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# ‘X marks the spot’: Urban dystopia, slum voyeurism and failures of identity in *District X*

## **ABSTRACT**

*This article studies the ‘imaginative mapping’ of a real-world neighbourhood in one comic book series: lower Manhattan’s Alphabet City in writer David Hine and artists David Yardin and Lan Medina’s District X (July 2004–January 2006). In contrast to a long-standing claim to ‘realism’ in Marvel’s use of New York City, this article argues that the real Alphabet City – at the time a contested and rapidly gentrifying neighbourhood – is nowhere to be found in District X, replaced by a voyeuristic fabrication, a sensationalistic node of concentration for middle-class fears about urban decline and blight amid prosperity and contemporary discourses about drugs, crime and homelessness that reproduces long-standing cultural representations of the neighbourhood as different and inferior. In doing so, the series polices a boundary of identity, empathy and imagination and tells readers that force in favour of clearing out radical difference in the neighbourhood and making it into a space fit for ‘normal’ people is natural, rational and logical and in the best interest even of those who might be displaced by gentrification, disproportionately incarcerated in the name of ‘law and order’, or put at risk of their lives in dangerous shelters.*

## **KEYWORDS**

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mutantcy  
blackness  
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urban representation

'In every [comic] book I've ever done', said Marvel Comics editor-in-chief Joe Quesada in a 2003 *New York Times* interview, 'the city [New York] has been a character'. In Quesada's view, the fact that Marvel sets its stories in New York, rather than in fictional cities, 'grounds the fantasy': 'It's important to us to keep the real world real' (Jennings 2003). Quesada's was neither the first nor the last such claim about the 'realism' of Marvel's use of New York (cf. Bainbridge 2010; MacDonald and Sanderson 2006). Indeed, Marvel has actively and with relative success tried to make this identification of their brand with the city a selling point (cf. Sanderson 2007). One academic even asserts that Marvel's use of the 'real world' – generally New York – 'create[s] a closer link between the world of the superheroes and the world of the readers' (Costello 2009: 11).

But Quesada's statement forgets a basic narratological fact: all characters have traits and properties that imbue them with meaning. And the recurrent claims to a 'New York–comics relationship' in the fan and daily press and in comics scholarship fail to differentiate between different spatial formations in history, culture and continuity and the impact these have on representation (e.g. Reynolds 1994: 18–25; Worcester 2011). By unreflectively asserting a relationship between city and mediated representation, complex discursive systems are obscured and presented as fact and reality. In doing this, creators and critics help to make the comics' historically contingent representations of New York seem 'natural', and thus to reproduce (intentionally or unintentionally) politicized myths about the city and its inhabitants (cf. Barthes [1972] 2009). The recurrence of such myth-making suggests a failure to acknowledge that real-world places that appear in comics are representations that do not exist in a one-to-one relationship with their models, but are reflective of wider political and social currents in their time (cf. Mele 2000: 14–15).

As comics historian Bradford Wright points out: 'Emerging from the shifting interactions of politics, culture, audience tastes, and the economics of publishing, comic books have helped frame a world-view and define a sense of self for the generations who have grown up with them' (2001: viii). Comics, as a medium and as cultural artefacts, communicate in a direct way: the writing, often constrained by a desire for mainstream appeal and an often tight schedule, regularly addresses current events and articulate a condensed interpretation of the attitudes and sentiments of their time and place. Although characterized by high-concept action and superpowers that, in a sense, serve to estrange the stories from the world they represent, they nonetheless mediate social myths and realities; indeed, Marvel's comics have been permeated by a generally conservative (and thus market-friendly) potboiler sensitivity to dominant cultural concerns since their very beginning in the Cold War (cf. Genter 2007; Yockey 2005; Costello 2009; Johnson 2011). Visually, comics work through a process of 'amplification through simplification' that strips images down to focus on a particular aspect, allowing them to be both more intense and broader in their appeal for reader identification (McCloud 1993: 24–59). Being a medium with no stylistic limits beyond the skill and imagination of the writer and artist, comics is perhaps particularly apt at provoking aesthetic and affective responses, using recognizable environments not only as believable settings, but also to reinforce characterizations and to strengthen narrative and emotional resonances. These characteristics make Marvel comics, with their long-standing claim to the city, particularly well-suited to the creation of idealized and normative maps of New York.

