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"Playing Superhero": Agency and the Role of the Teenaged Superhero

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by

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Chapter One: Rebellion for Power Against Adult Authority

In this chapter, I introduce an analysis of how various teen superheroes rebel against various forms of adult authority. In addition, I demonstrate how social assumptions towards graphic novels parallel those of teenagers by giving examples of progressive and reactionary traits within the titles. As in traditional young adult literature, adult anxieties result from social assumptions of teenagers' capabilities due to their biological and mental development. First, I will say a few words about how graphic novels can qualify as young adult literature and the medium's tendency to depict both reactionary and progressive characteristics to set up the unusual circumstances within superhero titles with teenaged protagonists. I focus on Bobby Drake, Wonder Girl, Tim Drake, and Molly Hayes as well as the overall trends of their respective teams, the X-Men, Teen Titans, and Runaways. In the superhero genre, there are numerous teen heroes, but I believe that these iconic characters best exemplify the struggle between teenagers and adults. Repression can come in the form of parents (whether through surface hostility or inner turmoil), adult mentors, or school authorities. Overall, adults pose a threat to teen heroes' agency, and rebellion against the established norm is how these teen heroes gain their agency.

Because many graphic novels are not specifically written and marketed for teenaged audiences, iconic title series are categorized as adolescent literature because of their focus on adult heroes. However, graphic novels with teen characters share the same characteristics as young adult literature written in the traditional novel form by specifically addressing the accumulation of agency and independence. Despite teen heroes' physical strengths and powers, they are subjugated to the repressions of adult

authorities, such as parents, mentors, and society as a whole. In *Disturbing the Universe*, Roberta Trites distinguishes teen characters' struggle for power by their reactions to social constructs: "[T]eenagers are repressed as well as liberated by their own power and by the power of the social forces that surround them in these books. Much of the genre is thus dedicated to depicting how potentially out-of-control adolescents can learn to exist within institutional structures" (Trites 7). Dr. Chris McGee and Dr. Jennifer Miskec adapt Trites's observation in a chart that lists common trends into two categories: "reactionary" and "progressive." According to them, reactionary novels portray teenagers by stereotypical means, which upholds established ideologies; in contrast, progressive novels dismiss ideologies by "creating dynamic teens who are because of experience, not age" and who "are not victims of their emotions, behaviors, or actions" (McGee "Reactionary/Progressive Chart"). However, young adult novels are not solely reactionary or progressive; they contain traits of each while leaning towards one end of the spectrum. For example, graphic novels are perceived as a progressive form of medium because of their utilization of illustrations and text for storytelling, but the reality is that graphic novels face the same challenges in depicting teenagers as traditional young adult novels. Due to changing authors and illustrators within single title series, individual characters may interchangeably gain and loose independence and agency through physical and verbal actions. Overall, graphic novels' reactionary and progressive tendencies are revealed through the pattern in which teen individuals and groups react to adult authority and repression.

For action/adventure graphic novels that feature teen heroes, social exclusion and adult conflicts are depicted through troubling imagery and actions due to the level of

anxiety adults have toward super-powered teenagers, and the teen heroes' reactions to conflict decide whether or not they gain the necessary agency to decide their own identities. Michelle Gorman explains that graphic novels featuring teen heroes exhibit relevant issues and themes while maintaining a correlation with the times: "Graphic novels address current, relevant, often complex social issues, such as nonconformity and prejudice as well as themes that are important to young people, including coming of age, social injustice, and personal triumph of over adversity" (Gorman 10). Just as the various comic publishers discovered, the allure of reading about teenaged superheroes results from young readers' ability to relate with alienated characters. Bradford Wright, author of *Comic Book Nation*, maps the birth of the teen hero through Marvel writer Stan Lee:

> Personally, he [Lee] had never liked comic book superheroes very much. They [adult heroes] were always too perfect and unbelievable, and he felt that most discerning adolescents could not relate to such stiff and silly characters. Lee hoped to recapture the teenage audience with a new kind of superhero comic book—one that played to some of the moral ambivalence that young people recognized and responded to. (Wright 204)

This change in audience focus establishes certain graphic novel series as young adult literature, such as Geoff Johns's *Teen Titans* and Brian K. Vaughan's *Runaways*. Graphic novels that feature teenaged superheroes offer the same themes as young adult novels on a larger scale because of the issues presented through the superhero teen characters' development and maintenance of their literal powers in addition to their symbolic power against adult repression.

Within the standards of social normality, teenagers are constantly struggling against age-based biases. Teenagers are stranded between being labeled as either children or adults during the transitional phase of adolescence. As teens, they are not considered "normal" by the standards that adult-centered society has established because of their perceived biological, emotional, and mental immaturity, characteristics that are depicted in young adult literature. In all young adult literature, various forms of adult authority and ideology attempt to hinder the teenaged characters' developing identities and agency. Roberta Trites discusses the power dynamic in young adult literature in relation to Marilyn French's differentiation between power to and power over:

> [W]hen are teenagers in Young Adult literature allowed to assume responsibility for their own actions and when do dominating adults refuse to acknowledge their capabilities? But the larger question for me is an investigation of the fluid ways that the individual negotiates with her or his society, with the ways adolescents' power is simultaneously acknowledged and denied, engaged and disengaged. (Trites 6)

Although Trites analyzes traditional young adult novels, her theories also apply to superhero teenagers in graphic novels, especially when adult authority attempts to hinder their physical and figurative agency. The institutions of ideological state apparatuses pressure these exceptional teens into either conforming or rebelling against interpellation. In teen superhero stories, parents are the most overwhelming form of ISA, especially when the teens' powers produce actions and beliefs that differ from their own. Although Mark Millar's *Ultimate X-Men* is categorized as adolescent literature, the series best exemplifies surface hostility between parents and adolescents because of the conflict

caused by social prejudices. As I have mentioned, teenagers are stuck within a transitional stage of development between childhood and adulthood, but the teenaged X-Men exemplify characters that are marginalized by their biological age and their genetic material. The X-Men's parents struggle to maintain some form of control over their mutant children, but when they acknowledge that their children are beyond their control and comprehension, the teen's powers are labeled as a debilitating problem that needs to be eradicated.

The X-Men storylines are riddled with conflict between mutant teens and parents, from Angel's parents who abandon him to Professor Xavier's care to Beast's barely-veiled hints of parental abuse. However, the struggle to attain agency from one's parents is best exemplified through Bobby Drake, known as Iceman. Bobby's situation is unique from the other X-Men because he is the youngest member, and his age prompts his parents to be unwilling to relinquish their influence over him. Trites explains the conflict between teens and parents is a commonality in the struggle for power: "Parents of teenagers constitute a more problematic presence in the adolescent novel because parent-figures in YA novels usually serve more as sources of conflict than as sources of support. They are more likely to repress than to empower" (Trites 56). Bobby's parents beautifully exemplify Trites' analysis of repressive parents. The Drakes realize that they are incapable of controlling Bobby's abilities in a normal, domesticated life, yet they clash with Professor Xavier for influence over Bobby's identity. An example of the Drakes forcing their control over Bobby is their demand for weekly visits; when Bobby fails to come home for Sunday dinner, his mother verbally reprimands him over the phone: "[J]ust because you're an X-Man doesn't mean that you're an orphan all of a

sudden either, Bobby Drake. We told Professor Xavier we didn't mind him training you to control this Iceman problem, but we didn't sign a permission slip for any round-the-world trips" (*World Tour* 34). Mrs. Drake labels Bobby's powers as a problem that needs correcting, and although she agrees that Xavier is best suited to handle Bobby's situation, her aim is for Bobby to be able to suppress his powers, not utilize them and bring attention to himself. Their attitude shows that they want their son to conform to their ideologies through the suppression of his biological identity as a mutant.

Ironically, although the Drakes disapprove of their son's developing identity as a superhero, they willingly seek to compensate themselves for society's prejudices against them. When Bobby is injured during a mission and hospitalized, his parents repress his agency and identity by holding him responsible for their hardships:

> When the guys at the car plant found out my son was in the X-Men, I was the first to be laid off in the next wave of redundancies. When your mother's friends found out about you, half of them actually crossed the street to avoid her [....] There ain't a day goes by where someone doesn't vandalize the porch or put filth through the mailbox, and it's all because our little boy had some bad luck with his genes. This lawsuit is the first piece of good luck we've had since we found out what was wrong with you, Bobby. [....] I hate to put you in this position, son, I really do... but if you don't press ahead with this compensation claim for your injuries, the three of us are going to be out on the street inside six weeks. (*World Tour* 192-3)

Although Mr. Drake is upset by his son's injuries, he blames Bobby's mutation for the stigma placed upon the family. Familial guilt convinces Bobby to take the responsibility

for his family's hardships and financial and social recovery by offering false testimony in favor to a racist, anti-mutant politician. The scene's monologue and illustrations parallel Iceman's struggle against alienation with the traditional young adult novel: "We all live in a state of profound isolation. No other human being can ever know what it's like to be you from the inside. And no amount of reaching out to others can ever make them feel exactly what you feel" (McCloud 194). The conflict between Bobby and his parents reflect a progressive characteristic by showing "society having a problem that the text explores and challenges", and this graphic novel is about what the adult culture, in this case prejudice, does to mutant teens (McGee "Reactionary/Progressive Chart"). For Bobby, the racism shown against himself and his family prompts him to feel guilty for his parents' hardships. His parents see him as their teenaged son who's suffering from a form of genetic disease, which causes them fail to recognize that his identity and powers could provide him internal agency.

Despite the guilt that Bobby feels for his parents, he gains agency through his ability to overcome society's prejudice against him, whereas his parents fail to confront the social pressures. In the end, Bobby demonstrates his agency by publically discrediting the politician who has virtually blackmailed him into making this proclamation against Professor Xavier, his father figure and the only adult who understands his plight:

> I got a speech here in front of me, just like Senator Turk has, but I'm not gonna read it 'coz, well, I didn't really write it and just about none of this stuff is true anyway. Sure, Professor Xavier sent us on dangerous missions, but it was only ever to help ordinary people like you. Sure, some of us almost got killed a few

> times, but he's training us to be superheroes for God's sake [....] I know that my Mom and Dad could really use that money right now. I know that I've really screwed up their lives and I feel really, really bad about it, but I'm not gonna sit up here and lie. (*World Tour* 212)

Bobby's speech parallels his father's because both monologues address the prejudices of society, but Bobby's televised declaration signifies his greater agency in comparison to his parents'. Bobby refuses to conform to the ideologies of prejudiced family and government figures and gives his testimony on television where it is witnessed by billions of viewers. Bobby's face and voice are forever imprinted in society as a face of teenaged agency and rebellion.

Bobby's greatest moment of development as an individual and as a hero involves a display of gained agency through metaphorical and physical agency. Although Bobby has declared his commitment to not speak against Xavier's mutant agenda, his parents cling desperately to assert their parental authority through guilt and emotional threats: "You get in touch with the X-Men again and, you have my word, your mother and I are through with you [....] Bobby, how screwed up does our life have to get before you let this Iceman thing of yours go, kid?" (*Ultimate Collection* 57). Bobby displays his previous gain of agency and breaks his father's pattern of delivering guilt-filled monologues by calmly arguing that he cannot allow his friends to be persecuted by the government for acts they did not commit. Once more, Bobby rebels verbally against his parents' ultimatums; to him, if their love depends on him repressing what and who he is, then he would be better off with his father figure Xavier and the X-Men who understand him. When the X-Men are at the brink of capture by the government, Iceman displays

the depth of his developed power by dramatically appearing onto the battlefield fully incased in his ice form and creating an ice tsunami that consumes the area and handicaps the soldiers' weapons. Single-handedly, Bobby turns the tide of the battle and embraces his identity as Iceman. Despite his parents' attempts to repress Iceman's powers and identity, Bobby's verbal and active rebellion grants him the agency to separate himself from their influence.

Bobby Drake exemplifies the progressive gain of agency through rebelling against hostile parents, but parents can also be a form of repression as a catalyst for teen superheroes' internal conflict. It is a common trend for parents to assert authority and guidance over their teenage children in young adult literature, but the Teen Titans' parents appear to acknowledge that their children's powers and/or exceptional abilities enable adolescents to be more powerful than themselves. Unfortunately, the parents' attempts to be a source of support in Geoff Johns's *Teen Titans* (2004-06) unintentionally repress their children through the teens' resulting guilt. In *Teen Titans: A Kid's Game*, the audience is introduced to Cassie Sandsmark (Wonder Girl) as she and her mother confront Cassie's high school principal over her expulsion:

> Since her identity as *Wonder Girl* became *public* knowledge, the FBI has issued us over a *dozen* security warnings! They're saying we're a potential *target* for super-villains. [....] Not to mention she's been preaching *paganism* in these halls. [....] Teaching the kids *Amazonian* rituals, claiming she was *granted* her *powers* by the Greek god Athena! [....] *Your daughter isn't normal!* (*A Kid's Game* 13, emphasis in the original).

Cassie is innocent of violating her high school's official rules, but her presence possibly endangers others as well as challenges the status quo's religious beliefs. In addition, the principal never directs her comments to Cassie herself but to her mother, and in the one panel that the principal faces Cassie, her eyes are shut, which further isolates Cassie from the proceedings concerning her (13). The principal embodies the social stigma that Cassie must face since her identity is public knowledge. In comparison to the X-Men's conflict with society, in which their identities as mutants are kept private, Cassie's struggle is more personal because she is a publicized outsider to the norm. Mrs. Sandsmark does not prohibit Cassie from being a superhero, but she does insist on taking on the burden of fighting against the prejudices that Cassie faces. When Cassie attempts to defend herself verbally to the principal, her mother instantly, yet calmly, tells her, "Let me handle it" (13). Mrs. Sandsmark does not silence her daughter's voice as an act of power; rather, it is an act of protection. Because of her parental role, Mrs. Sandsmark believes that she must be Cassie's voice in order to protect her. As a result, Cassie feels guilty for putting her mother in such a hostile situation just so that she can be enrolled in a public high school. Cassie endures the persecution and allows her mother to be her voice because she understands that the status quo harbors fears for her both as a teenager and as a superhero.

Tim Drake, Batman's third Robin, also exemplifies the internal struggle of parental expectations, but he differs from the rest of his teammates because his identity as Robin is kept secret from his father in order to preserve Bruce Wayne's anonymity. Although the secret may allow Tim to be free from parental concerns over his well-being, his conscience troubles him because of the lies he must tell his devoted father in order to

be Robin. Ironically, Batman does not encourage Robin to confess his double life to his father even though Tim blatantly tells him that his conscience is bothering him. Instead, Batman tries to lecture him on the necessity of the situation, which adds to the demand for sidekicks to be complacent to their orders: "I've always done what I have to, Tim. It's not something I'm happy about—It just comes with the job" (*Family Lost* 17). Although the adult superhero's responsibility is to personify the morals of society, Batman places his own personal needs ahead of Robin's dilemma because, as a sidekick, Robin's role is "to give the adult hero someone to talk to and commiserate with" (Fingeroth 140). Batman's resolution that Tim should abide to his need for anonymity further complicates Tim's dilemma of choosing between adhering to the status quo as a teen or being a hero.

Led by his guilty conscious, Tim resolves to mold his identity by what he believes would please his dad, Jack Drake. Through the first half of the series, Tim constantly questions his fate in respect to what Batman and his father want for him: "What do I want to *be*? *Not Batman*. This is only temporary. I'm not out to win Bruce's approval like Nightwing. My dad always said I could do *anything* I wanted. And I can. He *supports* me in whatever I do. I'm going to make *him* proud. All right, Tim… So *where* are you going?" (*A Kid's Game* 145, emphasis in the original). In the panels depicting his internal monologue, the artwork's sequence goes back and forth between Tim's face and the other carefree students around him as he struggles to write an essay entitled "My Career Path." The last two panels of his hand holding a pen without making contact with the paper visibly illustrates Tim's indecision between continuing his path as a superhero or adhering to his father's dream for him to have an exceptional fate within the confines

of the status quo. Although he states that his father supports all of his decisions, Tim suspects that his father would disapprove of his identity as Robin. Then, in *Teen Titans: Beast Boy and Girls*, Tim fails to join the other teens at Titans' Tower, prompting Superboy (Conner Kent) to search for him in Gotham. When Superboy finds Robin as Tim Drake, Tim informs Conner that he quits, not by his own choice but because his father disapproves: "Last week... My *dad* found my costume. He found out I was Robin and he went a little—overboard" (*Beast Boy & Girls* 119, emphasis in the original). Despite Tim's explanation, two things prompt readers to not believe him: Conner's observation of "he seems totally *relaxed* now. His heart rate is normal" and the lack of such a significant scene within the panels (119, emphasis in original). In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud emphasizes the importance of panel depictions in comics: "There is a kind of alchemy at work in the space between panels which can help us find meaning or resonance" (McCloud 73). With the graphic novel's mixed medium of text and illustrations, the absence of such a significant scene hints that it never occurred. The fact that Tim has made this choice as a result of his indecision is solidified when he confesses his conflict: "I never liked living *two lives.* I never planned on doing it for *this* long, and I *never* wanted to lie to my dad. [....] I don't know *what* I'm going to be yet, but I'm going to make my dad *proud*" (*Beast Boy and the Girls* 119, emphasis in the original). Ultimately, the decision does not last long because on the very last page of the graphic novel, Tim returns to his identity as Robin without allowing his father to know of his second life. Although Tim may appear passive in adhering to how Jack and Batman wish for him to act, Tim's decision to rejoin the Teen Titans empowers him because he makes the decision without the interference of an adult.

