ideally, after readers have read a book and have formalized their own interpretations of the story, they will be able to make optimal use of kiosks, which will have photo editing software and an image library that readers may utilize to create customized book covers. Prior to this approach being implemented, permissions must be acquired for titles and images. This approach will enable readers to personalize book covers to fit their interpretation(s) of the text.

If they so desire, readers also will have the option to revisit cover creation kiosks to create additional book covers and then insert them into adjustable cover-sleeves. This approach affords consumers increased flexibility and

control of how and when they choose to adorn their personal book copies.

## Conclusion

This paper fits with YALSA's 2012 Young Adult Literature Symposium theme "The Future of Young Adult Literature: Hit Me with the Next Big Thing" because it acknowledges a need for cover art that reflects the "changing faces of today's teen" and offers suggestions for how this may be realized on a small scale.

Altering the notion and presentation of cover art is undoubtedly one of the next big things. Yet questions remain as to how to best implement these ideas. Just as we choose which books we desire to order online via vendors, customize photos via kiosks, use software to alter images, and create mini prototypes of ourselves, why not make the same customization tools available to readers of print books as well as ebooks when it comes to cover art? The ideas I propose are designed to give readers more of a say in how cover art is rendered. They may even open up new markets. However, there are limitations associated with these ideas. For example, how do these ideas fit within the legal landscape? How will copyright and image royalties factor in? Will readers be prompted to purchase licenses prior to using images? Will book costs increase as a result of a move toward increased cover art customization?

When teens read YA literature, they read two stories: the outside cover as well as the text within. Instead of these being disjointed, these stories should be one and the same. Appropriate cover art is necessary because it helps to match the inside story to the story the cover portrays.

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