States and corporate entities frequently construct 'official' maps, in which some ugly realities are smoothed over in order to make a space seem better. In attempts to reveal the hegemonic politics inherent in 'official' maps and to show how the space is lived and experienced on the ground, residents, activists and artists sometimes construct 'counter-maps' (Runstrom 2009). Conversely, like space represented in other media, space in comics is imbued with cultural meaning through an 'imaginative mapping' and a particular structuring of elements within that mapping (cf. Wirth-Nesher 1996). Such mapping is never merely mimetic of material space, but symbolic, selective, and, if not always consciously so, ideologically informed.

This article studies one such 'imaginative' mapping of a real-world neighbourhood in one comic book series: lower Manhattan's Alphabet City in writer David Hine and artists David Yardin and Lan Medina's *District X* (July 2004–January 2006). The purpose is both to look critically at how the neighbourhood is characterized in the series and to destabilize the popular idea that Marvel's New York makes the city 'legible' (Bainbridge 2010: 176) for its readers in an uncontroversial way. *District X* is neither the 'official' map nor its counter; it does not rectify a false representation, but constructs one, largely sympathetic to the hegemonic map and often opposed to attempted 'counter-mappings'. The real Alphabet City – at the time a contested and rapidly gentrifying neighbourhood – is nowhere to be found in *District X*, replaced, it will be argued, by a voyeuristic fabrication, a sensationalistic node of concentration for middle-class fears about urban decline and blight amid prosperity and contemporary discourses about drugs, crime and homelessness that reproduces long-standing cultural representations of the neighbourhood as different and inferior (cf. Mele 2000). Before this characterization of the imagined can begin, however, some background and context should be established.

### **MUTANT SPACES: SITUATING *DISTRICT X***

*District X* is peripherally connected with Marvel's *X-Men* family of comic books. The X-Men are mutants, people whose genetic make-up gives them superhuman powers. This difference has often been used to inscribe mutants with a malleable form of Otherness within their fictional universe, a textual Otherness with extratextual ideological functions. Throughout their initial run (1963–1970), the X-Men were dedicated to an integrationist ideal and to policing those of their own kind who stepped out of line. Genetic difference itself did not often translate into persecution; instead, emphasis was on how this difference was used. Indeed, the 'evil mutant' enemy was initially mostly configured as a hyperbolically framed communist threat, as when the supervillain Magneto attempts to hijack America's nuclear arsenal in *X-Men* #1 (September 1963). Gradually, the series shifted to increasingly have the X-Men fight mutants who represented a white, fear-distorted vision of emergent Black Power (Lund forthcoming, 2013).

The setting of a comic book can serve to underscore the cultural meaning of the series and to emphasize the spoken and unspoken themes that underlie it. Thus, it is interesting to note that the caption of the first panel in *X-Men* #1 reads: 'In the main study of an exclusive private school in New York's Westchester County, a strange silent man sits motionless, brooding ...' (reprinted in Lee et al. 1999). At the time, Westchester was largely regarded as a WASPish preserve (Jackson 2006: vii–viii). The first thing signalled to

readers about these new superheroes, then, was a spatial cue that connoted high social status. Indeed, throughout the earliest years of *X-Men* publication, the titular mutant heroes lived in a white suburban middle-class paradise. Emphatic references to Westchester were fairly common; they helped figure the X-Men as a model minority in contrast to 'evil mutant' stand-ins for communists and militant civil rights activists, who turned difference into a social ill.

After the liberal consensus that gave such a prominent place to American capitalism and consumption collapsed, and after writing transferred to Chris Claremont (1975–1991), the meaning of the Westchester school changed to reflect new social realities. It was even abandoned for long periods in favour of more escapist and less exceptionalist locales. Westchester's privilege itself was no longer left implicit (cf. *Uncanny X-Men* #139 in Claremont et al. 2002), and it was contrasted with the working-class or ethnic character of other places (e.g. *Uncanny X-Men* #130 in Claremont et al. 2002, or #223 in 2006). This paralleled a growing consciousness in the series of identity and greater sympathy for those deemed Other by the majority culture, as mutants became increasingly persecuted for their difference (cf. Lund 2013, forthcoming).