Despite Tim's resolve to be a hero, he still struggles with his decision to withhold his dual identity from his father. When Jack is murdered, Tim is figuratively free to live on as Robin, but his guilt for not telling his secrets to his father troubles him. Jack Drake's death affects Tim in the form of Roberta Trites's power/knowledge dynamic:

> Both acceptance and awareness serve in the power/knowledge dynamic to render the adolescent both powerless in the fear of death and empowered by acknowledging its power. Adolescents often gain their first knowledge of the pain permanent separation involves when they feel powerless because someone they love dies; the corollary that inevitably follows is adolescents' recognition of their own mortality. (Trites 119)

Despite Tim's grief, his father's death allows him to experience death's impact; although he has fought crime for years, this is the first time that a loved one has died. The graphic novel depicts Tim, dressed as Robin, standing before his father's gravestone: "My dad. Jack Drake. He was murdered last week. The person who killed him is dead. The one who hired him is locked away in Arkham. None of that makes it any easier" (*The Future is Now* 122). The fact that Tim faces his father dressed as Robin only in front of his gravestone signifies that Tim is both free and burdened by his parent's death. His guilt of being incapable to save his father motivates him to continue his life as Robin.

Brian K. Vaughan's *Runaways* also harbors a group of teens who struggle against the repression that their parents represent. Vaughan's *Runaways* narrates the story of a group of teenagers who discover that their parents are truly super villains while simultaneously coming to terms with their own various superpowers. The graphic novel series exhibits a narrative about teens in comparison to its Marvel and DC counterparts

because it depicts teen characters who reject the assumption that adolescents need adult supervision and influence to mature into capable individuals. In fact, due to their parents' betrayal and villainous acts, the Runaways decide to completely rebel against the corrupted adult society by righting their parents' deeds:

> Gertrude: What are you talking about? Dressing up in costumes and... and playing super hero? No offense, Alex, but isn't that sort of childish?
>
> Alex: What's the alternative, 'Arsenic'? Being an adult? If that means turning into the people who raised us... I hope I die before I get old" (*Pryde & Joy* 141-42).

Unlike the other graphic novel series that I have mentioned, *Runaways* questions the ethics and ideologies of adult-oriented society. The teens' relationship with adults is complicated because although they defeat their evil parents and prove that they are capable of controlling their individual powers, the adult heroes reprimand their success because of their age. Captain America, Marvel Comics' personification of adult-oriented American ideologies, publically addresses their actions as if they acted impulsively: "I'm not going to condone acts of vigilantism by *minors*. If children have reason to believe their guardians are involved with illegal activities, they should *not* take the law into their own hands" (*The Good Die Young* 119, emphasis in the original). Captain America fails to mention all of the Runaways' failed attempts to go to supposedly trusted adults to assist them or the corruption within various restrictive state apparatuses, such as the police. After witnessing the corruption of adult society, the Runaways deny the ideology of "adults holding the knowledge that represents the highest goal: truth" or that "no adolescent is given the opportunity to be as wise" (Trites 79). As a result of their

experiences and newly attained knowledge, the Runaways have lost their metaphorical innocence and deem themselves insufferably repressed when separated into adult-sanctioned foster homes: "I thought I'd be able to put up with being controlled by know-nothing adults again… but I can't. Not after everything we've been through" (*The Good Die Young* 135). They refuse to surrender their attained agency just because the adult world fails to accept that they have grown as independent individuals as well as a teen-oriented family. Instead, they evade recapture and adult repression while learning to understand and utilize their powers for good.

Although parents are the most common form of adult authority, teenagers also have to confront the ideologies forged through social assumptions about their inability to independently develop positive identities. Adult anxieties are extended to all of society because of the potential harm done by the teenagers' extraordinary powers. In her article "'Is He Still Human? Are You?': Young Adult Science Fiction in the Posthuman Age," Elaine Ostry focuses her analysis of the posthuman teen on genetic variance, and she quotes from Francis Fukuyama's *Our Posthuman Future* to emphasize how social anxieties towards genetic engineering parallel with that of adults for posthuman teenagers: "[T]he most clear and present danger is that the large genetic variations between individuals will narrow and become clustered within certain distinct social groups…. that social elites may not just pass on social advantages but embed them genetically as well" (Ostry 228). Although Fukuyama's emphasis is on genetics, her argument does not limit the X-Men as the only group of teen heroes under suspicion; any superhero team consisting of powerful teenagers are suspected of potential delinquency. The fear is that the teenaged superheroes can usurp the established, adult-oriented society

and ideologies. Society's anxiety over teenaged heroes is best summarized by Starfire's observations of Earth's ideologies: "I've been on Earth long enough to know that most authority figures don't deal well with younger heroes. They see them as callow and irresponsible. Potentially dangerous." (*A Kid's Game* 16). Starfire's estimate of adults' fears toward teenaged heroes depicts the reactionary anxieties that these teens can be influenced to become corrupt or that they can cause problems for society through the force of their abilities.

Despite the promotion of agency for individual teen heroes, *Ultimate X-Men* and *Teen Titans* still depict the reactionary trend of enforcing adult mentorship and ideologies over them. Although Mark Millar's *Ultimate X-Men* is a reinvention of the classic title line, their characterization as teenaged mutants emphasizes the impact of the school system on the X-Men philosophy: "From the very first page of the very first issue of *Uncanny X-Men* in 1963, the center of the X-Men mythos has been a school: once Professor Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, now the Xavier Institute for Higher Learning. The X-Men's home and headquarters has almost always been this school" (Decandido 80). Keith Decandido's analysis of Xavier's school is convincing in its evaluation of the building's significance; the single building is described by three nouns that are associated with sources of ideological and restrictive state apparatuses. When Xavier writes an article to promote his peaceful ideas of mutant-human cohabitation, he explains the great potential that his students possess to protect others: "Dear reader, As I argue at length in my book, this raw power you fear is precisely the reason that these young, terrified mutants must be embraced. Can you imagine their potential for good with the proper guidance and teaching" (*World Tour* 6). The emphasis that teen heroes

are molded by positive adult guidance reveals the reactionary trend of didactic novels that emphasize the dangers of bad behavior and the benefits of good. In consideration to his students' tumultuous lives with their parents, Xavier's peaceful ideologies supply the X-Men with the parental assurances and support that they lacked with their biological families. Xavier's influential power over them promotes his role *in locos parentis*, and it reveals the graphic novel's ideas on rebellion. Teens can rebel to gain personal agency, but those in possession of great powers must adhere to some form of nurturing authority.

Similar to the X-Men, the Teen Titans' agency is limited to personal conquests, not as a team, because they are still under the influence of their respective mentors outside of Titans Tower. Their time as Teen Titans resembles that of an extracurricular club that "serves as an institutional setting in which the protagonist can learn to accept her or his role as a member of other institutions" (Trites 32). Although the Titans' agency stems from separating from their adult mentors, their independence and agency are limited as a team because each member is influenced by his or her mentor for the majority of the week. The adult heroes' belittlement of the Teen Titans as a superhero team is revealed through Superman referring it as "unique after-school activities" (*A Kid's Game* 6). The teen heroes are viewed as too young and impressionable to fight crime on their own. Thus, the adult Justice League views the Teen Titans as a necessity for training their apprentices in the finer points of being superheroes; however, they also deny the teens the title of "heroes," thinking of them solely as impulsive sidekicks who need their overall guidance to grow into respectable heroes. The Teen Titans' overall agency is attained through their numerous experiences which helps them develop into independent heroes separate from their mentors. When the adult heroes attempt to cross

the boundary of interfering with the Titans' affairs by proclaiming guidance, they are corrected by the former teen sidekick Nightwing: "You want these kids to open up to you—Respect their privacy here at the tower. Let them handle things on their own" (*A Kid's Game* 129). The Titans Tower is depicted as a safe domain for Superboy, Wonder Girl, Robin and company to grow as heroes without their mentors' influences. Like the school structure of Xavier's Institute of Gifted Youngsters, the mentors act as guiding force of the Titans' weekdays while the Tower is their weekend getaway to form their own heroic identities.

Despite the fact that the Teen Titans' activities are limited to the weekends, participation is still a personal choice for each teen, and any challenge to that right is perceived as a threat to their identities and agency. Once more, Trites' emphasis of power and repression between teens and parents is significant: "The role of parents in adolescent literature is one of the defining characteristics of the genre. Since Anglophone cultures, by and large, usually accept as a given the premise that adolescents must separate from their parents in order to grow, the literature of these cultures reflect the same bias" (Trites 55). Adapted to the superhero genre, adult mentors serve as parental figures because of their protectiveness and reluctance to relinquish control over their sidekicks. For instance, Cassie Sandsmark values her status as a Teen Titan the most because it liberates her from the judgment and isolation she faces at school, but Wonder Woman attempts to force Cassie to return to her mother and justifies her interference in Cassie's life by stating her ideal for training: "If you need direction, I want you to come back to Themyscira. Train with Artemis" (*A Kid's Game* 114). Despite Wonder Woman's assumed responsibility, there is a distance between the mentor and sidekick

because she does not intend on making Cassie her personal student. In a progressive moment of growth and agency, Cassie recognizes Diana's attempts to mold her into a perfect image of a Wonder Girl prototype and rebels: "You want to control me, right? Don't you have enough to worry about? I mean, you're out there being the ambassador for *peace*, writing some book that shows people how to live—trying to save the world. Well, go do it. Go *save* the world. Tell them *how* to do it. But don't try and tell *me*. [....] I'm *not* some perfect woman made from *clay*" (114, emphasis in the original). Not only does Wonder Girl reject Diana's offer, she verbally recaps that her mentor was literally molded at birth into her perfect persona through the interference of the Greek gods; whereas Cassie was born of normal flesh and seeks experience to shape herself into a hero. Cassie's verbal rebellion symbolizes a separation from her mentor because she separates her identity from Wonder Woman's ideals. Although the Teen Titans may be restricted by adult repression during the week, Cassie progressively gains her agency by rebelling against her mentor and winning her freedom to be a Teen Titan.

Millar's *Ultimate X*-Men and Johns' *Teen Titans* exhibit both reactive and progressive characteristics within their depictions of teenaged superheroes' rebellion against various forms of adult authority for agency, but Vaughan's *Runaways* depicts the best example of a teenaged character gaining agency in spite of adults' constant attempts to intervene. Molly Hayes, the youngest member of the Runaways, gains the most literal and figurative strength amongst her comrades through her mutant powers and ability to manipulate adult expectations. Her power involves super-human strength which grants her the title of the group's muscle, which is illustrated as readers witness an eleven-year-old girl lifting large debris and punching holes through robots. Despite her strength, as an

eleven-year-old girl, Molly is stuck between the biological phases of child and teenager, and even her fellow teammates struggle with trying to decide how much she can mentally handle:

> Gertrude: But this involves Molly's parents, too! She deserves to know the truth!
>
> Alex: She's just a kid! Gertrude: She's old enough to know her parents are evil! (Pryde & *Joy* 31)

Her young age poses a threat toward her personal agency because everyone seeks to protect or guide her according to what they perceive is best for her. In addition, adults tend to use her age and gender against her and her friends, which is illustrated when their parents frame the older teens for kidnapping Molly to draw them out of hiding. The press and city constantly flash Molly's picture on television and urge people to save her: "The Amber Alert system has been activated for eleven-year-old Molly Hayes, who was allegedly kidnapped by this gang just a few hours ago" (*Pride & Joy* 133). Adults, as well as her older friends, view and label Molly as a child who needs protection because of her age and assumed innocence. Both good and bad forces want to guide and influence her into fruition because of her powerful mutant status. In one occurrence, the Runaways are accosted by a fully grown team of X-Men who wish to take Molly into their custody: "Your young comrade belongs with us now, in a safe environment where she can be taught to use her powers to make the world a better place" ("X-Men/Runaways" 284). The adult X-Men fail to acknowledge the possibility that Molly can develop her powers positively on her own. Instead, they seek to mold her with their

own ideology without addressing her. Thus, because of her age and appearance, adults dismiss her physical strength because of their ideas of how young girls need protection.

Despite what other people assume, Molly's agency is prevalent through her perceptiveness because she is able to take notice of details that others miss. Ironically, Molly is able to take advantage of how adults view her because villains tend to not try to conceal their ideas around her as a result of their assumptions. For example, she recognizes a future enemy when he is impersonating a hero trying to take them into custody. While her friends are busy fighting, Molly quietly reveals that she is aware of his ruse by saying, "Who do you think that fakey accent is fooling?" (*True Believers* 62). This observation emphasizes Molly's perception of essential details despite her childish persona. Although Molly's physical strength is what others witness, her greatest ability is to manipulate others' perceptions of her by performing the behavioral roles that society assigns her. She speaks childishly and acts naïvely around her friends in order to camouflage her true agency. Ironically, adult villains see through the ruse as a tactic "to lower people's defenses" that "masks a ferocious intellect" because they also have to perform according to conventional society's laws (*The Good Die Young* 46). Their parents compare Molly to themselves, but Molly differs from them because of her morality. Her greatest moment of agency is when she exemplifies her physical and moral strength through the act of crumbling the Pride's device that holds the soul of a murdered child. By smashing it, she physically and metaphorically demolishes the restrictions of tainted adult authority that has held her captive through deceit: "You can't take kids, and… and… put them in little *boxes* just 'cause it makes you happy […] It's *wrong*" (108; emphasis in original). Molly's act symbolizes the Runaways' mentality towards

adult authority: adults should not reign over teenagers' lives through deceit and repression. Although the other Runaways have their moments of agency, Molly Hayes's development of her literal and figurative powers is essential to the comic series' progressive tendencies because of her success in gaining agency despite her young age.

The superhero subgenre has always been a subject of appeal to young adult audiences, and the previous titles' emphasis on the struggle for identity and agency gain parallels with the themes of the traditional novel form in young adult literature. Millar's *Ultimate X-Men*, Johns's *Teen Titans*, and Vaughan's *Runaways* exhibit both progressive and reactive traits in their portrayal of teen superheroes who struggle to gain their personal agency through their rebellion against adult authority. Whether the adults are hostile/ well-meaning parents, school authorities, or adult mentors, adults pose a threat to teen heroes' independence and agency. The teenagers' individual reactions to adults' attempted repressions decide the characters' gain of agency. In Chapter Two, their reactionary characteristics of mentor-student relationship are demonstrated within Mark Millar's *Ultimate X-Men* and the various Batman and Robin partnerships.

Chapter Two: The Identity Formation of Teen Superheroes

This second chapter reveals the negative, reactive trends within graphic novels that feature teenaged superheroes under the guidance of an adult mentor. Social anxieties prompt adults to believe that teenagers need adults to guide their identity formation because they believe that teenagers can only come to harm if left on their own. Adults fear that teens will indulge in risky behavior that can lead to death or negative identity formation. Mark Millar's *Ultimate X-Men* and Batman's three Robins exemplify the negative effects of overbearing adults pushing teens to adopt their sanctioned ideologies. While the X-Men are discriminated against because of their genetic inability to conform to normal society, they still form their identities in accordance to Xavier's agenda of proving that mutants can be beneficial to society. In the Batman series, the role of Robin, the Boy Wonder, is one to be performed by replaceable boys, and Dick Grayson's replacements must conform to Dick's image if they hope to be Batman's sidekick. Although Jason Todd, the second Robin, attempts to be progressive and act by his own accord, he exemplifies how social anxieties over teens are established through his death when he refuses to conform.

In graphic novels that feature teenaged superheroes, risky behavior implies much more than what is typically discussed in coming of age, problem novels; instead, teenaged risk taking involves saving the world from adult villains or fighting adult-oriented crime. However, in his book *Superman on the Couch: What Superheroes Really Tell Us about Our Society,* Danny Fingeroth emphasizes that while characters may be biologically young, their positions as heroes burden them with adult conflicts: "Comics portray the sagas of adolescents who have the burdens of adulthood forced on

them, yet who still maintain a youthful exuberance and sense of wonder" (Fingeroth 153). Fingeroth's theory creates a paradox within the superhero genre. Because of their powers, young heroes are expected to behave maturely, but they are reprimanded for thoughtless uses of powers. Whenever they attempt to act independently, mentors dismiss their actions as a result of their young age. In addition, rarely do teenaged superheroes confront young super villains; instead, those that act under the guidance of an adult fight against their mentors' foes. The adult mentor ensures that powerful teenaged characters limit the use of their abilities under the adult-oriented framework.

Although Mark Millar's *Ultimate X-Men* and Grant Morrison's *Batman and Robin* are categorized as adolescent literature, the teen superheroes featured within them are similar to traditional young adult characters because they are constantly conflicted over the shaping of their personal identities. With all of society criticizing their actions, these young superheroes are expected to exhibit negative and risky behavior that embodies their perceived immaturity. For superhero teens, the pressure is intensified because of society's added fear of them and mentors' pressure for sidekicks to represent their own ideals. In Millar's *Ultimate X-Men*, the teen mutants are remolded to exemplify the positive attributes of Professor X's mutant agenda for society. In Morrison's *Batman and Robin*, Robin is created as DC's attempt to deliver didactic lessons to young audiences. These youthful heroes become unreliable characters because of their mentors' influence over their identities and mindsets, and they prove that society's thoughts of young adults have not progressed too much. In graphic novels, teen heroes' identity formation is limited by the guidelines of adult framework created by the

adult mentors and the novels' authors that personify the social anxieties that teenagers need to be protected from their own reckless behavior.

With the influence of Dr. Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954, American society deemed youth delinquency and rebellion as an epidemic, and early comic titles were criticized for depicting sexuality and violent crimes to the presumed teen audience. In *Comic Book Nation*, Bradford W. Wright summarizes Dr. Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* as an unreliable conquest against youth culture that effectively frightened his audience with provocative images and misguided interpretations: "Wertham failed to document any of his evidence, and he provided no footnotes or bibliography to verify his research. He simply expected readers to trust his evidence and conclusions on the basis of his own expert credentials" (Wright 158). Despite Wertham's biased critiques, he succeeded in provoking adult anxieties over society's youth. As a result, graphic novels (1956-1967) were revitalized with adult superheroes who posed as responsible role models for teen characters and readers, a trend that can still be found in modern graphic novels:

> All conformed nicely with the comics code, and none questioned the state of American society or the meaningful place of individuals within it. Evincing a pedantic, judgmental, and ultimately condescending adult perspective on young people, these comic books seemed determined to assure parents that comic book publishers could act *in loco parentis* to incubate appropriate values in children. (199)

Adult protagonists always verbally delivered a moral lesson that was learned from the escapades, and although parents approved of the didactic comics, the protagonists failed

to connect with readers because of the age gap. In relation to traditional young adult novels, Roberta Trites explains that the novels' adult voices may also be what impaired adolescents' embrace of their ideologies: "The power dynamic also shifts if the ideological voice is stated by an adult voice rather than an adolescent voice. Some narratives that rely exclusively on adult voices to articulate direct ideologies may offer fewer affirmations of power/knowledge necessary to engage with ideological statements" (Trites 70). Applied to graphic novels, readers discover the trend of adult, iconic heroes directly delivering ideologies and lessons to young characters, which limits teens' agency to form their own beliefs and identities through individual experiences. In *Ultimate X-Men*, Xavier assigns his students to serve the community by resolving crimes, but he vehemently reprimands them when they do so violently: "How can I tour the world asking for change when my students are clinging to the politics of the ape-man? I don't like prisons, I don't like capital punishment and I don't like mutants dropping car-size hailstones on unsuspecting Irishmen" (*World Tour* 38). The morals of the stories did not dissipate; instead, teens become a secondary character for the mentor to directly deliver his politics and ideals for them to adopt. In Xavier's case, violence is never the answer; reform and acceptance are the only methods to create positive change. Although teen heroes are better relatable to audiences than their adult counterparts, they are molded to accept the role of their mentors' students, never as equal partners. In other words, certain teen heroes only appear to be empowered through their choices to become superheroes.

Although *X-Men* is a prominent title within Marvel Comics, the originally teenaged students of Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters have long since grown into adulthood, and the comic exemplifies the conflict of students developing their own

identities separate from their beloved Professor Xavier. Mark Millar's *Ultimate X-Men* revitalizes the classic comic title by reintroducing the characters as teenagers that ideologically reflect the times. Their characterization as teen mutants reflects the ideologies that labels adolescence as being a time of confusion and conflict with adult society. In his article, "Playing God and Discovering My Own Mutanity," Joe Casey explains the youthful X-Men's significance in the comic genre and to its audience: "I felt as though I'd actually crafted some cogent commentary on the modern teenager, how teenagers view themselves and how others view them" (Casey 13). In a sense, the X-Men's plot is a metaphorical coming of age story, but this commentary on adolescence is reactionary and limited by an adult-centered society. In *Youth in Context: Frameworks, Settings, and Encounters*, Claire Smith, Wendy Stainton Rogers, and Stan Tucker's article "Risk" stresses that society fears teens that act without intervention because they are biologically and psychologically incapable of caring about how their actions affect others:

> The young are defined by their lack: their lack of care in what they do, lack in concern for others, and lack of self-control and self discipline. It is hardly surprising, then, that the adult world finds their risk taking disturbing—even threatening—and hence seeks to prevent, reduce, or curtail it. [....] In other words, the dominant representation of young people means that whatever they do, they are positioned, in the eyes of the adult world, as 'being a problem.' (Smith, Rogers, and Tucker 223)

Smith and her colleagues' article is based on case studies focused on at-risk teens, and her summation of adult anxieties parallels with the social fears towards mutant teens

because of their abnormal abilities which prohibit them from conforming to social ideologies. They pose a risk because their powers are misunderstood as weapons, and the X-Men understand that the society that they protect distrusts them in return: "They hate us, Cyclops. As far as ordinary people are concerned, we rank somewhere between athlete's foot and child molesters" (*Tomorrow People* 88). This sentiment deeply reflects the prejudiced views against nonconformists within the problematic world. Despite the X-Men's efforts in protecting others, their volatile society fears and suspects them of being potential terrorists.

Although I chose to analyze Millar's *Ultimate X-Men* for the iconic characters' ages, one of its most interesting storylines is the government's sentinel project, in which huge robots are manufactured to commit genocide against mutants. Teenage anxiety formulates society's concept of problematisation, a term that Claire Smith and her colleagues coin, which defines all teenagers as being inherently and inevitably at risk: "The problematising approach of such reports can be used to declare groups of young people to be 'at risk' and 'out of control'" (Smith, Rogers, and Tucker 224). Although problematisation refers to society's fears of criminal behavior, it reflects the mutant teenagers' daily struggle to survive within a prejudiced society; the dangers teens face are not based so much from their own actions, but through society's fears of their existence. The extreme approach of annihilating the problem is viewed through the government's support of the sentinel program in *X-Men*. The beginning panels of *Ultimate X-Men: The Tomorrow People* illustrate the extreme prejudices of normal society by depicting the impersonal murders of innocent mutants who may not even be aware of their genetic variance. The huge robots target and kill people with striking accuracy because their

programming enables them to analyze individuals' genetics at a glance. After a test run occurs in Los Angeles, the media report a positive message in the successful extermination of mutants:

> Tonight's top story: Trial run of *the sentinels* is hailed as a triumphant *success* as a mutant nest in Los Angeles is uncovered and neutralized with *no* civilian casualties. *Were* these mutant terrorists behind the recent anti-human bombings in *New York* and *Washington*? Police say the evidence is *undeniable*—but human rights campaigners amnesty international have condemned the action as '*inhuman* and *unconstitutional*,' provoking a stern White House response—How anyone can question the sentinel initiative after the *Washington annihilation* is astonishing. The President wishes to reaffirm his support for this project, and offers his sincere *congratulations* to the federal employees behind it. (*The Tomorrow People* 4, emphasis in the original)

The genocidal attitude towards mutants is an extremely violent portrayal of social action against nonconformity. The fear of mutants that lead to the sentinels parallels with adult anxieties of teens, but the genocidal sentinels represent adult reactions to the extreme. Adults may not want to harm teens, but they want to control them. In such a hostile world, teenaged mutants could easily be motivated to turn against the society that hates them; the violence aimed at mutants justifies Xavier's doctrine of saving teen mutants. With Professor Xavier's nurturing guidance, the teenaged X-Men feel protected and obliged to utilize their powers to benefit all of society.

Professor Xavier's Institute for Gifted Youngsters represents a positive institution for intervening and remolding teenagers for the good of all society. For teen mutants, the

school also provides the most peaceful choice offered in comparison to joining Magneto's Brotherhood of Mutants or being killed by the sentinels. When drafting an article for publication, Xavier refutes the celebration and dependence of violence within society:

> Some people ask why we don't just wage war on The Brotherhood, but that's such an old-fashioned, imperialistic solution to the problem.... As we look around the world today, it's clear that violence breeds nothing but further violence. Ideas are the only way to change the world and, as a teacher, I feel it's my responsibility to prove it. (*World Tour* 10, 13)

Xavier's published statement sets the skeletal model of how he strives to shape society's youth based upon his worldview. Xavier further symbolizes his ideals because of his physical handicap and telepathy. Being disabled from the waist down, Xavier represents the mind and liberal ideals, but he is incapable of comprehending physical needs. Ironically, Xavier depends on his teenaged X-Men to accomplish his physical goals which involve fighting and other risky behavior that he initially saves them from. The X-Men fight enemies who prohibit their mentor's goals for all of mutant kind, never for their personal goals. The conflict between the teenaged heroes and their mentor is the fact that they are used as tools to achieve the adult's goals.

Despite the mutants' recasting as teenagers in modern society, they are still Professor Xavier's students who are encouraged to remold their identities. Although Millar's series contains the progressive setting of a problematic adult world, Professor Xavier's ideology parallels with society's perceptions that young adults need guidance. As a result of their genetic inability to conform to social ideologies, the graphic novel

introduces the X-Men as vulnerable teens when left to fend for themselves. Hank McCoy is a runaway; Jean Grey is an asylum patient; Scott Summers is an orphan; Ororo Munroe is a carjacker; and Piotr Rasputin is a mafia henchman. In comparison to their attempts to survive on their own, their adoption into Xavier's program promises to give them purpose. Roberta Trite's definition of schools' purpose as an Ideological State Apparatus in young adult literature parallels with Xavier's agenda:

> [S]chool serves as an institutional setting in which the protagonist can learn to accept her or his role as a member of other institutions [....] School settings exist in adolescent literature to socialize teenagers into accepting the inevitable power social institutions have over individuals in every aspect of their lives [...] [I]f these novels have an element that purports to empower teenagers, that sense of uplift is often balanced by the acknowledgment that although social institutions give in adolescent literature, they also take away. (Trites 12-13).

Trites' emphasis on schools is based off of young adult novels, but the significance of schools is witnessed in how the X-Men establish their identities according to Xavier's approval. In the *Ultimate* series, Xavier's school provides a nurturing, educational institution where the previously socially-alienated teens become assets to protecting the same society that persecutes them. Xavier endeavors to reform his students through idealistic, institutionalized education. The X-Men's education curriculum provides a model for them to remold themselves to his ideals:

> [P]erhaps the development I'm most proud of is how Wolverine and Colossus have reinvented themselves over these past few months. Both young men raised in violence and misery, they now spend their evenings scanning newspapers for

> hard-luck stories and unsolved crimes… walking the streets from dusk 'til dawn in search of people who might need their particular kind of help. (*World Tour* 9)

As I mentioned, the X-Men are unable to conform to normal society's ideologies because of their mutation, but Xavier's mentorship compels them to conform to avoid persecution. By labeling Wolverine and Colossus as success stories, Xavier seeks to prove that his students are capable of reform. If the mutant teens cannot conform to normal standards, then they must prove that they are beneficial to humanity.

As the teens become integrated within Xavier's ideology, they lose their status as young adults and become adults in order to gain knowledge of the prejudices surrounding them. The X-Men exemplify the transformation from youths to adults through their thorough interpellation into Xavier's worldview. Essential clues to the X-Men teens performing a role are the characteristics of their uniforms and their physical appearances as depicted within the comics' illustration panels. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud emphasizes that readers' perceptions of characters are based upon their appearances: "Our identities and awareness are invested in many inanimate objects everyday. Our clothes, for example, can trigger numerous transformations in the way others see us and in the way we see ourselves" (McCloud 38). McCloud specifically addresses how graphic novel artists' decisions regarding character designs affect the development of the teammates' identities or lack thereof. In previous X-Men titles, each uniform differed in color theme and style to represent the individual's identity and powers; Mark Millar's *Ultimate X-Men* contrasts through the uniformity of the teen X-Men's costumes [See Appendix Figure 1]. In the two-page spread panel that first depicts the established X-Men, they are wearing skin-tight, black uniforms that reveal the boys'

muscular stature and emphasize the girls' hypersexual curves. The illustration depicts the first time that they are seen as a team; although Storm and Jean stand casually, the assembled members are clustered together, which depicts how these different teens would soon assimilate and conform to Xavier's expectations (*The Tomorrow People* 17-18). They lack the differing characteristics that should establish each team member's personality, and the design signifies how Professor X's agenda remolds individuals into his idealized image for teen mutants. Not only should teens think and act in accordance to his agenda, they must also appear as a unified group.

Although the X-Men's uniform appearance suggests the team's organization, they also force the students to appear, not only as adults, but trained soldiers. Roberta Trites emphasizes that in most reactionary young adult literature, teenaged characters conform in order to gain truth: "[A]dults hold the knowledge that represents the highest goal: truth. No adolescent is given the opportunity to be as wise. The only way teenagers can obtain that goal is to grow, to quit being adolescents themselves, to become more like the insiders, the adults" (Trites 79). According to Trites, conformity is the key to truth in reactionary young adult literature, and because of their conformity, the *Ultimate X-Men* contains drastically reactive trends. The X-Men are cast as teenaged heroes who physically fight for acceptance, but they never establish the ethos of being adolescents. In his evaluation of the various X-Men titles, Danny Fingeroth analyzes the problematic depiction of the mutant teens based on their appearances and behavior:

> X-Men never would have dreamed of using the word 'teen' to describe themselves. Indeed, the way they acted and the way they are drawn would have made it hard for anyone to think of them as teenagers. They behaved in such a

> world-weary and responsible manner, punctuated by the occasional horseplay [....] They called themselves adults, they were drawn looking like adults, and the audience believed they were. (Fingeroth 141)

The X-Men may inhibit the progressive trend of illustrating teenagers who perform powerful acts, but as a consequence, readers forget that they are teenagers because of their adult appearances and actions. Due to social prejudices, they are forced to become adults in order to survive and adopt Xavier's agenda. Only when potential tragedy strikes do the characters recognize their own age; when a teammate is nearly killed, Bobby Drake's distraught emotions are explained away by his young age: "It's easy to forget what age he is, isn't it? I mean, what must this seem like when you're fifteen years old?" (*Tomorrow People* 95). Age does not hinder the society's acceptance of the X-Men; rather, society's prejudice towards them is due to the mutant gene that both grants the teenagers extraordinary powers and prevents them from conforming to social ideologies. The society that they protect still hates them and does not show them leniency because of their age. In such a hostile world, the X-Men cling to the belief that if they remain as Xavier's students, then they will find acceptance.

As I mentioned, the X-Men exemplify the negative trends of young adult literature where teens are influenced to form their identities within adult frameworks. The *Ultimate X-Men* depicts various degrees of how individual characters eagerly conform to Xavier's ideologies. Whereas Scott Summers maintains his traditional persona as the X-Men's loyal leader, there are still those who solely join Xavier for survival because of their prior experiences within adult society. Storm depicts the development from troubled teen to model X-Man through the series' progression. When

she first enrolls into the Institute, Storm's initial view that the school is her only means of safety exemplifies stereotypical, teenage hostility towards adult oppression: "I don't like being holed up in Xavier's old school either, Iceman, but going solo just means you end up as dead as the mutants you see on the news" (*The Tomorrow People* 64). Storm's suspicion against adults is parallel with her inability to control her powers over the weather. Reactionary novels characterize teenage rebellion as being a potential threat, and in Storm's case, her emotionally-charged powers can be physically destructive. Her emotions, especially anger, trigger her powers, and she is unable to control the possible destruction without Xavier's tutorage to suppress and redirect her chaotic energy. The Institute's atmosphere can change into one of hesitation and distrust when one makes a mistake. In one occurrence, Storm becomes furious and creates a torrential storm when Beast ends their relationship and leaves the Institute. As she sits in a kitchen chair, the rest of the team stands behind Xavier as he confronts her about her lack of control; no one approaches her or comforts her because they are afraid of her tumultuous emotions. The connection between Ororo's powers and emotions causes them to be weary of allowing her to experience the normal range of emotions that they take for granted. By repressing her emotions and redirecting her powers, Storm presents her conformity to Xavier's ideals.

Storm represents the difficulty of labeling teen heroes as completely reactionary or progressive because she also exemplifies the progressive act of not allowing herself to be labeled by adult characterizations. Teenaged-Storm's self-discipline over her emotions and powers differentiates from that of her adult-counterpart in previous series who completely represses her emotions to control her powers. Although *Ultimate X-*

Men's Storm lacks that level of self-control, her flaws illustrates her as a more believable character; she represents the progressive trend that not all teenagers are alike. In a prominent scene where Storm is trying to enlist Angel into the X-Men, she confesses her own indecision about her identity as a mutant and person:

> Sometimes I think that my entire personality has, like, become my powers over the weather. Like all of a sudden, I don't have an identity beyond the fact that I'm a 'mutant.' And I love my powers. I love flying. I love rain. I love my winds. I'm so lucky. I know. But I know what I can do outside of all of this, y'know? And I get so frustrated that all anyone ever sees is my powers. Or, like, all they see is a mutant. They don't see me. (Bendis 16)

Of all of the students, Ororo has the best overall view of what is it like for a teenaged superhero. She acknowledges the public's opinion of her as a mutant, and her frustration over being labeled by her powers illustrates that she is aware of her own potential. Her self-awareness speaks volumes about her identity. She acknowledges that being an X-Man is a significant part of her identity, but she does not limit herself to Xavier's definition of mutant teenager. The mixed signals of conformity and nonconformity are the result of multiple changing authors who contribute to a single series. Characters have moments of progression, but overall, *Ultimate X-Men* is a reactive series in which teenagers form their identities in accordance to adult authority. The X-Men represent an organized team of teen superheroes, but they cannot be easily categorized as teens that chose to be heroes because of Xavier's influence over their identities.