When Claremont left Marvel in 1991, other writers continued to build on the identity-momentum he had brought to the forefront. Other examples of space used to emphasize identity can be seen in the squalid conditions suffered by the underground-dwelling mutant outcast Morlocks who made appearances in the ongoing *Uncanny X-Men* series under Claremont (from #169 [May 1983] onward) and in their own Chicago-set miniseries in 2002 (Johns and Martinbrough 2002). The fictional island of Genosha has served as both a stand-in for Apartheid South Africa (cf. *Uncanny X-Men* #235–38 [Late October–Late November 1988] in Claremont et al. 2008, *Uncanny X-Men* #270–72, *New Mutants* #95–97, *X-Factor* #60–62 [November 1990–January 1991] in 2012; cf. Lund 2013: 344–46) and, in a sense, for Israel (Davis et al. 2002). The latter connection can also plausibly be drawn with suburban California in the 2004 *X-Treme X-Men* storyline 'intifada' (Claremont and Kordey 2004) and the foundation of a mutant homeland on the San Francisco Bay island 'Utopia' in 2009 (Fraction et al. 2009).

Rather than focusing on ethno-racial or class identities, Grant Morrison (*New X-Men*, 2001–2004) envisioned mutants as representing the younger generation, feared by the older one. Again, however, space was used to make the idea of mutants as a feared and hated people seem more believable, this time by adding around 150 mutants to the Westchester roster as a sign that the mutant population was growing rapidly (DeFalco 2006).

Space, then, has been a useful tool for mutant writers. However, many of the above-cited representations were inflected with a super heroic grandeur that was missing from the more 'grounded' representations of first-run *X-Men* Westchester or Claremont's sporadic street-scenes. While the representation of place and the meaning-making connected with it in all these cases deserves critical attention, this article focuses instead on a New York mutant slum, created in 2002 by Morrison and artist John Paul Leon, because of its comparative 'realism'.

'Mutant Town', or 'District X', was first introduced in *New X-Men* #127 (August 2002). After an establishing shot in which mutants can be seen openly using their powers, the scene cuts to two police officers: 'Go through it again, Dan', one of them says, 'we got the **gays** in one part of town, the poets in the other and the anarchists **here** and the copy editors **there**. Now we got militant

**mutants** setting up flags in Alphabet City. What happened to the nice, quiet **Melting Pot** they promised me?’ (Morrison et al. 2002: n.p.).<sup>1</sup> This dialogue, paralleled by an earlier scene set in Chinatown, marks the neighbourhood as an enclave. Indeed, this aspect of ‘Mutant Town’ has been remarked by fandom: ‘Morrison turned mutants into a subculture [...] He gave them their own Chinatown, their own Little Italy, and made it a point to show that mutants [...] were more than just mutant paramilitary teams’ (Brothers 2009; Morrison encourages this reading in DeFalco 2006: 234).

The neighbourhood made only a brief appearance during Morrison’s tenure, but it reappeared from time to time over the following years. Between November 2003 and October 2005, for example, Joe Quesada, working with artists Joshua Middleton (#1–4) and Robert Teranishi (#5–7), produced NYX (Quesada et al. 2006). Parts of the series took place in ‘District X’, but its scope was city-wide and its tone increasingly one of high-concept action. NYX was also spatially confused, in terms of both continuity and New York geography; the series’ ‘District X’ was on the Lower East Side (#7: n.p.), rather than in Morrison’s Alphabet City and, strangely, given Quesada’s above-quoted emphasis on ‘keeping the real world real’, the Lower East Side’s Essex Street was placed within the boundaries of Alphabet City (#6: n.p.; #7: n.p.). Thus, although ‘Mutant Town’ did make a few appearances between its creation and *District X*, it was not until Hine, Yardin and Medina’s series that the place became an area of sustained focus. It is with the configuration and characterization of mutant space therein that the rest of this article will be concerned.

## NEW YORK’S MUTANT SLUM: DYSTOPIA IMAGINED

In *District X*, the mutant and X-Man Bishop is called in to investigate rumours of an impending turf war between two rival gangs. As his guide to the area, he has local beat cop Ismael Ortega, who after a shooting involving his partner has been pulled from active duty, pending Internal Affairs investigation. The neighbourhood’s first appearance in *District X* #1 shows a place covered in graffiti outside and in hallways, but one in which indoor environments can seem almost lavish. The impression is also given that a sense of community exists, extending to a rapport between residents and the cops walking the beat. This image is quickly upset, however, with the first-issue revelation that ‘Mutant Town’ has the highest unemployment rate in the United States, the highest rate of illiteracy and the highest severe overcrowding outside of Los Angeles, as well as the nation’s highest crime rates for narcotics, prostitution, vehicular theft and burglary. ‘And that’s smack in the middle of what’s supposed to be the **safest** major city in the USA’ (#1: n.p.). To this litany was later added family homelessness.