Whereas each member of the X-Men may embrace Xavier's agenda as their identities at varying degrees, the position of being a teenaged hero is limited in the case

of Batman and his numerous Robin, the Boy Wonders. To understand Robin's character, one must be knowledgeable of Batman's origin and characterization. In *Comic Book Nation*, Bradford W. Wright describes the originally grim nature of the *Batman* series:

> [T]he explanation for Wayne's crime-fighting career is particularly intriguing and disturbing. As a child, he sees his parents brutally murdered by a petty burglar. The severely traumatized Bruce inherits his father's fortune, trains his mind and body to the pinnacle of perfection, and devotes himself to a personal war against crime. [....] Set in a claustrophobic netherworld, his adventures benefited from some of the most grotesque and memorable villains ever created for comic books: the Penguin, Catwoman, and, of course, the Joker [...] The brooding series lightened a bit in 1940 with the addition of a teenage sidekick named Robin, a character with whom young readers could supposedly identify. (Wright 17)

The *Batman* series emphasizes loss of innocence and mental deterioration through its setting and characters. Even as the vigilante hero, Bruce Wayne is conflicted with grief and vengeance for the loss of his own childhood after his parents' murders. Robin's introduction into the *Batman* series attracts younger readers' attention, but he also becomes a source of light for Batman's originally dark nature. In *Superman on the Couch*, Danny Fingeroth defines sidekicks as a younger, uncorrupted version of their adult mentor: "What a teenager brings to the table is knowledge and experience without cynicism and bitterness" (Fingeroth 148). Although the various Robins may add strength to Batman, they symbolize the innocence and benevolence that Bruce Wayne lost. Gotham sets the scene for teen characters that are in danger of risky behavior because of its exceptionally high crime rate.

Society's emphasis on adult institutions and interventions is deemed as a necessity because of negative ideologies that state that teens need to be saved from themselves. Again, Smith, Rogers, and Tucker's article "Risk" analyzes the social anxieties over teenagers that parallel with the adult concerns of youthful, risky behavior in young adult literature:

> Whereas terms- such as 'hazard,' 'threat,' and 'danger'- always carry a negative meaning, risk taking is much more ambiguous: except, this is risk taking by the young. Youth plus risk taking always seems to add up to a bad thing! That is, if you are an adult. Young people rarely think about their lives in terms of risk. Rather, risk-taking behavior among young people may be spoken about as forms of pleasure seeking, having fun, being adventurous. (220)

Although psychologists distinguish the negativity surrounding risk taking, they still stereotype teenagers by describing their risks as forms of fun, which can be ambiguous and suggest sexual activity or substance abuse. The evaluation of risk is not determined by the individual teenager himself but through the broad implications of what could put the juvenile at risk. Claire Smith and her colleagues explain that society unrealistically labels all of society's youth as being at risk through abstract factors, such as assumed psyche and environmental factors: "[N]othing is 'off limits,' in the sense that a great deal of the things young people do and say have the potential to place them at some level of risk [...] The important point to focus on here is the way in which the concept of 'risk' arises out of processes of social construction" (235). In Gotham City, crime becomes a lifestyle for juveniles, whether for selfish gain or survival. In the case of the second Robin, Jason Todd, Batman saves the young boy from a life of crime: "He was ripping

off the tires on the batmobile. This is how Jason Todd and I first met. He was living on his own in an abandoned apartment building. The kid was getting by boosting tires. His mother had just recently died and his father had disappeared, possibly been thrown in jail" (Starlin 100). Jason's predicament exemplifies Claire Smith's case study of vulnerable youth needing adult intervention in order to be saved from their behavior. Stereotyping adolescent behavior develops the social anxieties and ideologies about teenagers that become interpolated into adult-oriented young adult literature. Adult involvement becomes necessary because of the social belief that teens need guidance to learn and to understand the implications of their actions.

Similar to Jason Todd, the original Robin, Dick Grayson, is adopted by Bruce in an attempt to protect the boy from his vulnerability as a witness to his parents' murders. Bruce Wayne prevents Dick from the possibly risky, criminal behavior that often befalls the vulnerable youth in Gotham City, and he molds him into the persona of Robin, the Boy Wonder. Although Batman introduces Dick to risks while fighting crime, his formidable presence and relentless mentorship protects the sidekick from harm. In addition, Dick Grayson exemplifies the reactionary trend of a youth conforming to adult ideology, which establishes the mold for future Robins. Grayson's experience as a superhero is set into stages of development to mature into the hero that Batman expected; his chosen identities are divided by his age: childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, which can be characterized by his roles as Robin, Nightwing, and Batman. Out of the three Robins, Dick is the one to be treated as Bruce's legitimate child, for he is the original son-like figure who inherits the role of Batman when Bruce is presumed dead: "I've always known what I'd do if... if anything ever happened to Bruce. I just didn't

want to face it. [....] As long as I was Nightwing I could pretend I'd never have to take over as Batman. I could act as if he'd always be around" (Morrison 10). Dick limits his agency by imagining himself as a child in Batman's shadow. Despite his experiences and earned agency as both a teen and adult hero, Dick Grayson forfeits his own identity to take on Batman's for Gotham City's well-being: "I sounded so *fake*, like a kid trying to do *Batman's* voice. [....] Nobody believes I'm Batman! I spent *years* building up respect as *Nightwing*, and now they're looking at me like I'm one more psycho *Batman impersonator*" (41-42, emphasis in the original). Gotham City cannot depend on Nightwing or any solo Robins because none of them exhibit Batman's authority. Performance becomes the key for Dick to even become accepted as Batman because police and criminals alike do not believe Dick to be Batman through his own methods: "Think of Batman as a great *role*, like a Hamlet, or Willie Loman... or even *James Bond*. And play it to suit your strengths. [....] Everyone's waiting for the hero to take the stage. And the spotlight is on you now" (43, emphasis in the original). Although Alfred emphasizes that Dick utilizes his own personal strengths to be Batman, he does not persuade Grayson to fight crime under his own persona. Even Alfred, who also had a hand in raising Dick, indirectly admits that Batman cannot die and be replaced by another hero; the public must believe that he is the original Batman. Dick ultimately surrenders his own identity as Nightwing in order to perform as Batman, who will always be remembered as Gotham's respected adult authority over crime.

Performance also embodies the persona of Robin within the *Batman and Robin* series through the character's replica nature. After Dick Grayson establishes Robin's design and character, each of the future Robins are forced to replicate him despite their

individual personalities. The graphic novel's storytelling through illustrations can ironically limit characters to appear in a single image: "While comic colors were less than expressionistic, they were fixed with a new iconic power. Because costume colors remained exactly the same, panel after panel, they came to symbolize the characters" (McCloud 188). Robin's image becomes an emblem within the *Batman* series as a result of the costume and character type being recycled. All of the Robins are mirror projections of Dick Grayson with their age, body type, hair color, and physical capabilities. In fact, as a disturbed adult, the second Robin, Jason Todd, reminiscences how Batman physically molds him into Dick's image: "I'm going *bald*... You know why *that* is, don't you? When I was *Robin*, Batman made me dye my hair to look more like *Grayson*" (Morrison 120, emphasis in the original). Rather than creating new sidekick personas, Batman merely replaces Robin even if it means modifying his recruits' physical appearance in order for them to fit the role. In addition, as soon as one Robin matures into adulthood and out of character of a teenaged sidekick, they are quickly replaced by a younger version. In Geoff Johns's *Teen Titans*, Jason Todd confronts Tim Drake, the third Robin, about his recruitment by mocking Batman's words as a script: "I bet I can guess what Batman said to you. That you had the talent to make a difference in Gotham. That he needed someone he could trust in his war on crime. That you were one of a kind. The light to his darkness. Robin, the Boy Wonder" (*Life and Death* 14-15). Reciting the words back to Tim signifies that he is merely continuing the performance of partnership between Batman and Robin. If there is any teen sidekick who forms an identity for himself, it is Dick Grayson, for he is the original and is able to create his identity as Nightwing before inheriting the role of Batman. Although each Robin has different ideas

and personalities, they appear as the same person within the public eye, and as a result, becoming Robin is not a matter of adopting an identity rather than performing a role.

In the case of Jason Todd, Batman's position as *in locos parentis* exemplifies society's anxieties for vulnerable teens. Unlike Dick Grayson who had always been positively-influenced by adults, Jason resorted to crime for survival before Bruce adopted him. Although Batman could have sent Jason to prison, he decides to become a form of ideological institution to reform Jason. In her article "Institutions," Helen Evans explains the societal shift from punishment to reformation of delinquents:

> [T]he possibilities for training and reforming the young were to be harnessed. Punishment alone could not produce benefits for society: what was needed was deterrence and reform. [....] What is this objective? It is increased state control of the individual, what some have called 'governmentality' and Foucault describes as 'surveillance'. (Evans 196-97)

In the case of young adult literature, Evan's analysis of case studies describes the process of adolescents being conformed into adult society through Ideological State Apparatuses and Repressive State Apparatuses. Batman views Jason as a possible contribution to his cause if his skills are harnessed into positive acts under his tutelage. In *A Death in the Family*, Batman reminiscences both the attributes and drawbacks of recruiting Jason: "Jason took to the training like a fish to water. He was quick and intelligent. It was like training Dick again. But this kid had a rebellious streak in him. I told myself he'd work it out of his system in time. Yes, I blinded myself to so much" (Starlin 101). In comparison to Dick Grayson, Jason's past is full of emotional turmoil and deviance, but the boy's potential is surmountable if he is carefully molded. Despite Jason's past,

Batman sees the rebellious boy as a potential replacement to the innocent Dick Grayson that he himself needs for conformity.

The establishment of Robin's character type exemplifies how graphic novels become mediums of social ideologies for how teenagers should behave by adult standards. Although surface ideology explicitly states adult-oriented beliefs within texts, sometimes the most powerful form of coercion is passive ideology with its subtlety:

> The distinction between explicit ideologies that the text directly articulates versus those that it only implies has repercussions for the power relationship that the text establishes with the reader. Unstated explicit ideologies left as inferences for adolescent readers to draw imply a different set of power differentials between the text and readers than explicit ideologies stated directly for readers' benefits. Indirect ideologies may, for example, imply that the reader has more knowledge or more capability to draw inferences than narratives that rely on directly stated ideologies. (Trites 70)

The assumption of the reader identifying passive ideologies about teenage behavior in adult society can be dangerous because these types of ideologies are generally not identified unless sought for in reading. In the 1980s, Jason Todd is introduced as the second Robin and expected to conform into Grayson's image, not only in appearance but also personality. In the recorded interview of "First Look at *Batman: Under the Red Hood*," co-creator Judd Winick distinguishes the differences between Dick and Jason: "He was nothing like Dick Grayson, and I think that's what people missed about it. Dick was light, energetic, and positive, and this Robin talked back. This Robin didn't do what he was told. There were two numbers for the fans, for the readers. If you want Robin to

live, call this number; if you want Robin to die, call that number" ("First Look at *Batman: Under the Red Hood*"). Unlike the X-Men, who for the majority, conform unquestionably to their mentor's expectations, Jason presents a slightly more progressive example of agency because he talks back:

> Batman: What the devil was that all about!? Didn't I tell you to hold up!?
>
> Jason: Yeah, I heard you, but we had the goods on these lowlifes. I didn't see any reason to wait. There were only eight of them. (Starlin 11)

Although Jason does not follow Batman's orders, he proves that he is capable of fighting crime on his own. However, despite the example of teen agency, the fans voted for Jason Todd to die at the hands of the Joker, which comments on the fans' idea of how Robin, the Boy Wonder should behave [See Appendix Figure 2]. Jason Todd failed to meet the merits of the fans' expectations, and so he dies, falling into the reactionary trend of conform or die.

Jason and Dick's opposite lifestyles and experiences before their time as "Robin" depict them as foils for each other. Dick Grayson represents the ideal situation in which a youth can be molded by a mentor into a constructive attribute to society; otherwise, Jason represents the harsh reality of how a corrupted society can influence a youth to grow as a criminal. Despite Batman's influence over both young men to become contributing members of society, circumstances in Jason's life lead him to becoming a violent vigilante in adulthood: "Bruce thought that he could save Jason… and he might have if the Joker hadn't got to him first with a crowbar and high explosives" (Morrison 118). After being killed by the Joker, Jason is resurrected and reborn back to his moral state before Bruce's influence. As an adult, he seeks to fight crime under the Joker's past

alias as the Red Hood, and he is willing to kill to do so, going against Batman's code. Jason alludes that he never had a chance to become Robin, for he could never conform to Dick's image: "It was always too late for me, don't you get it? I tried really hard to be what Batman wanted me to be... which was you. But this world, this dirty, twisted, cruel, and ugly dungheap had... other plans for me" (Morrison 146). Jason was destined to die as Robin because of his nonconformity, and the text also reveals the possible threat that can arise to teen superheroes who cannot become what their mentors what them to be.

Although in Geoff Johns' *Teen Titans*, Tim Drake, the third Robin, is conflicted with the knowledge that he is a replacement to Batman's prior sidekicks, his initiation as Robin reiterates how easily the role of Robin can be filled. After Jason Todd's death, Batman starts taking unnecessary risks, and when he is nearly killed, Tim Drake approaches him after weeks of observation to explain the significance of Batman and Robin:

> I don't know *why* you decided to wear that costume, but it makes you a *symbol*. Just as Robin was a *symbol*. Or *Superman*, or Nightwing, or the *policeman* who wears *his* uniform. And this isn't just a symbol of the law; it's a symbol for *justice*. When one policeman is killed, others take his place because justice can't be stopped. And Batman *needs* a Robin. No matter what he *thinks* he wants. ("A Lonely Place of Dying" 262, emphasis in the original)

For Tim, the partnership of Batman and Robin is a positive symbol for the crime-ridden Gotham City; however, his monologue strengthens the fact that Robin is a character role with his analogy to Robin being replaced like a killed police officer. Tim's belief is so

strong that he willingly relinquishes his own identity for what he presumes is the best thing for Batman and Gotham: "Look, I never wanted this for myself… but I wanted Batman and Robin back together they way they should be. And if Dick won't become Robin again… someone else has to" (252). Tim gains agency for making the choice to becoming Robin himself, but his purpose in becoming Robin is to continue the legacy of what Batman and Robin symbolizes for Gotham City, not to change the persona of Robin. Ultimately, Tim continues the pattern of performing the role of a sidekick because as soon as he matures, he is replaced by another teenaged boy. Thus, Robin, the Boy Wonder is categorized as a role created and performed by boys who are influenced by Batman's moral standards and need to reform vulnerable youth.

Social ideologies and stereotypes mold the belief that teenagers are inherently troubled or in danger because of risky behavior. In the early to mid-twentieth century, adult society misinterpreted youth rebellion as signs of a delinquency epidemic, which ultimately influenced how youth culture was developed. Thus, despite the medium's expected progressive trends, graphic novels exhibit reactionary characteristics, such as teenagers being cast as sidekicks or team members who are led by an adult mentor. Society's anxieties over teenaged delinquency results in mentors molding their pupils through how they perceive the ideal teenaged hero should behave. This level of adult influence raises the question of whether teenage superheroes can personally claim their status as chosen identities or if they are merely becoming their mentor's model teen. Although Mark Millar's *Ultimate X-Men* and the numerous *Batman and Robin* series are categorized as adolescent literature, these series best exemplify the conflicts and identity crisis involved between mentors and students in superhero graphic novels. The X-Men

and numerous Robin, the Boy Wonders exhibit teen heroes whose identities are compromised from both the expectations of society and mentors. However, in the upcoming chapter, the progressive trends of liberation are exemplified through X-Men's Jean Grey and Teen Titans' Raven's developing identities.

Chapter Three: "Finally Calling the Shots:" Female Liberation in Graphic Novels

Using Jean Grey and Raven as key examples, I will explore what a powerful heroine can look like in the realm of graphic novels. Their liberation derives from four key markers: the ability to control one's physical body; the capacity to desire sex, yet not be punished for that desire; the demonstration of physical power; and the ability to control one's overall image and identity. After all identity and image, along with physical power, are obvious recurring themes in superhero stories, and all of these aspects return to the conflict I have been exploring in previous chapters: adult repression versus teen liberation. Mark Millar's *Ultimate X-Men* and Geoff Johns' *Teen Titans* offer two strong, beautiful teen girls by the names of Jean Grey and Raven who resist adult control and yet remain teen mystiques. Jean Grey and Raven disprove the assumption that all female heroines can be characterized by stereotypes; instead, they forge identities through their individual experiences that they gain through controlling their remarkable powers.

The portrayal of teenaged girls in graphic novels is significant because it parallels with the characteristics of the teen mystique. In *The Rise and Fall of the American Teenager*, Thomas Hine refers to the teenager as the teen mystique, which he describes as "a seductive but damaging way of understanding young people [that] encourages adults to see teenagers (and young people to see themselves) not as individuals but as potential problems" (11). Although the teen mystique is used for teens regardless of gender, I understand the term as a summarization of teen characteristics that adults both celebrate and fear, and it implies that teenagers are a force that naturally rebels against conventional ideologies. Because of their physical and emotion vibrancy, teenagers

resemble a force separate from adult authority, which ideally should not be repressed. Jean Grey and Raven exemplify progressive elements of the teen mystique through their unfathomable powers and self-awareness, which deviates away from the teen mystique's negative and stereotypical image.

In accordance to Hine's definition of the teen mystique, both female characters are also initially depicted as forces to be potentially feared. Millar's teenaged Jean Grey is one of Professor Xavier's first and most gifted students, whose mutation includes telepathy and telekinesis. Through her adult counterpart in earlier X-Men titles, Jean Grey is made famous through her transformation into the Phoenix Force, in which she is the mutant host of godlike powers. *Ultimate X-Men* approaches the Phoenix storyline uniquely by illustrating Jean as a former asylum patient who confesses to fellow X-Man Cyclops that she suffers from delusions: "I think I've been selected to host an ultra-dimensional entity that wants access to this reality so it can annihilate us like it annihilated a billion worlds before us. It talks to me in Latin and calls itself the Phoenix Force, Scott. It wants to decreate and unravel everything God has ever made. Like I said. Certifiable" (*World Tour* 186). Similar to Hine's definition of the teen mystique, Jean initially dismisses her innate powers as a negative symptom of her telepathy and categorizes herself as someone without control.