These problems, however, were not that pervasive in the real-world Alphabet City of the day: during New York’s early-twentieth century rising homelessness ‘crisis’, the largest number of shelter-applying families were found in areas of the Bronx and in Brooklyn (Feerick et al. 2003: 39) and, ‘[i]n 2000, the Bronx had the highest percent of severely crowded households (10.0%), followed by Queens (8.8%), Brooklyn (7.1%), Manhattan (6.2%), and Staten Island (2.0%)’ (Feerick et al. 2003: 31). Crime in New York declined significantly throughout the 1990s (cf. Chauhan and Kois 2012) and crime rates in Alphabet City dropped by almost 57 per cent between 1993 and 2000 (Pekarchik 2001). Already in the first pages of *District X*, then, problems of representation appear. Although not fully gentrified, the nightmarish place

1. Boldface text in all *District X* quotes is found in the original.

described in *District X* #1 did not match empirical conditions in its model (cf. Mele 2000).

Nor did it match contemporary cultural representation of the neighbourhood. Granted, Alphabet City, which gets its name from its enclosure of Manhattan Avenues A, B, C and D, is part of an area that has long been associated with poverty, ethnicity and despair, and was once known by the 'alarming if not particularly clever acronym of Assault, Battery, Crime and Death' (Campion 2003; Mele 2000). Following a period of real estate disinvestment, municipal neglect and abandonment beginning in the 1970s (Mele 2000: 180–200), the neighbourhood evoked 'images of burned-out buildings, rubbish-strewn lots, squatters and drug dealers' (Brozan 2000). By the year 2000, however, 'as prices soar[ed] and crime rates tumble[d]', the area had acquired 'a patina of affluence and stylishness' (Brozan 2000; cf. Mele 2000: 209). 'Alphabet City certainly seem[ed] the place to be [by] 2001' (Pekarchik 2001). As one restaurant review noted half a year before *District X* premiered: 'Once everyone wanted to escape Alphabet City, but now it has attracted refugees from one of the snottiest parts of town [the Upper East Side]' (Burros 2004).

At the time of *District X*'s publication, following uneven gentrification that had begun in the 1980s, Alphabet City was a contested space, marked by tensions based in classed, political, economic and ethno-racial difference (cf. Mele 2000: 236–54; Campion 2003; Ferguson 2002). When *District X* came out, rising rents were pushing out lower-income residents, but luxurious bistros and \$2000/month studio apartments shared the neighbourhood with public housing projects and 'you [could] still spot a junkie, but they [were not] nodding off on street corners the way they used to' (Hartocollis 2002; cf. Brozan 2000; Pekarchik 2001). By emphasizing squalor and extreme rates of crime and illiteracy, and by drawing sharp distinctions between 'Mutant Town' and its surroundings, the real-world neighbourhood's diversity is erased in representation and the area becomes instead a dystopian caricature (cf. Robinson 2010; cf. Mele 2000: 186–88). Through its invocation of the mediated site of New York, then, the series presents a place that is simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar (cf. Yockey 2005); it is from these changes in spatial characterization and cultural representation that *District X*'s myth emerges.

### 'MR. M': DECAY AND DESPAIR ON THE STREETS

At the beginning of *District X*'s first story arc, 'Mr. M' (#1–6, July–December 2004, reprinted in Hine et al. 2005), Ortega's partner Gus provides a closed-minded contrast to the protagonist. He calls the place 'District X', he says, because

**X** marks the **spot**, right? See, I figure some city planner took a big fat marker and drew a big fat **X** on the map of Manhattan and he said 'that's where we dump the trash.' All the ugly, twisted **freaks**, and they're ours to 'serve and protect'.

(#1: n.p.)