Similarly, Raven has a unique history due to her supernatural powers; however, unlike Jean Grey, Raven has always had a full understanding of her powers as the daughter of the demon Trigon. In previous *Teen Titans* series, Raven grew into adulthood while constantly repressing her father's influence. Despite her efforts, adult Raven succumbed to her darker nature and became Trigon's human vessel to Earth.

After adult Raven is destroyed to stop Trigon, Geoff Johns's Raven is reincarnated into a teenaged body. Despite Raven's past as a Teen Titan, the adult Justice League regards her as dangerous, and she is only accepted by her teenaged comrades: "Batman does not know her like we do. Few have ever taken the time to see Raven as anything but a potential threat" (*Family Lost* 27). Both Jean and Raven are depersonalized on certain levels of their identity and are initially labeled by others and themselves as potential problems. The difference between these female teens and stereotypical teen mystique figures is their methods in which they gain and demonstrate their agency despite others' stereotypical expectations.

One of the most disconcerting aspects of the teen mystique in reactionary novels is the teen girls' depicted indulgence or fear of sex. The adult-oriented approach towards the discourse of sex and teenagers in young adult literature can be indirectly traced back to Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, in which Foucault discusses the connection of power repression to sexual censorship in Western civilization. According to Foucault, power is repressed through the censuring of sexual discourse within the public:

> [A]ll those social controls, cropping up at the end of the last century, which screened the sexuality of couples, parents and children, dangerous and endangered adolescents—undertaking to protect, separate, and forewarn, signaling perils everywhere, awakening people's attention, calling for diagnoses, piling up reports, organizing therapies. These sites radiated discourses aimed at sex, intensifying people's awareness of it as a constant danger, and this in turn created a further incentive to talk about it. (Foucault 30-31)

Although Foucault's theory does not focus on teens, it explains that Western civilization censures sexuality because it understands sex to be potentially dangerous. Foucault theorizes that the negativity depicted onto sexuality ironically causes the public to discuss the topic to caution others despite society's attempts at censorship. Young adult literature replicates this pattern with novels that are filled with sexual discourse while simultaneously warning teens against sex. As a result, the reactionary trend found in young adult literature is to construct a female character around the question of her sexuality rather than her individuality. Dr. Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls* analyzes the pressures that influence teenaged girls to sacrifice their identities in favor of social acceptance: "[A]lmost all [girls] watch television. On the screen they see women mainly depicted as half-clad and half-witted, often awaiting rescue by quick-thinking, fully clothed men. I ask girls to watch the ways women are portrayed on television. We'll talk about their observations and I'll ask, 'What does this teach you about the role of women?'" (42). Pipher's collection of case studies is biased with examples of tumultuous girls, but she makes a valid point by signifying the media's influence. The present treatment of female sexuality originates from the media that glamorizes the image of teenaged sex objects.

In graphic novels, the discourse of sex and female characters becomes a more visual concept rather than one of language in traditional young adult novels. Although female superheroes are physically empowered, graphic novel authors and illustrators sexualize women through provocative character designs and wardrobes. Comic book writer Christy Marx comments upon hypersexuality based from Sheri Graner Ray's argument in *Gamer Inclusive Game Design*:

> [I]t's common for us to want our heroes to be young, strong and fertile/virile. She lists the physical traits for men as having large shoulders, broad chest, slim waist and hips, large legs, and long, thick hair. For females, that list is large breasts placed high on the chest, slim waist, round rear end, and long, thick hair. This key difference is that the traits that are the most exaggerated in the female characters indicate 'sexual receptivity, i.e., those physical traits that say, 'I'm ready for sex right now'. (Marx 177)

The difference in physical appearance parallels with the protagonists' agency; attractive male characters are perceived as physically strong, while females are made into sex objects. Although my goal is to prove how Jean and Raven are progressive examples of powerful girls, I cannot ignore their seductive character designs. As I emphasized in the previous chapter, the assigned uniform in *Ultimate X-Men* signifies how design can potentially limit a character's identity. While wearing the black, latex-like uniform, Jean Grey is a model example of a hypersexualized female with her accentuated curves, bare midriff, and provocative poses. Likewise, Raven's wardrobe consists of a black, high cut robe that is only covered when she is draped in her cape and hood. Both girls are illustrated as sexual beings by their character designs to appeal to audiences' expectations of feminine appearance. Although their designs are reactionary to teen sexuality, their agency is not limited to the expected stereotypes of attractive, teen characters.

Realistic depictions of teens' individual choice to be sexually active reveal girls' capability to handle their bodies without the stereotypical dilemmas. Roberta Trites's *Disturbing the Universe* correlates with Dr. Mary Pipher's analysis of teenaged girls' sexuality because Trites notes the ideological pattern in young adult novels that originate

from society's negativity towards girls and sex: "The text tries to liberate teenage sexuality by communicating that curiosity about sex is natural, but it then undercuts this message with a series of messages framed by institutional discourses that imply teenagers should not have sex or else should feel guilty if they do" (Trites 88). Trites observes that if a teenaged girl character willingly has sex, then she will bear the repercussions in the form of pregnancy, sexual disease, poor relationships, or death. It is imperative to note that not all young adult novels depict the consequences of sex so negatively, but warnings against sex are a commonality. In a medium that uses illustrations to sexualize female characters, one would expect the same pattern to exist within graphic novels, but in *Ultimate X-Men*, Jean Grey proves that not all female heroines can be characterized by the norm. In *The Tomorrow People*, Jean has sex with Wolverine, who is depicted as teen-like due to his healing factor and appearance despite his old age. The comic does not graphically illustrate the scene, but the conclusion is formed with the panels in which Jean is lounging in a robe with Wolverine. However, despite Trites' observations in young adult literature, Jean and Wolverine's relationship is short lasting and does not become a pivotal plot within the storyline. Wolverine may be jealous of her later relationship with Cyclops, but she is never confronted with any repercussion for her decision to have sex. Instead, unlike other female protagonists, Jean has the power to initiate sex, but when she discovers that Wolverine originally joined the X-Men as Magneto's hit man, Jean demonstrates her power to end the relationship by flinging him across the bedroom with a thought. When Wolverine attempts to pacify her by confessing that she reformed him, she refuses to easily forgive him:

> Wolverine: I turned for you, Jeannie. I came here hating Xavier's guts, but ended up falling for his big idea just like the rest of you people. To tell you the truth, I kinda figured you'd be happy.
>
> Jean: You'll see how happy I am when I shove this candlestick up your—. (*The Tomorrow People* 130)

Jean's physical and verbal refusal to accept Wolverine's excuses demonstrates her agency, not only as a mutant, but as a teenaged girl. Despite Wolverine's physical abilities and age, Jean is the more powerful in the relationship through her mind's strength. Mark Millar's treatment of Jean's romantic relationships offers an attempt at a progressively powerful female teenager. He succeeds in depicting Trites' argument that sex should be depicted as natural without the hardships that teenagers are typically persecuted with for being sexually active.

Unlike Jean, Raven is not a sexually active character, but she is the product of the concerns revolving around teenaged girls and sex. Her mother, Angela, duplicates various anxieties shown towards the teen mystique. As a teenager herself, Raven's mother ran away from an abusive home, joined a cult, and was raped and impregnated by the demon Trigon. Angela's identity became that of a rape victim, who had to sacrifice everything about her potential identity in order to give birth to Raven. After Raven's birth, Angela becomes a sort of martyr or mythological figure because she and Raven are never allowed to meet. Raven narrates that the distance placed between herself and her mother was a procedure to repress her emotions: "Azar's priests would not let me speak to anyone but them, not even to my own mother… I was taught only how to suppress my emotions… I was not allowed to experience hate, or anger, or sorrow or happiness. And

especially not love" (Wolfman 9). Each of the listed emotions is a possibility within the mother-daughter relationship. Knowing the violence her mother faced, Raven could experience negative feelings towards herself for her mother's pain, and the possible positive emotions could be equally dangerous. However, Raven is not sexually inactive due to a fear or repulsion toward sex because of her mother's rape; her abstinence is due to the priests' anti-emotion training. In addition, when interacting with other teenagers, Raven amazes others when she reveals that she is unknowledgeable of pop culture: "I don't watch TV. I don't go to the movies. I don't play video games. I don't understand a word they're saying" (Wolfman 6). Other teen characters may deem Raven as dull or prudish because of her lack of interest, but her disinterest in influential ideologies prevents her image from becoming focused on her sexuality. Understandably, in comparison to Jean Grey, Raven appears to embody the good girl prototype due to her abstinence, which can be problematic, but her ability to distance herself from others' sexual experiences and ideologies portrays her as being as progressive as Jean Grey. Similar to Jean Grey, Raven's identity is not focused on her sexual activity or lack thereof.

Raven illustrates how sexual behavior is not the only way that teenaged girls demonstrate agency over their bodies in graphic novels. Unlike Jean Grey, Raven's power revolves around her empathy and healing, which exemplify emotional and mental strength rather than physical. For Raven, physical agency includes making choices about her body which had previously been a vessel for her demonic father:

> Raven: Even without my father's influence, I still have trouble deciphering my own feelings. Along with borrowing some of Wonder Girl's clothes, I'm finding different ways—to express myself. What do you… think?
>
> Starfire: It's lovely, Raven. Your body is yours to do whatever you wish. (***Beast Boy & Girls*** 92-93)

In the pages' panels, Raven lifts her thick hoodie to reveal that she has gotten an intricate raven tattooed on her lower back. Her choice to express herself through body art parallels with the physical freedom that she gains with exalting Trigon from her body, and the tattoo acts as a beginning step in expressing herself without emotions. Raven's past training to repress her true self to ensure the world's existence parallels with Dr. Pipher's observation of how girls are trained by social expectations: "Girls are trained to be less than who they really are. They are trained to be what the culture wants of its young women, not what they themselves want to become" (Pipher 44). Raven was trained from birth to repress her emotions and individuality, but as soon as she gains her liberation, she aims to discover and develop her true self. Reborn in a teenaged body, Raven enrolls into high school and adopts the name Rachel Roth to form an identity separate from that of a Titan. When others critique her attempts, she retaliates by reasserting her agency over her identity: "Why do you find it funny? My name. My clothes. I just want a chance to do something besides hiding behind my cloak" (*The Future is Now* 127). Cast as a demon's child all of her life, Raven is now free to develop an identity that personifies her rather than her lineage. Although Raven's physical agency differs from Jean's, Raven's identity formation as an individual, separate from negative assumptions, initiates her process of gaining power over her body and identity.

In addition to their agency over their sexuality and physical bodies, Jean and Raven offer progressive examples of young heroines who do not depend on others to save them. As a scholar who studies the affect of graphic novels on American culture, Bradford W. Wright summarizes the negative characterization of women found within storylines: "The primary function served by women was to resist the romantic advances of the superhero's alter-ego, pine for the superhero, scheme to get close to him, screw things up, get captured by the bad guy, and await rescue by the hero, who usually scolded her for being so bold in the first place" (Wright 184-85). Wright's observation of women in early graphic novels depicts the ideological characterizations that reflected the pre-feminist eras. From the 1930s to present, women characters are found to be weak troublemakers who depend on male heroes; and although there have been strong, women characters intermingled into the fray, these female characters are still limited by the stereotypical portrayals of the feminine sex. For teenaged heroines, the conflict of power originates from ideologies that restrict them to images of girls who need to be protected. Dr. Pipher explains the conflict of one of her teenaged patients based on a summation of what ails all girls' identity: "Cayenne experienced what all girls experience in early adolescence—rigorous training for the female role. At this time girls are expected to sacrifice the parts of themselves that our culture considers masculine on the altar of social acceptability and to shrink their souls down to a petit size" (Pipher 39). Although Dr. Pipher's summation is based on her psychiatric work with troubled girls, young adult literature exhibits the conflict of girls adopting ordained ideologies or establishing their own identities. The same conflict is found amongst teen heroines in superhero storylines. In the case of Jean Grey, her identity as the Phoenix is endangered by the

limitations placed on her by Professor Xavier. Like Dr. Pipher, Xavier diagnoses Jean's visions of the Phoenix as a symptom of her mutation: "Has it never occurred to you, even for a moment, that these phoenix visions Jean's experiencing are just a side effect of her fragile psychosis? She's an eighteen year old telepath trying to get a grip on her gifts, you idiot. These kinds of delusions are absolutely standard" (*World Tour* 243). Similar to Dr. Pipher's summation of teen girls, Xavier limits Jean's powers by referring to her as a subject in a case study of developing telepaths. The diagnosis is an attempt to restrict Jean's individuality by labeling her in accordance to a generality. As I mentioned throughout, adult authority attempts to hinder teenaged heroes' identities, and the conflict between mentor and peer is significant in Jean and Xavier's conflicted relationship.

Mark Millar's teenaged Jean Grey in the *Ultimate* series is a significant example of how girls in adolescent and young adult literature can demonstrate their physical powers and establish their images despite supernatural or adult forces. A monumental storyline for Jean's character is the development and authority she reins over the Phoenix Force, a plotline that has consumed her adult-prototype since the 1980s. In Marvel history, the Phoenix Force is an alien entity that possesses Jean and personifies Jean's repressed subconscious. The conflict of the Phoenix originates from Jean's ability to control it, which has always been portrayed as a constant, and sometimes loosing, battle for adult Jean Grey. In his article "Mutants That are All Too Human: The X-Men, Magneto, and Original Sin," Tim Perry attributes the 1980s Jean Grey's failure of control to her immaturity: "The saga carries with it implicit theological reflection related to the complexity of human nature. Grey's god-like power could not be contained because of her immaturity. She resembles a child playing with matches or a nation unable to handle

its own nuclear capabilities" (Perry 175). Perry's argument that Jean's inadequacy is resulted from the flawed nature of humanity especially since the 1980s Dark Phoenix is responsible for the genocidal act of destroying an inhabited planet. Millar's teenaged Jean Grey differs from past prototypes through her capability to control the Phoenix's mindset. Rather than becoming a destructive being, the Phoenix becomes a healer despite its claim of being neutral to morals:

> It all starts here in this wretched building—the hearts and minds of a hundred world leaders, so devious and filled with ambition, becoming purified and filled with nothing but love. Done. Three blocks away, a dozen sick children open their eyes and smile for the first time in months. Their parents weep, holding them in their arms and whispering their thanks to God. Done. Eight blocks away, a jilted lover tears up his suicide note and starts scribbling furiously, a new zest for life and the half-finished novel he'd left lying under his bed. Done. (*World Tour* 251-252)

Although the acts are not visibly illustrated, the Phoenix's certainty of their completion signifies the strength of Jean's power. If the Phoenix Force is originally neutral to the welfare of humanity, then it acts in accordance to Jean's desire to save and heal others with her powers. Despite Jean's substantial power, her agency conflicts with Xavier's beliefs that she, as a teenaged girl, cannot control herself.

Similar to the teen mystique, Jean verges with the supernatural, and she displays powers that cannot be understood or controlled by adult authority. As the male adult, Xavier threatens to repress Jean's liberation as a strong, independent teenager. Even as he witnesses Jean's power, he attempts to deny her agency by degrading her age:

"You're not a God, Jean. You're an eighteen year old girl with a discipline problem, and I will not tolerate this behavior from one of my students" (252). Xavier's denial of Jean's power is due to his belief that Jean and her powers need to be controlled to benefit the world by his terms. Ironically, Xavier accuses Jean of imitating a god despite the questionable use of his own powers. As I have mentioned in Chapter Two, Xavier is suspected of tampering with his students' free will in an attempt to mold them into his ideal image of mutant teenagers. In one incidence, Scott argues with Xavier over humans' prejudice against mutants and finds himself being mentally influenced:

> Scott: Professor… are you doing something to my mind?
>
> Xavier: Just releasing a pleasant hormone into your bloodstream to calm those rising tempers, my friend. We were about to exchange six very unpleasant sentences, and I know for a fact that a reasonable boy like you couldn't possibly mean the fifth one. (*The Tomorrow People* 102)

This example validates concerns about Xavier's influence over their minds: is Xavier controlling the group of teens or are they merely questioning their development as heroes? There is a frightening aspect to one's vulnerability and agency when under the guidance of such an influential, though well-meaning, adult, yet Xavier hypocritically reprimands Jean for her use of power because she is accomplishing feats that he can never accomplish by his own merit. As the Phoenix, Jean states the truth when she tells Charles Xavier, "Stand back and witness the birth of the utopia you were too weak to deliver!" (*World Tour* 251). Jean delivers a progressive element of character growth in an otherwise reactionary storyline of adult influence. As the Phoenix, Jean possesses

powers that go beyond Xavier's capabilities, and her ability to accomplish her mentor's goals belittles Xavier's agency over her and the other X-Men.

The Phoenix's initial appearance triggers Jean's gain of agency to create an image that is separate from her sexuality and adult expectations. At the Phoenix's first appearance, Xavier and Jean battle telepathically, and although Xavier succeeds in resurfacing Jean's full consciousness, the adult has fallen while Jean remains standing and alert: "He's okay. Totally out of his freaking mind, but breathing pretty much normal" (*World Tour* 255). Jean's standing pose illustrates that she is a stronger telepath than her mentor, but she is still initially unsure about the source of her powers because of the extreme circumstances. She still believes Xavier's diagnosis, and she feels isolated from her friends because of her prior demonstration of power: "I feel like such a basket case since this whole Phoenix thing happened. I know it's still inside me somewhere. I can hear it whispering in my ear and telling me things about all of you" (*Ultimate Collection* 146). Although Jean has gained exponential physical power, her personal identity is unclear due to Xavier's influence over her. Jean only begins to consciously gain her agency to construct her own identity and image when she realizes that her substantial powers are not hallucinations of a debilitated mind. For this to happen, she must be completely conscious while using the Phoenix Force, which finally happens when she consciously lifts and destroys a nuclear reactor that Magneto has detonated. Jean's physical power is illustrated in a two page spread depicting Jean's Phoenix Flame surrounding and lifting the wide-wide area surrounding the nuclear plan, and the illustration does not show signs of Jean struggling with the task. She's in complete control, a fact that is emphasized by the size comparison between Jean's tiny body and

the large nuclear plant. The size difference symbolizes Jean's colossal agency that is entrapped within her teenaged body [See Appendix Figure 3]. When Xavier attempts to warn others to be weary of Jean, she interrupts him while engulfed within the Phoenix flame:

> *Seriously*, sir. I'm in *complete* control. Can't you tell the *difference* from the way I'm *speaking*? It's like all those things the *Phoenix Force* could let me do are here at my *disposal*, but the voice in my head has finally *disappeared*, y'know? For the first time since I was *twelve years old*, I'm the one who's finally calling the *shots* again. (228, emphasis in the original)

After destroying the reactor while completely within her own consciousness, Jean decides that her identity is a merging of herself and the Phoenix Force. Emphasizing that her voice, speech patterns, and thoughts are her own signifies her control over her image and actions. The most significant notion is her questioning of the Professor; by questioning Xavier's knowledge over her state-of-mind, she establishes the knowledge that he does not know her as well as he claims. Thus, with the realization of the Phoenix being a part of her, Jean demands the power to liberate herself from others' restrictive image of her. Jean's identity and image are not concepts that can be limited by stereotypical trends found in teen mystique characters.

Jean Grey offers an example of female liberation by gaining physical power, but Raven exemplifies a progressive, teen girl through her emotional control and self-awareness. In her observation and treatment of adolescent girls, Dr. Mary Pipher characterizes girls of being unable to control their emotions or the effects of those emotions over their mentality:

> The emotional system is immature in early adolescence. Emotions are extreme and changeable. Small events can trigger enormous reactions. [....] Not only are feelings chaotic, but girls often lose perspective. Girls have tried to kill themselves because they were grounded for a weekend or didn't get asked to the prom. Despair and anger are the hardest emotions to deal with, but other emotions are equally intense. Just as sorrow is unmodulated, so is joy. [....] The feeling of the moment is all that exists. (Pipher 57-58)

Although Dr. Pipher's psychiatric study is influential, her explanation of teen girls' emotions are severely biased because her study is limited by her concentration on mentally troubled patients. Azar's priests represents Dr. Pipher's view that teens are a thing that needs to be controlled due to their unbalanced emotions because of their influence over Raven's emotional restraint. Raven is characterized as a type of teen mystique through adults' regulation over her natural emotions; if she expresses any form of emotion, then she risks releasing her demonic father Trigon into the world through her physical body. Despite emotional restriction, Raven differs from the traditionally-depicted teen mystique because she is fully aware of the danger of losing control over herself:

> I have struggled to gaze into the light for years. I have tried to embrace what my mother bestowed upon me. My humanity. Though even being reborn within this body—a body made from the blood of Trigon's worshippers—I still feel the darkness in my soul grow—and hunger for emotion. I have always hated the darkness. I have always hated a part of myself. (*The Future is Now* 164)

Raven's concerns center on her soul being reborn within a teenaged body; although she remembers her time as an adult, she lacks confidence in her abilities to control her powers. Despite the priests' anxieties over her self-control, Raven best represents humanity's struggle against one's personal darkness; she is aware of her personal flaws and fights against her darker nature to ensure her liberation.

Raven's control over her image and identity begins when she rebels against the negative assumptions aimed at her. When she rejoins the Teen Titans, the new members are weary of her because of her past although they agree to fight along side her. An example of Raven's response to the teammates' negative assumptions is when Wonder Girl unintentionally refers to her as a monster:

> Wonder Girl: Raven, you're an emotional vampire.
>
> Raven: An emotional…? I don't think I like that term, Wonder Girl. (*Beast Boy and the Girls* 123)

Raven's rebuttal to Wonder Girl's statement reveals her refusal to be labeled as a monster. She may hate the darkness within her because of her father, but her self-awareness over the potential dangers of becoming emotionally overwhelmed is not synonymous with identifying herself as a monster. Instead, her awareness divulges her practiced self-restraint. She knows and accepts her past, but she refuses to allow her teammates to align her identity with her father's crimes. In addition, Raven offers a progressive example of a strong female through her empathy because it allows her to understand and be aware of others' emotions.

Marv Wolfman's *Teen Titans Spotlight: Raven* (a side story to Johns' *Teen Titans* storyline) Raven establishes her image as a self-sacrificing healer. When her high

school is targeted as the subject of a mad scientist's experiment on artificial emotions, the students are physically suffering as a result of the forced, unnatural emotions. Because of her low confidence in her ability to control her powers in her new teenaged body, Raven initially blames herself and believes that she is unintentionally harming them: "So many emotions… coming into me… flooding out of me…. I cannot contain them all… They are… spreading… infecting… everyone. My powers… the emotions… This is my fault. I can… I have to… save them" (Wolfman 32-33). The whole page panel depicts Raven crouched on the ground as the only clear image amongst the multicolored portraits of students suffering artificial emotions. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud emphasizes the significance of colors in graphic novels: "Through more expressive colors, comics can become an intoxicating environment of sensations that only color can give" (192). The faces that are surrounded Raven's crouched body are brightly colored, which depict the feelings going through them as artificial and intense. In addition, the various images overlap each other in a collage format, which visually represents the chaotic atmosphere surrounding Raven [See Appendix Figure 4]. In obvious pain, she absorbs the extreme emotions into her own mind to heal her classmates. Later, when Raven discovers the truth behind the hysteria, she takes it upon herself to heal them. Although the Azar priests trained Raven to suppress her emotions to prevent her father's emergence on Earth, the training could potentially kill her if she experiences an overload of extreme emotions:

> I suffer pain with every cure I attempt. But because of who I am, I still have to heal. Because I was bred from birth to fight emotions, emotions have always overpowered me… and yet, because of who I am, I am unable to turn away.

> Despite my pain I always assimilated their pains. Despite my agonies, I always assimilated their emotions. (84)

Azar's Priests aimed for Raven to be an emotionally neutral being, but Raven's self-awareness as a healer enables her to choose to risk her life to save others. Despite her lineage and the priests' anti-emotion training, Raven defies their instruction and absorbs her classmates' emotions in order to stabilize their feelings. Their emotions become hers to experience, and although they cause her pain because of her intolerance, she is capable of preventing them from destroying her. Raven is still limited in expressing her own emotions, but she cements her identity as an unselfish healer, an image many adults thought improbable. The effect is shown as her fellow Titans' impressions change. Robin best identifies Raven's image when he refers to her as "the daughter of a demon, trying to live life like a saint" (*The Future is Now* 126). Others realize Raven's benevolent nature despite the negative adult assumptions about her identity. This change in trust and image control brings Raven closer to accomplishing her everlasting goals of allowing people closer to her and herself to experience emotions.

Raven differs from Jean Grey through her less physical display of strength, but both characters gain individual agency through the intensity of their powers and construction of their images. Both teens exemplify how teen heroines can form their own identities and images that contrast from the common characterization that attempts to define the teen mystique in regards to their sexuality, demonstration of powers, and control over their physical bodies and identities. Although they are initially suppressed in some aspects by adult authority, Jean and Raven continue my recurring dialectic: adult repression and teen liberation. Contrasting from the previous chapter, Jean Grey and

Raven provide positive examples of teen agency by defying adult authority and generalized expectations. Through their efforts and self-awareness, both teens provide examples of strong heroines can be represented in superhero graphic novels.

Chapter Four: "My Genetics is who I am": The Inheritance of Identities

Previously, I emphasized the dialectic of liberation and repression with the various victories and failures of teen heroes in the struggle against adult conformity. In this final chapter, I take my analysis a step further by specifically analyzing the conflict of superhero clones, teenagers who are specifically forged to carry out the agenda of their creators. Using *Runaways'* Victor Mancha, *Teen Titans'* Superboy, and *X-Men*'s X-23 as examples, I will concentrate on four main concepts: the inheritance of biological/mental traits from progenitors; the expectations placed upon them; their self-images; and the process of distinguishing their individual identities. Then, as a conclusion of this analysis of teen superheroes, I will talk specifically about death as a realistic consequence for teen heroes' actions in terms of how teens are the characters that experience physical and spiritual death.

The key difference between the previously mentioned teen heroes and these specific clones is that clones' identities are drastically challenged because of their origins. They are typically the results of experimental procedures done without the adult originals' consent or knowledge. Thus, these teens are introduced to the hero as both their children and foes. Victor Mancha, Superboy (Conner Kent), and X-23 (Laura Kinney) exemplify these trends in the sci-fi superhero genre; they were created for the purpose of being weapons for super-villains to succeed in their plots without any thought for their humanity. Victor, Conner, and Laura exemplify the most extreme cases of teen heroes who seek liberation from the adult expectations that repress their agency and identities.

The most powerful force against these specific characters' identities is the labels already placed upon them by being the clones of their assigned hero or villain. For instance, their identity crisis originates from the persistent claim that their genetics and upbringing characterize them. Roberta Trites explains how assumptions are made through associating with specific social institutions in an attempt to define teenagers through identity politics:

> 'Identity politics' refers to the social affiliations that members of any society construct to position people in relationship to one another. Although certainly not constituted as monolithic institutions, identity politics nevertheless take on institutional dimensions in the ways that people who share affiliations conform to the expectations of their identified social positions. (Trites 45)

As a social construction, identity politics affects teenaged characters through the impact of their impressions on others as well as themselves. In traditional young adult literature, identity politics are commonly linked with religion, race, and gender, but in the superhero genre of graphic novels, I affiliate identity politics to the conflict between superheroes and their teenaged offspring. Superhero teenagers are expected to carry on their parents' missions to carry out justice, but the pressure to replicate their predecessors is emphasized when the offspring are actually clones of respected adult heroes. Just as society expects typical teenagers to acquire their parents' ideologies, there is an assumption that clones genetically inherit all of their progenitors' powers and ideologies. Brian K. Vaughan's character Nico of the Runaways best phrases parental influence over teens in young adult literature: "Every kid gets 'programmed' by their 'rents, Chase. That doesn't mean they have to do as they're told" (*True Believers* 140). Nico's

sentiment parallels with the liberation versus repression dialectic of the clones' personal identities.

I stress clones being the focus of this chapter, but Brian K. Vaughan's Victor Mancha from *Runaways* is a special case because he is not only a clone, but also a biological cyborg. Victor's story begins when one of the Runaway members, Gertrude, travels from the future as an adult to warn them that Victor will one day grow up to be one of the most powerful super villains of all time. When the Runaways find Victor, he is a teenager who believes that his father was a deceased soldier, and he refutes the idea that he will become a monster because of his father's supposed crimes. As I explained in Chapter One, the Runaways have learned to distrust adults ever since they discovered that their parents were super villains, so they emphasize that Victor may have been lied to about his father's identity. When they continue to reference Victor's electromagnetic powers with known villains, Victor retorts their theory that parents influence children's actions:

> Lots of children of horrible people have grown up to be productive members of society! Haven't you heard of Ultron? He was a demented killing machine, but he still created the Vision, who turned out to be, like, one of the greatest heroes ever! (*True Believers* 88).

Victor's logic parallels with the dialectic of repression and liberation, for he understands that individuals have the freewill to mold their identities without parents forcing interpellation. He proves to have a more mature idea of parent child relationship in comparison to the other Runaways, who are automatically suspicious of all adults due to their own experiences. The Runaways understand that teens do not have to follow in

their parents' footsteps, but they insist on knowing everything about Victor's origins due to their ominous warning.

Victor's struggle to distinguish his identity starts when he discovers that he is a cybernetic/clone hybrid created from Ultron's mechanics and his human mother's genes. In her article "'Is He Still Human? Are You': Young Adult Science Fiction in the Posthuman Age," Elaine Ostry examines teen characters who are subjugated to question their identity and humanity due to their post-human origins, such as cloning or androids. In the case of cyborgs, such as Victor, Elaine Ostry emphasizes that the character's humanity is a question of biology versus machine: "[P]osthumanism involves the collapsing of boundaries between the human and the mechanical[…] It questions what makes a human human, and a machine merely and machine" (Ostry 224). The revelation scene of Victor's origin, Ultron explains that Victor was a hybrid of clone and machine:

> Utilizing your mother's DNA, I soon began work on my most spectacular invention: a fully grown cybernetic/human hybrid. [….] Gradually, the nanites that make up your skeleton will mature and metamorphose until they are *indistinguishable* from your human cells. By the time you reach adulthood, the Avengers will be unable to discern that their newest member was once *half-machine*. (*True Believers* 121, emphasis in the original)

The division of flesh and machine is null and void with Ultron's explanation. Through biological maturation, Victor's body will be completely indecipherable from an organic human, which can still be a staggering fact for others to accept. Therefore, the question of Victor's identity depends on his mind and whether or not his actions are of his own free will or data programming.

In previous chapters, I have discussed the significance of adult influence over teens' identities and motives for being heroes such as mentors, unpowered parents, and social institutions. As a cyborg, Victor faces the most violating interpellation through the data programming that Ultron instills within him:

> I told your mother that I would fill your brain with enough false memories to make you believe that you had lived a full life as a real human boy. What I failed to tell her is that I also gave you a deep-rooted love of 'superheroes,' and the fervent desire to become one yourself. The latent electromagnetic abilities I installed in you were meant to activate upon your first exposure to powered beings on a trip to New York I programmed you to take on your twenty-first birthday. (*True Believers* 122-23)

According to Ultron, Victor's personality is not the result of his own experiences but that of computer programming. His mother's efforts in his programming are to give her son a sense of normalcy through the illusion of having a childhood. However, Ultron's motives are to create the perfect weapon to extract his own agenda, and his explanation to Victor reveals that someone else has planned out his entire life by camouflaging the thoughts as his own. If it were not for the Runaways' intervention, Victor may have carried out Ultron's plan without realizing that he never had control of his own actions. In addition, due to Victor's discovery of his origins, Ultron determines that he needs to commandeer Victor's subconscious and force him to exterminate the Runaways and later delete Victor's software.

Although Victor is briefly controlled by Ultron, Victor gains his first bout of agency and liberation as a human by refuting his programming. Once he is reminded that

Ultron murdered his mother, Victor's empathy and humanity resurface through Ultron's control, and he attacks Ultron while proclaiming his rebellion for liberation: "I am nothing like you!" (*True Believers* 124). Despite his proclamation of agency, Victor has to determine what about his personality is himself and computer programming. In her article, Elaine Ostry explains how the search for identity in young adult literature is modified in posthuman science fiction: "The trope that all young adult literature has in common is the search for identity. In the posthuman young adult science fiction novel, this search takes a particularly sharp turn when the protagonist realizes that he or she is not conventionally human, that many people would consider him or her to be an aberration" (Ostry 224). Victor relates to Ostry's analysis because he is currently still half-cyborg with false memories of a childhood and uncertainty of which thoughts and actions are his own. Shortly after joining the Runaways, he relates his worries to Molly when buying supplies:

> Victor: Molly, tell me the truth. Are the other guys, you know... are they scared of me? Because of what I'm supposed to become when I grow up? Is that why they always send me out with you? Since you're the only one strong enough to fight me if I ever go haywire again?
>
> Molly: [P]eople are always afraid of kids who are different, even when *we* haven't done anything bad yet. All you can do is be a good person. (*Escape to New York* 12)

As I mentioned in Chapter One, Molly is a strong source of support for the teenager-oriented team. As a mutant, Molly relates to Victor's plight of isolation from conventional society, and she emphasizes the illogical anxieties aimed at Victor and

herself. Although the advice does not resolve all of Victor's anxieties, Molly's support relieves his fear that not all of his new allies are afraid of him. Despite Molly's advice, there is still an underline suspicion of Victor due to the identity politics revolving around his mechanical hardware and connection to Ultron. Although friendships are made, the conflict of Victor's free will and dangerous programming is constantly remarked upon.

Victor realizes that there is still a suspicion of his agency to resist Ultron's programming, but he establishes his agency as an individual by identifying his own thoughts and free will. When Nico believes that Victor has been acting as a mole for the reformed Pryde, she and Gertrude immediately believe it to be true; Gertrude even goes so far as to assault him with a giant wrench. The violent confrontation quickly ceases, which gives Victor enough time to realize that he was unknowingly being used to spy on his teammates:

> I haven't been spying on anyone, Nico. Someone's been spying through me. When we fought the people who stole Molly, one of them took control of my body. I started to wonder, what if they could also take signals from my brain? That's why I've been patching some of my cyborg components into the Leapfrog, so he can trace any cerebral spyware back to its source. (*Parental Guidance* 92-93)

Enemies may take advantage of Victor because of his computer programming, but Victor is becoming more aware of his physical body and mentality. In the panel, his forearm is opened to reveal his circuitry, which reveals that he has been discovering aspects of his organic body that he had been unaware of before. He corrects the situation by utilizing the spyware as a tracking route and later programs a firewall to prevent future enemies

from hacking into his system. Victor's self-awareness of his potential weaknesses and individual thoughts empower him to be his own person without fear of becoming Ultron's weapon.