As the series begins to establish its sense of place, the first call Ortega and Gus respond to is a domestic one; a man is keeping his wife prisoner in a run-down apartment because he thinks that the sound of her voice makes men fall in love with her. The visit ends with Gus falling under the woman's spell and

killing her and her husband. The shooting leads to the Internal Affairs investigation that introduces Bishop and sets the plot proper in motion.

As so often in the history of Alphabet City's cultural representation, the series strikes a somewhat symbolically inclusive note (cf. Mele 2000), and some initial overtures are made to counter Gus' 'trash' label. Thus, in the second issue, Ortega and Bishop go to check out a disturbance in an apartment where a man who hatches rat-like creatures out of boils on his body disgusts his neighbours. Once, his powers produced beautiful creatures, but unemployment has led him to drink, and drinking has caused him to spiral further. The scene is sympathetically portrayed and the mutant aspect, albeit conspicuous, does not detract from the parallel drawn with poverty brought on by an inability to work or get disability assistance due to suffering from a non-recognized medical condition. Indeed, in a later call-back to this scene, Ortega tells another cop that the man 'produces physical manifestations of his current emotional disposition'. When the cop has trouble understanding, one of the man's sons clarifies: 'He hatches **vermin**' (#7: n.p.). This works well as a metaphor for the potential cumulative negative effects of slum life. But it also sets the tone of the series, which is predominantly one of urban decay and despair.

Soon after the house call, the main plot begins to intrude. This plot draws heavily on tropes and discourses connected with an increasingly powerful 'law and order' discourse in America that has helped usher in an era of racially slanted mass incarceration in the 'War on Drugs' that began in the early 1980s (Alexander 2012: 40–58, 60). In 'Mr. M', a gang war is brewing between two neighbourhood mutant factions who both want to control the flow of the powerful new drug 'Toad Juice', distilled from the bodily fluids of a mutant known as Toad Boy. Daniel 'Shaky' Kaufman's gang kidnaps Toad Boy from 'Filthy' Frankie Zapruder. Almost immediately, it turns out that the ingestion of the mutant DNA in the drug causes 'massive genetic trauma' in non-mutants (#2–3). There is a multiple-issue build-up of the 'Toad Juice' thread, but the storyline ends abruptly after Toad Boy is made human by the powerful mutant Absolom Zebardy Mercator, or 'Mr. M', because this transformation causes the supply to dry up (#4: n.p.). Things escalate quickly. Zapruder bombs one of Kaufman's clubs and Kaufman sends heavily armed gangsters against Zapruder in retaliation. A cinematic shootout ensues, in which, among other things, Zapruder launches a rocket-propelled grenade at Kaufman. This plot is then also neatly wrapped up, with the bosses and their gangs arrested in a single 'bust' (#5–6).

With the drug and the gangs off the streets, the only storyline that remains to be wrapped up is the story of Absolom Mercator, who is introduced as a somewhat introverted but helpful and congenial resident of 'Mutant Town'. Starting out as an observer, by the end of the arc he has been convinced by the course of events that he is a monster and sets out to destroy the neighbourhood. As far as he knows, he succeeds, but immediately comes to regret having levelled most of 'Mutant Town' with a powerful blast of mutant energy. The destruction is only an illusion, however, projected by a mutant with the power to show anyone anything they want, while Bishop uses his own power to absorb Mercator's blast and save the neighbourhood (cf. #5: n.p.).

*District X* starts off as a relatively grounded police procedural. Threads of that kind of drama (told in the *X-Men* comics' soap operatic style) run throughout, most notably and consistently in Ortega's character arc, which centres on his increasingly unstable home life. Much of the tension comes

from his wife Armena being a mutant, a difference that is further emphasized by her sympathy for Cuba (#5: n.p.). The series also reproduces a 'made-for-TV' image of the American justice system that 'perpetuates the myth that the primary function of the system is to keep our streets safe and our homes secure by rooting out dangerous criminals and punishing them', while at the same time obscuring the very different and often brutal racialized reality of law enforcement (Alexander 2012: 59).

From early on, *District X*'s tendency is away from portraying mutants as a 'subculture'; the strand of social realism that is introduced in the early issues is increasingly interwoven with much thicker strands of action cinema and television, science fiction and superhero comics. If the purpose of showing the street-life of mutants is to use the trope of mutantcy as a way of commenting on marginality and Otherness, then the series' inability to divorce itself from the trappings and tropes of less realistic genres leads it astray and helps cement its failures of identity.