Whereas Victor is a cyborg-human hybrid created to become the ultimate weapon, Superboy (Conner Kent) is the clone of both the iconic Superman and villain Lex Luthor. Superboy is created by Cadmus Labs to become the ultimate weapon that could rival Superman, Earth's presumed mightiest hero. After Superboy is released from Cadmus Labs in a prior series, Superboy idolizes Superman, not only as a role model, but as his own identity due to the iconic hero's positive image. Danny Fingeroth explains how Superman has always represented the positive aspects of being a superhero: "In the Superman school of superheroism, there is a vein of gentleness and civility. Whatever violent acts the Man of Steel commits are committed in a rational and positive manner" (Fingeroth 120). Superman may have arch foes and resort to violence, but his actions as a superhero do not interfere with his morals. As the adult hero, he represents stability and rationality, which are qualities that Conner believes that he will genetically inherit on his path of becoming a hero. Initially, Conner argues with Superman that his identity is already developed due to their shared genetic material: "Cadmus Labs grafted what they could of your Kryptonian D.N.A. to human D.N.A. when they conjured me up—but that human was just one of their whacked out scientists. Trust me, your genetics way overpower that jerk's. Through and through—I'm a clone of the world's greatest hero!" (*A Kid's Game* 6). Conner's argument over his identity is centered on nature rather than nurture; because Superman is his originator, Conner believes that he will inherit all of

Superman's physical and ethical qualities. However, everything changes when Tim Drake (Robin) approaches Conner with the question of his human D.N.A.

The rest of the Teen Titans are comfortable with their knowledge of Conner's genetic makeup, but Tim is determined to make Conner aware of everything about himself. When Tim hints at the possibility that Lex Luthor may have been involved, Conner dismisses the idea: "Luthor has nothing to do with where I came from. And nothing to do with me. Forget about this. My genetics is who I am. And right now—it's all I have" (35). Superboy's adamant denial of Robin's idea reveals his dependence on his connection with Superman to define his identity. His ambition is to shape himself in Superman's image, and his identity is limited because he is allowing himself to mature through adult expectations rather than his own experience and beliefs. The limitation that he places on his potential identity is revealed when Tim discloses the results of a D.N.A. test: "What am I going to do!? It's like having a fifty-fifty percent chance of growing up to be the greatest hero or villain!" (130). With this acquired information, Conner endures an identity crisis because of his ironclad belief that his genetics construct his identity. Although Tim promises to keep his secret, Superboy still suffers from the insecurity of his teammates' reactions.

Any change that the others may have towards Superboy is the result of his own insecurities and misbehavior. Unaware of Superboy's plight, Cassie interprets his strange behavior to protect his secret as a sign of distrust: "He's the one person I can tell anything to. But I don't think he feels the same way about me. He's been hiding something. When Cyborg asked him to get his blood tested he was really rattled" (*Beast Boy & Girls* 96). Conner fears that he would be rejected by his teammates and friends if

they discover his connection with Lex Luthor, but in reality, he estranges himself with his self-doubt and odd behavior. Conner's behavior exemplifies tendencies that Elaine Ostry lists in her analysis of posthuman clones: "For the clones, the feeling of being different from others and estranged from oneself is particularly strong. Their sense of identity is confused as they must judge whether they even have a separate self" (Ostry 226). His agency is limited due to his doubt; as a result, he cannot claim control over the powers he did genetically inherit from Superman. When he is unable to conjure his heat vision, he mumbles to himself, "Alright, Kid. Concentrate. Don't think like *you*. Or the bald guy... Think like *Superman*. And you'll *be like Superman*" (*Family Lost* 68, emphasis in the original). His lack of agency over his identity pushes him so far that he forces himself to think as he imagines Superman would in combat. Eventually, he temporarily loses any claim to his agency as a hero because of his identity crisis.

Conner's gain of his individual agency and identity initially depicts him at his lowest before he progresses to his resolution in the nature vs. nurture debate. During events that lead up to the Infinite Crisis, in which heroes and villains from parallel universes are attempting to usurp Earth, the Teen Titans struggle to aid the general public while the adult heroes wage war against their counterparts. Conner refuses to help his fellow Titans because he believes that doing nothing will prevent any of Luthor's characteristics from breaching through:

> Aunt Martha: You need to go help your friends.
>
> Conner: Luthor didn't clone me to help people, Aunt Martha.
>
> Aunt Martha: That's for you to decide. Not anyone else. The world needs a Superboy. And right now you're all they've got. (*Life and Death* 48)

Superman does not formally adopt Conner but rather leaves him in the care of his own adoptive parents; thus, he does not provide the support that Conner needs. Instead, Aunt Martha recognizes what Conner needs to hear to make him think about his own identity because she supported Superman during his own image crisis. She never judges Conner for not helping his teammates; instead, she emphasizes that his actions and identity are of his own making, which is something he does not receive from Superman. Eventually, Superboy decides to help the rest of the Teen Titans and Nightwing during the Crisis in order to protect Wonder Girl. As he witnesses Nightwing risking his life, Conner compares him to the other Robins: "Whatever Batman does to his Robins, it's like they've been grown from the same genetic material. Which puts nurture ahead of nature" (169). His realization is still worded in terms of genetics and cloning, but the observation derives from his prior knowledge that none of the Robins are biologically related to each other or Batman. This example solidifies what everyone has told Superboy about how little genetics has to do with his identity, which motivates him to fight with his own strength rather than rely on what he may have inherited from Superman or Lex Luthor.

Whereas Superboy argues that his genetics decide his actions and identity, Wolverine's clone X-23 (later named Laura Kinney) thoroughly represents how nurturing molds a person. Wolverine is the X-Man who suffers from partial amnesia and was subjected to torturous experiments that fused his skeleton with adamantium, a rare, unbreakable metal. After Wolverine escaped, Hydra created X-23 with hopes of regaining Wolverine's healing factor and skeletal claws for their purposes. Throughout X-23's childhood, Hydra scientists molded her to be the perfect weapon, and at age eight she underwent the Weapon X project and had adamantium coated over her bones.

Genetically, Laura replicates Wolverine, but the difference lies within their mindsets. In *Superman on the Couch*, Danny Fingeroth describes Wolverine as a tortured hero because of his fragmented past: "He has only the sparsest memories of his past. This alone can be frustrating and rage-inciting. The images of his past that he can access are full of torture and sadism inflicted on him. He's somebody's victim, certainly, but he doesn't know exactly whose" (135). Fingeroth explains Wolverine's violent behavior as a vent for the frustration of a severed past; however, in a way, Wolverine's mind is safeguarded due to his amnesia. Laura, on the other hand, retains all of her memories of physical and psychological abuse, which conditions her to lose her ability to express all emotions but one: rage. Because of her lack of empathy due to her training as an assassin, conventional humans and law officials see her as a monster due to her violent acts: "This girl is not human. Good God. She's been killing people since she was nine years old. X-23 has killed politicians, dictators, drug lords, mob bosses, members of AIM, Hydra, and S.H.I.E.L.D... and those are just the targets that we've been able to identify" (Kyle, Yost 64). Although Laura was molded into a killer by evil adults, law officials only see the potential threat that Laura poses to other humans. In his article "Mutants that Are All Too Human," Tim Perry explains that sometimes the most realistic quality of superheroes is that "a protagonist does not always act like a hero" (Perry 171). Although Perry was specifically referring to Marvel characters as a whole, his statement adds to the argument of a double standard between adult and teen heroes. As Perry observes, adult heroes are known for making mistakes due to intense emotions or losing themselves to the heat of battle, a common occurrence for Wolverine who frequently stabs his enemies with his knife-like claws. However, when adolescent heroes make

mistakes, they are corrected hastily and sternly. An example of such is seen when X-23 is first introduced to the X-Men in Chris Claremont's *Uncanny X-Men: The New Age* series. Recently freed from Hydra, Laura still has the instinctual mindset of a weapon and when she reacts violently to a training exercise in an attempt to aid Wolverine against the other X-Men, the other teammates are intimidated by her ferocity and strength. Emma Frost reprimands Wolverine and the other X-Men to better control X-23: "Keep your new protégée on a tighter leash. [....] I suggest doing your best to teach the child some manners... or I may be forced to take matters into my own hands" (*On Ice* 12). Due to Emma Frost's past as the White Queen in the Hellfire Club and one of the X-Men's most formidable foes, her reproach to X-23 is a hypocritical act. Even though Emma is a redeemed villain, she distrusts Laura because she is intimidated by the clone's fighting skills and physical capabilities.

Unlike Victor Mancha and Superboy, X-23 constantly struggles with her identity due to the mixed messages she receives from the X-Men. Her first, positive step towards regaining her humanity occurs when she forms a bond with her progenitor Wolverine. When Wolverine recognizes that she is a victim like himself, he attempts to gain her trust by relating to her past without judging her:

> Wolverine: My name is Logan. And you?
>
> X-23: My designation is X-23.
>
> Wolverine: No name? Silly me, names are for people. To the folks responsible for you, we're not people. Busy little bees up in the great white north. Now, the "Weapon X" Project's playin' with kids [....]
>
> X-23: I don't know what you're talking about.

> Wolverine: Don't lie, girl. Your heartbeat gives you away. But you're right. I need to earn your trust, same as the X-Men had to earn mine. (*The Cruelest Cut* 36)

Similar to Superboy, identity politics play a role in Laura's relationship with Wolverine; just as Superboy aligned his identity with Superman's due to their genetics, Laura imprints upon Wolverine because of their shared experience. They have both been wronged, but neither accepts being labeled as a victim. Laura almost immediately delves into a father-daughter relationship with Wolverine. In Marjorie Lui's *X-23: The Killing Dream*, Laura reminisces when Wolverine takes her to a fair in which he proposes that he adopts her:

> Wolverine: Way I see it. You and I are family. Hell, we share practically the same DNA.
>
> Laura: I'm your clone.
>
> Wolverine: You're not just that. X, I'd like to adopt you. As my daughter. I won't be a good father, but I'll be yours. Your family. (Lui 24)

Unlike Superman and Ultron, Logan takes full responsibility for Laura because he recognizes the turmoil in her violent past, but he also differs from them by recognizing Laura's agency. Because of her experience as an assassin, Wolverine recruits her into the X-Force, a special mutant division that handles the violent operations that the other X-Men cannot handle. Laura proves herself as a valuable teammate, but after she carries out Cyclops and Wolverine's orders of killing numerous enemies, Wolverine pulls her off the roster in fear that he is causing her more harm than good.

Laura inhibits physical agency due to her mutant powers, but the adult X-Men are conflicted in how they should approach her, which could potentially repress her inner agency. Witnessing Laura being ostracized from the younger X-Men because of her participation in X-Force, Emma and Storm separately confront Cyclops and Wolverine for using her as a weapon just as Hydra did: "Despite all of my misgivings, she proved herself. She made so much progress. She had friends her own age. She was just beginning to understand what it means to be a... a young person. A child. We took that away" (Lui 13). The debate over Laura's welfare is split between fearing her for her perceived violence and apathy or nurturing her so that she can heal from her past and become a normal teenager. Their concerns over X-23 parallel with the adult-oriented concerns surrounding teenagers in young adult literature. Even Wolverine, despite his love for Laura, is convinced that she solely understands combat. However, Gambit recognizes that Laura's identity can only be positively defined if she is the one who discovers and shapes it: "You're all wrong if you think Laura is gonna stick around long enough to be... helped. The X-Men have become a prison to her. She's not a person here. Jus' a thing to be fixed. She knows that's how she's seen. An' she's not a child to let adults make decisions for her" (64). The adult X-Men realize that X-23 is not a typical teenaged girl; however, they still attempt to limit her identity as a soldier who replicates Wolverine or as a victim who is in desperate need of nurturing and reformation.

For Laura's self-identity to emerge, she must confront the identity politics surrounding her origin as a clone. X-23's journey to discover her identity in Marjorie Lui's *X-23: The Killing Dream* begins with the progressive step of separating herself

from Wolverine In her analysis of posthuman teenagers, Elaine Ostry remarks upon the exploitations placed upon these teenaged characters: "These characters have been tortured and all torturers want to break down their victims' spirit, their sense of self—their humanity. They are treated as parts rather than, as a liberal humanist perspective would have it, more than the sum of their parts" (Ostry 231). This pattern in science fiction is replicated with the development of Laura as a weapon. After running away from the X-Men, Laura's two questions that decide her humanity are the questions if clones have souls or redemption for past sins. She longs to be a whole individual with her own ideologies and self-worth, but in reality, she is the constructed summation of adults who viewed her as a tool. On her journey, Laura confronted by an entity that claims to be the part of her that "scientists never touched," and it forces her to remember how Hydra created her to be a weapon (Lui 52). Throughout Laura's childhood, she was deemed as property, and the scientists molded her as a weapon, one step at a time. First, they modified her mutant body with the adamantium claws and training. Their psychological torture attacked her empathy by forcing her to watch images of horrendous violence until she was emotionally immune: "Her empathy scores are still too high. We need to alter the conditioning process. She's been resisting from the beginning. It'll take sometime extreme if you want to break her" (54). The panels are drawn in a fragmented sequence that Scott McCloud refers to as aspect-to-aspect transition, which "sets a wandering eye on different aspects of a place, idea, or mood" (McCloud 72). Each panel depicts a different view of the psychological torture that she endures. Laura is literally surrounded by violent images, and the panels illustrate a stripping of innocence by depicting Laura in a pink robe and physically restrained and forced to watch with clamps

keeping her horrified eyes open [See Appendix Figure 5]. The depictions reveal that Laura was not born to be an emotionless killer, rather than she was molded into a weapon in order to survive the tortures that were used against her. Laura's soul reminds her that she was a victim as a child, but now she is older and stronger to make her own decisions concerning her identity: "It took many hands and minds. It took years. You fought them, every step. But they outnumbered you. And you were so young. You had no choice. But you have a choice now. [....] Choice is your weapon. Belief is your weapon" (58). By confronting the memories of her torture, Laura understands that she never had a choice in becoming the fearsome assassin everyone labels her. Evil adults repressed her identity and forced her to accept their claims that she was their weapon, an object rather than a person.

The best metaphor for Laura's identity is the parallel of her story with *Pinocchio*. Laura's character revolves around the famous children's story because of her longing to become a person rather than an object. In addition, Pinocchio's image stalks her subconscious. In her fragmented memories of her mother Sarah Kinney, she remembers her mother reading the story to her, and the book's cover names the story and shows a picture of Pinocchio. Then, she encounters a huge, broken doll while running away from her memories. Pinocchio symbolizes Laura's journey for an identity separate from a clone because just as Pinocchio is the toy who wishes to be a real boy, Laura is molded into an object that later wishes to be a real person. Despite Sara Kinney's attempts at giving Laura human contact, she is also a colleague of Laura's tormentors who denies Laura protection: "She made me from her own body. She carried me in her womb. She read me books. But she also obeyed the men in white. She let them hurt me. She asked

me to kill. And in the end I killed her" (46). Her memories and personified soul reassure her of her humanity and free will now that she is free of Hydra. As her inner soul tells her that choice and belief are her weapons, she no longer has to depend on her implanted claws to fight, but Laura realizes that her claws and fighting are her physical tools to defend herself from anyone who would try to imprison her again. When she later encounters a conspiracy to use various clones (all named Alice) as experiments, she fights to liberate them from being used as mere dolls or tools for evil adults. Ultimately, she kills the cultivator while saying, "I have been told it is important to offer mercy. But I have my limits" (133). She still resorts to violence because she does not fully adopt the X-Men philosophy of mercy to enemies, and due to her past, she understands that sometimes villains will not stop their crimes because heroes showed them mercy. Although Laura has not achieved her goal of becoming a real girl story in the current X-Men series, Lui's *The Killing Dream* initiates X-23's journey in separating herself from the image that the people surrounding her perceive of her.

Victor Mancha, Superboy, and X-23 exemplify the conflicts of gaining agency as a teenaged clone, but they also offer different perspectives of death within graphic novels. Coming to terms with death is a central theme in young adult literature, and because teenaged heroes place themselves into dangerous situations to protect others, it is necessary to analyze death in the conclusion of this thesis. Despite the commonality of death in both reactive and progressive novels, the deaths of teenagers in superhero graphic novels are unique because death is a constant and recognized threat. Although I analyzed risky behavior and noted Jason Todd's murder in Chapter Two, I chose to analyze teen perceptions of death in this final chapter because of the unusual nature of

death in graphic novels that noticeably skips adult heroes and is inherited by their teenaged counterparts. In her commentary of Jean Grey's character, Christy Marx remarks upon her acknowledgment that death has lost meaning in superhero storylines: "Death has been degraded to the level where it ceases to have real meaning" (175). Marx's comment is based upon the storyline revolving around adult heroes, but she drives a valid point. Iconic adult superheroes repetitively cheat death through their superpowers, and if they are killed, then they return through resurrections, reincarnations, or dimensional wormholes. A perfect example would be adult Jean Grey/Phoenix who suffers through multiple deaths only to be resurrected through various loopholes; Superman is another example because his powers make him virtually indestructible. Teen superheroes are the ones who suffer and experience death, and if they are resurrected, then they are altered due to their violent deaths, such as Jason Todd who became a violent killer after being murdered. Unlike traditional coming of age plots where death is perceived as unexpected, teenaged heroes are fully aware of their mortality in their pursuits to aid others.

Brian K. Vaughan's *Runaways* series depicts teenaged heroes who are aware of the consequences of their actions. The graphic novel is set within the Marvel Universe in which being a superhero is glamorized with merchandizing in games, figurines, and posters. Although the original Runaways team is aware of death as a plausible reality, Victor's mindset towards being a superhero is set, not as a game, but by stereotypes:

> Victor: You guys have some kind of rallying cry? You know, "Avengers, assemble?" "It's clobberin' time?" "Hulk smash?"
>
> Nico: "Try not to die." (*Escape to New York* 4)

Nico's reply is a sobering reminder of the dangers they face in their attempts to rectify their parents' crimes, and the team adopts the reminder as, what Victor refers, their rallying cry. Victor adopts the mindset to keep himself and his teammates alive, and Germaine's later murder cements death's threat as their reality.

Similarly, death is a constant reminder for Geoff Johns's *Teen Titans*, especially with the death of Superboy. Conner Kent dies during the Infinite Crisis, in which multiple universes are spiraling out of their dimensions and erupting as the numerous Earths collide. Despite Conner's identity crisis due to his genetics, the teen clone appears to have inherited the universal trait of death. In *Comic Book Nation*, Bradford W. Wright critiques the Superman legend as an unrealistic character due to his boundless powers:

> Superman's comic books developed into a fantastic mythos that owed less and less to any standard of reality. Superman's powers, daunting enough to begin with, grew to staggering, godlike dimensions. [....] Over the years, Superman had picked up more powers: flight, X-ray vision, faster-than-light speed, unlimited physical strength, and invulnerability to nearly anything except kryptonite. [....] After DC's writers had exhausted ideas for plots to put the invincible hero through, they resorted to "imaginary" stories, wherein Superman could, marry, have different powers, or even die. (Wright 60)

The progression of Superman's powers transcends him into resembling a demigod, and his indestructible state marks him as being less human. In comparison, regardless of Superboy's origin as a clone, his death reestablishes his humanity. He dies as the result of saving the world after deciding that genetics does not define him as a hero. Despite his fears of becoming Lex Luthor's protégé, he realizes that doing nothing will damage his

identity more than taking the risk to act. As he lies dying, he tells Wonder Girl his revelations toward his identity:

> Conner: He said I wasn't the real Superboy. Kfff.... He was wrong. I just forgot for a little while.... We all forgot.... Don't let them forget again.
>
> Wonder Girl: Just hang in their, okay? You did it, Conner. You saved the Earth. You saved everyone.
>
> Superboy: I know, Cass. Isn't it cool? (*Life and Death* 205)

Unlike Superman, Conner actually depicts the sacrificial hero in his efforts to save the world. In addition, Superboy's death exemplifies how young adult literature depicts death as a realistic moment in life: "The reader is not protected from either death by the filter of indirect narration. [....] [I]n YA novels, adolescents learn about their own mortality by witnessing the death of someone who is not going gently into that good night" (Trites 120). Traditional young adult literature depicts death through the first person narration of protagonists who must mourn the death of a loved one, but graphic novels progressively depicts the impact of death through their illustrations. Conner's death is no exception with his broken body centered on the whole page panel surrounded by adult Nightwing, Batman, Wonder Woman, and two Supermen. Witnessing Conner's last moments educates Wonder Girl about her own mortality, and readers witness and understand her grief as she mourns over Conner's body. [See Appendix Figure 6].

The Runaways and Superboy exemplify the physical concept of death in graphic novels, but Laura from the X-Men depicts how death can become a symbolic concept. Physical death is not possible for X-23 because of her healing factor that she inherited from Wolverine. In past altercations, she suffers from being shot, burnt, and

disintegrated only to be restored as if nothing happened; even when her arm is sadistically chopped off, it grows back. Her mutant abilities render her immortal, but unlike Superman, who never appears to feel a punch, Laura suffers the pain inflicted upon her. However, physical death is not what Laura fears. Due to her sordid past, recapture by Hydra resembles death because they would potentially force her to lose her humanity again. Roberta Trites explains how death can be tragic in forms other than survivors' grief: "Understanding Being-towards-death leads adolescent characters into a loss of innocence that seems, at least initially, tragic" (Trites 121). Laura has already died once during her childhood at the psychological torture of her captors. As I mentioned before, Laura's soul reminds her of her past, and that includes when they finally broke her spirit. Despite her efforts to fight the brainwashing, the scientists finally break her when they force her to kill a puppy that they had given her:

> You were supposed to kill that thing an hour ago. It was your task. Such a simple, easy task. Even an idiot could do it. But you haven't. [....] Because you failed at your task, this dog is going to suffer. Horribly. And you're going to watch. You're going to listen. Because it's your fault. [....] Fortunately for you, I believe in second chances. If you care about this dog, you won't let anyone else take its life. You won't let anyone hurt it. You'll follow orders. You'll kill the dog now. And put it out of its misery. (Lui 55-56)

In the flashes of memory, the reader witness Laura's initial joy in the puppy's companionship as well as her being held back from saving it. The panels have slanted borders that represent a "dynamic and changing" mood in the scene, and Laura obviously senses that as she urgently tries to save the dog (McCloud 125). The only recognizable

face other than Laura's is that of her biological mother. As Laura looks to her for help, Sarah only stares blankly and expectantly at her [See Appendix Figure 7]. Realizing that no one will protect her beloved dog, Laura finally submits to their will in order to spare the pet the pain that she knows the soldiers and scientists will deliver. The concluding panel depicts Laura succumbing to her captors' expectations by illustrating half of her face as blacked out while the detailed half is licked by the puppy. The clear half of her visage represents the child she was before the adults break her spirit. The scientists shatter her resolve by using her empathy against her, and her act of killing the dog initiates her forgotten humanity that allowed her to kill emotionlessly until she finds Wolverine. Thus, death can mean much more than the physical interpretation; it can be the loss of one's very identity and agency.

Superhero storylines separate themselves from traditional young adult novels. Not only do graphic novels tell stories through intermixing mediums, they also depict unique teenaged characters that physically save their societies from catastrophic harm. These teenagers possess physical powers to combat villains; however, they also face the challenges of liberating their identities and agencies from the repression of adult expectations and anxieties over their welfare. Each chapter depicts how teen heroes either progressively obtain their agency or conform to their adult mentors' expectations. Each title series exhibits both progressive and reactionary trends found in young adult literature, but the public's reception of adolescents as respected heroes depends on the individual teenager's response to society's limiting, adult-oriented guidance.

Appendix

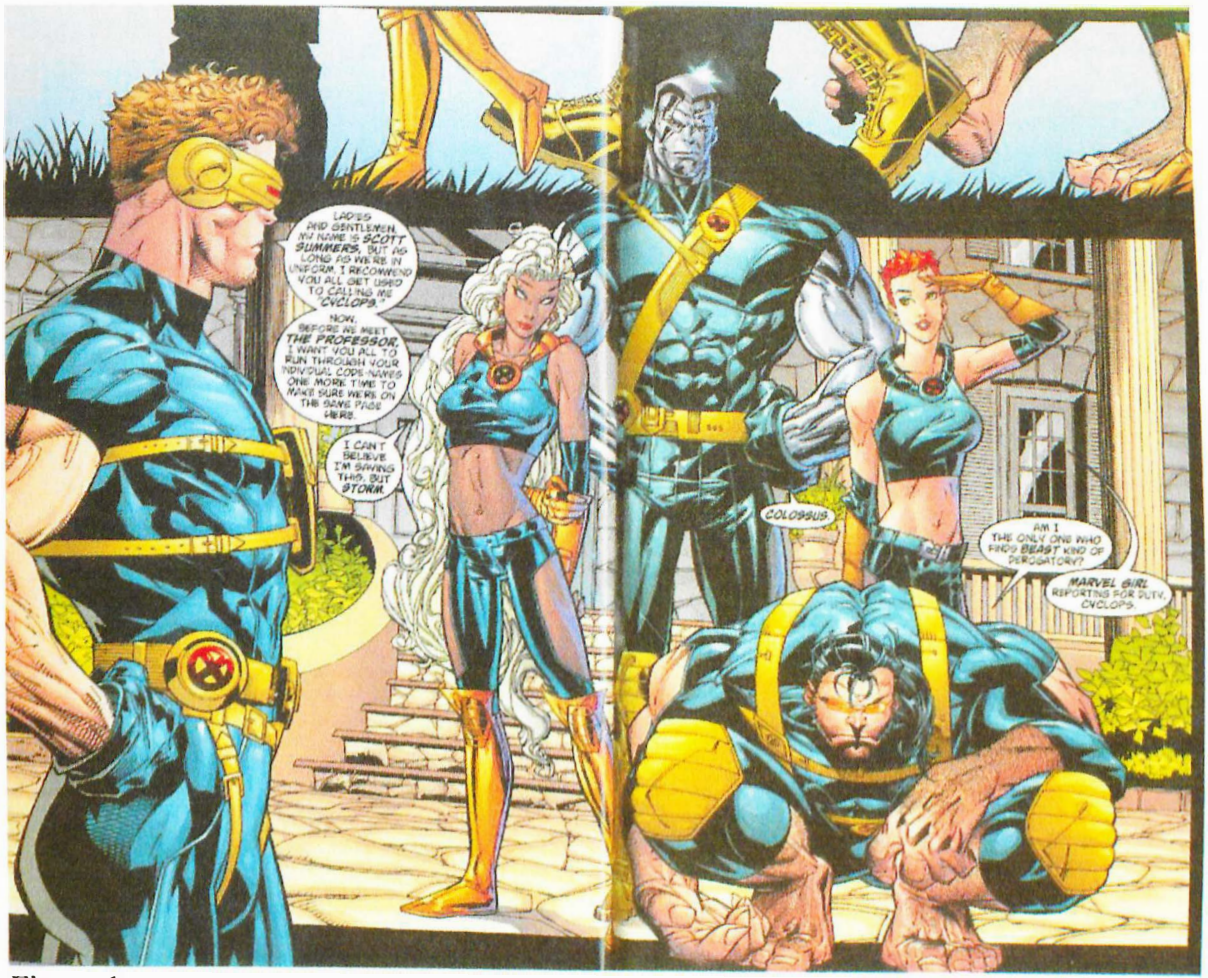

Figure 1

Millar, Mark. *Ultimate X-Men: The Tomorrow People*. Vol. 1. New York: Marvel Publishing, Inc., 2004. Print.

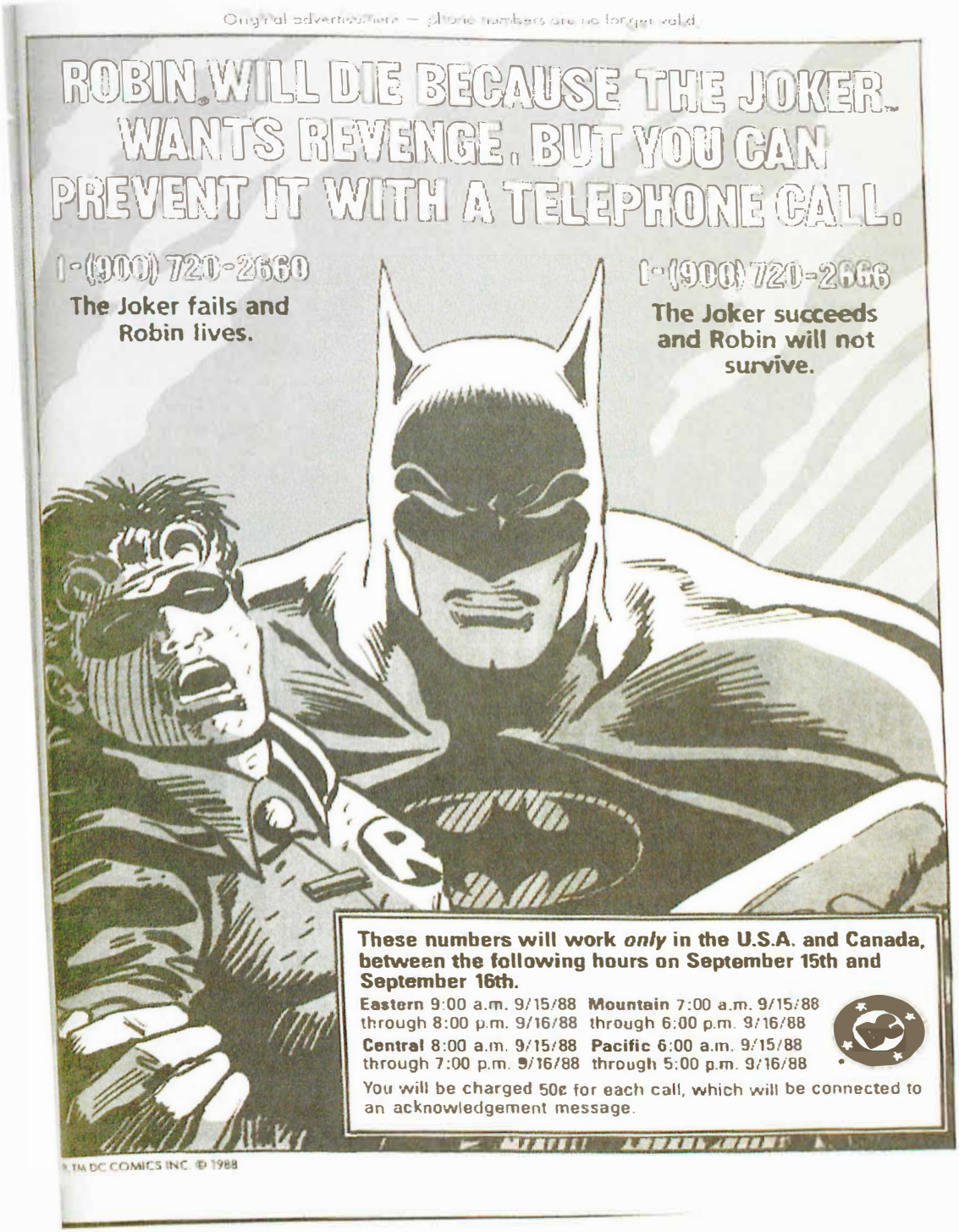

Figure 2

Starlin, Jim. "A Death in the Family." *Batman: A Death in the Family*. New York: DC Comics, 2011. 7-144. Print.

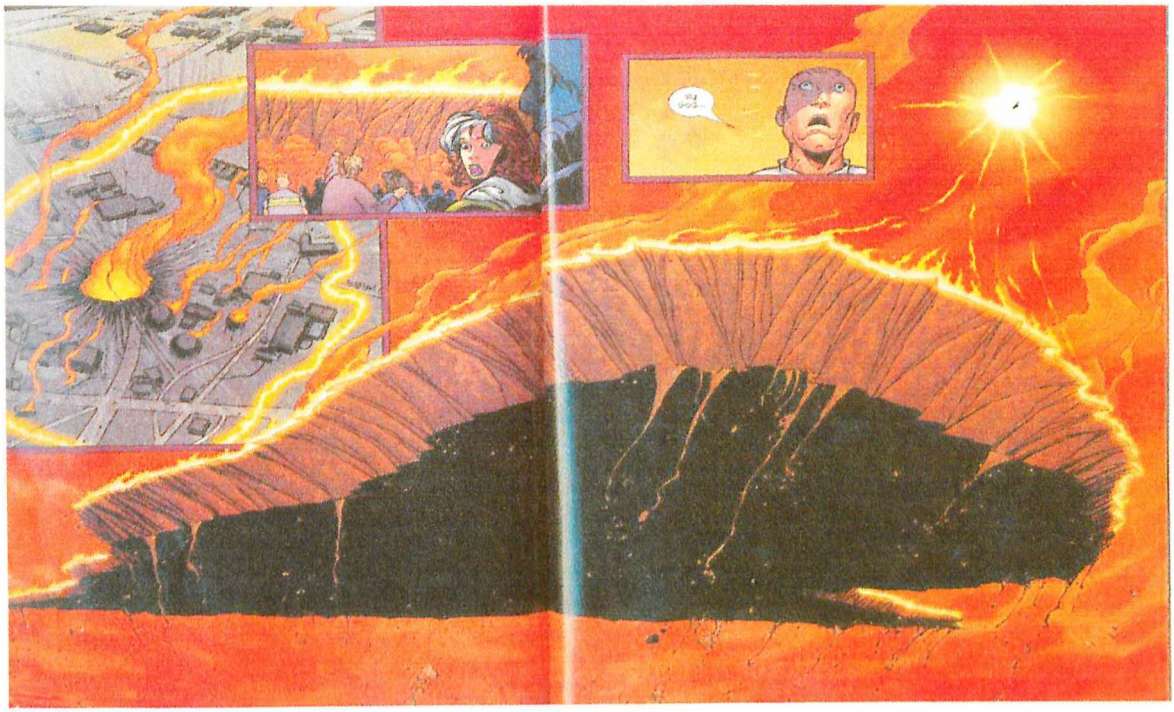

Figure 3
Millar, Mark. *Ultimate X-Men: Ultimate Collection Book 3*. New York: Marvel Publishing, Inc., 2009. Print.

Figure 4
Wolfman, Marv. *Teen Titans Spotlight: Raven*. New York: DC Comics, 2008. Print.

Figure 5

Liu, Marjorie. *X-23: The Killing Dream*. Marvel Worldwide, Inc., 2011. Print.

Figure 6

Johns, Geoff. *Teen Titans: Life and Death.* Vol. 5. New York: DC Comics, 2006. Print.

Figure 7

Liu, Marjorie. *X-23: The Killing Dream.* Marvel Worldwide, Inc., 2011. Print.

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