As already noted, allegorization of identity is a recurrent phenomenon in Marvel's mutant comics and the attempt to make mutantcy stand in for extradiegetic identities quickly becomes heavy-handed in *District X*, as it often has in earlier publications (cf. Shyminsky 2006). As Bishop and Ortega investigate Toad Boy's kidnapping, Bishop is worried that the turf war has begun. Ortega tries to calm him down, noting that these are not mutants with dangerous powers: 'Maybe they have an extra digit or two [...] [m]aybe they just smell bad'. Bishop replies: 'This is no joke, Izzy. There's a question of **public perception**. Being a mutant is like being black. You can be a black check out [*sic*] clerk or the black heavyweight champion of the world ... but first thing you are is **black**. Same thing with mutants' (#3: n.p.).

There is a point to this statement; ever since the invention of 'blackness' as a supposedly inferior contrast to reified 'whiteness', black skin has been used to motivate physical, psychological and economic segregation and systematic oppression of slaves, Southern blacks under Jim Crow and African Americans nationally in the ongoing and racially slanted 'War on Drugs', to name a few examples (cf. Roediger 2010; Alexander 2012). The invocation of blackness and the problems connected with it in the public imaginary, then, would appear to be a call for justice and equality in accordance with America's founding ideals and promises, or at least an acknowledgement that such calls exist. But Bishop's comment quickly emerges as rhetorical gesturing, a symbolic use, or appropriation of, identity that is not followed by a sustained attempt of imagining and empathizing with what 'being black' might mean; a mere two pages later, for example, the allegorical enlistment of blackness is revealed to be shallow and flippant, when mutantcy becomes a source of humour. When Zapruder, who exudes a pungent odour when angered, finds out that Kaufman has taken Toad Boy, he becomes agitated, at which point his 'girl', holding her nose, interrupts with a protracted 'Frankieeee ... [...] It's just ... you know how it is when you get **upset**'. Zapruder replies: 'You don't like the way I **smell**, you get out of my face!' (#3: n.p.).

This failure to sustain and advance a progressive perspective could be called disappointing, given that Marvel's extended mutant franchise has increasingly been styled as supposedly sympathizing with minorities and the marginalized. But it is also, as political scientist Neil Shyminsky has pointed out, unexpected: 'While the popularly accepted suggestion [...] is that *X-Men* espouses a progressive politics of inclusion and tolerance, a deeper textual analysis would seem to reveal the opposite' (2006: 388). Indeed, a failure

of identity – and inability or unwillingness to ‘shift identities imaginatively’ and to inhabit the position of the Other (cf. Michael 2008: 18–20) – a lack of sympathy and a reductive view on structural and social problems disproportionately affecting the type of poorer areas that the series tries to represent runs throughout ‘Mr. M’s’ storylines, cascading out from the use of blackness quoted above.

A rash of drug abuse in ‘Mutant Town’ is an unsurprising introduction in a series that claims a neighbourhood that was once known as the ‘drug capital of America’ and that was produced in a climate where drugs had been propelled into the centre of American discourse (Mele 2000: 212–13, vii, 197–200; Alexander 2012). In combination with the increasing violence between the gangs vying for control of the drug market, it even coincidentally produces a parallel with history: ‘Historically, crime increases were linked to drugs and/or drug markets. The NYC homicide peaks in 1972, 1979, and 1991 mirrored the drug epidemics of heroin, powder cocaine, and crack cocaine, respectively’ (Chauhan and Kois 2012: 7). There is a significant difference to how the violence ends, however. In *District X*, where a SWAT team intercedes and arrests the belligerent gangsters, two major ‘Drug War’ myths are reproduced: that the main targets of SWAT raids are ‘kingpins’ and that the ‘War’ is primarily concerned with dangerous drugs, when the heavily armed paramilitary units are, in fact, most commonly deployed to serve warrants for small offences (cf. Alexander 2012: 60, 74–78, 79–82, 92).

Conversely, violence related to the New York crack and heroin markets abated as distribution went ‘from public spaces to underground places using delivery services, beeper services, and house connections located in less public, private spaces’ and ‘[t]he crime drop coincided with a shift in the way drug markets operated rather than with a decline of drug use’ (Chauhan and Kois 2012: 7). Rudy Giuliani’s ‘broken window’ or misdemeanour policing, which is often credited as a reason for New York’s declining crime rates, it seems, deserves little of this praise. Rather, the drop followed a longer national trend (Angotti 2008: 203–05; Chauhan and Kois 2012). Juxtaposing story and history like this makes Bishop’s comment after the big bust stand out all the more as simultaneously praise of the police and anxiety about their failures: ‘[A]t least we got to arrest **someone** this time’ (#6: n.p.). In the comic, the police provide a happy ending that neatly contains and ends an urban problem in a way that they have not managed in the real world (cf. also Mele 2000: 239–40). The guilty are punished and off the streets, but there is no consideration of rehabilitation of Toad Boy’s addicted and emaciated mother, who resembles nothing so much as the ‘crack whore’ made famous by ‘Drug War’-era media discourse.

Making the crack-like ‘Toad Juice’ mutant-based is narratively unnecessary. Doing so not only (unsurprisingly) suggest that the emphasis in production was on tying the series deeper into the larger Marvel Universe, rather than attempting critical social commentary within a popular franchise, as mutantcy ostensibly allows; but it also reproduces a racialized and inaccurate public discourse about the distribution and consumption of dangerous drugs that has been dominant since the mid-1980s (Alexander 2012: 51–53). Indeed, the drug’s mutant origin undercuts any corrective progressive ‘public perception’ potential the mutant trope might provide, since it makes the drug stem from the mutant community’s explicitly and hence highly problematically racialized essence; the only way for Toad Boy to stop corrupting the world is to be made non-mutant (i. e., ‘non-black’), because the corruption comes from the very heart of what he is.

The mutant base also mediates 'Drug War' assumptions by telling readers that, while the drug is a nuisance to the mutant ('black') population, it is deadly to the finer class of non-mutant people living outside 'District X', perpetuating the fiction that drug sales mainly occur in ghettos and that it is their population that does the selling to each other and to otherwise innocent whites (Alexander 2012: 98–100). The purveyors and users of 'Toad Juice' might be drawn with white skin (but never as WASPs) in the comic, but the earlier coding of mutantcy as blackness and deep media coding of the 'black' drug user and trafficker (Alexander 2012: 105–06, 197–200, 205) connect the storyline to the 'Drug War's' 'us' (whites) vs 'them' (blacks) scheme.

The treatment of Absalom Mercator, the titular 'Mr. M', further entrenches the storyline's failure of identity with the residents of poorer urban areas. Having tired of doing nothing as he saw the neighbourhood declining, Mercator decides to act, only to find himself doing harm at almost every turn: 'So in the past three days I have told a man that he has **murder** in his heart ... I have made a young boy **normal**, and taken away what made him **unique** ... I killed a man ... and I have saved the life of another' (#4). He soon snaps and becomes convinced that he is 'a **destroyer** [...] a **monster** [...] put here to **end** the misery. I'm going to wipe Mutant Town off the **face of the Earth!**' (#6: n.p.).

Art can choose whether to convey or inspire both despair and hope in response to real or imagined blight. Philosopher Marshall Berman noted how in the midst of the desolation that for decades plagued the Bronx, a sense of hope and ordinariness could flourish through the application of labour and spirit ([1982] 2010: 343–45) and that 'social disintegration and existential desperation can be sources of life and energy' (2010: 135). For Berman, this was the 'real message' of Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's 1982 hip hop classic 'The Message'; the song told listeners that the kids who made it 'come from the ruins, but [...] are not ruined'. They had 'been through great losses without losing themselves. Not only had their suffering not destroyed their idealism: in some mysterious way, their suffering had *created* idealism' (2010: 135).

Similarly opposing the urban decay that plagued the city from the 1960s onward with culture and cooperation, homesteaders and squatters in the Bronx, Harlem and Brooklyn took action to save their neighbourhoods by taking over thousands of buildings (Angotti 2008: 97–101). Comparable developments took place on the Lower East Side and in the East Village in the 1970s and 1980s. Following a long neighbourhood history of collective action, Puerto Rican residents started combining cultural work with strikes and demonstrations to resist crime and abandonment. Squatters, homesteaders, activists and punks occupied and attempted to rehabilitate bombed-out buildings, some keeping up their efforts well into the twenty-first century (Mele 2000: 200–212). Over the years, often against police pressure, the squatters 'helped start one of the city's first recycling programs, set up food co-ops, and were among the local groups that established the Lower East Side People's Federal Credit Union' (Ferguson 2002). For all the conflict they engendered, homesteading and squatting, along with community gardening, were 'movements that demonstrated the success of community reclamation as the means to combat physical and social decay' (Mele 2000: 210).

Conversely, in *District X*, 'Mutant Town's' invented, projected and exaggerated decay and Mercator's brief adversity lead to a conscious decision to demolish the neighbourhood. With the power he had been given by his writer,

Mercator could have been made a creator, a source of hope and renewal coming from within a community that readers are ostensibly supposed to sympathize with. Through his negative portrayal, Mercator instead becomes a caricature who represents the idea that, without outside intervention, poor communities will destroy themselves. Despite the fact that this idea is powerfully challenged by the persistence of the Lower East Side and East Village squats, homesteads and community gardens, he cannot be trusted with his own neighbourhood. After Bishop prevents 'Mutant Town's' destruction, he asks Mercator '[c]an we arrest you now? Or do you want to do this all over again?' (#6: n.p.). The despairing slum-resident, then, is not only blamed for the deterioration of his neighbourhood, but also chastised for giving in to desperation and anger and then taken off the streets where he is out of view (cf. Alexander 2012: 144, 175–76).

A couple of instances of 'slumming' appear in *District X*: Greenwich Village non-mutants go mutant-club-hopping in #3 and, in #7, Ortega's sister hosts an art show 'in spitting distance of Mutant Town', because it '[g]ives it that edge of authenticity' (n.p.). This is perhaps where the series comes closest to reflecting the Alphabet City of its day. By the millennium, the East Village landscape in which Alphabet City is located had become a brand name and cultural commodity that promised a controlled measure of danger and difference (Mele 2000). By August 2002, 'moneyed folk' were moving in '[b]ecause it's cool. It's about living on the edge, being Bohemian, but with lots of money' (Jacobs 2002). Readers are arguably invited to do the same and to consume a controlled measure of mediated danger and difference.

As Neil Shyminsky points out, the readership of Marvel's mutant stories is predominantly white and male, and the franchise 'appeals largely to an audience that cannot share in the experience of being either female or black in a socio-economic system dominated by white men' (2006: 390–91). Considering that habitual comics reading requires a fair amount of disposable money, it is safe to assume that the deepest recesses of poverty are similarly beyond the horizon of the mutant stories' largely middle-class consumers. As written, despite its protagonists being black (Bishop) and Cuban (Ortega), *District X's* symbolic inclusivity is constrained by white privilege and middle-class conceptions of difference and poverty. Only because the target audience remains at a safe distance from its realities, and because the series recalls and reproduces a 'flawed public consensus' that is 'indifferent, at best, to the experience of poor people of color' (Alexander 2012: 233–34), can slum life be portrayed as utter devastation and the police as the only force capable of stopping further decay.

### **'UNDERGROUND': THE TERROR OF THE HOMELESS**

Like 'Mr. M', *District X's* second arc, 'Underground' (issues #7–12, January–June 2005, reprinted in Hine and Medina 2005), initially shows 'Mutant Town' from the level of the streets, beginning with the introduction of a young mutant addict who is living with the homeless 'tunnel rats' in abandoned subway tunnels (#7–8). Again, things escalate quickly as the 'rats', led by Melek the Telepath, black out half of Manhattan with the help of strategically placed explosives (#8). The 'rats' send a letter to city hall, telling the people of New York that 'we will continue to deprive you of your power until the hostility towards underground dwellers has ceased'. The mayor wants to send in SWAT teams, but Ortega worries because he has heard that 'the tunnel people have **serious** weaponry stashed away down there'. Bishop agrees,

noting that he has managed to negotiate a three-day reprieve to find out who is behind the attack (#9). In the end, Bishop and Ortega find the 'rats' and try to broker a one-sided deal; come to the surface within 24 hours or SWAT will clear the tunnels by force (#10: n.p.). The 'rats', they say, will be treated well. Some comply, while others move deeper underground.

A second plotline involves Winston Hobbes, also called the Worm because of his worm-like appearance. Abandoned by his homeless parents at a young age, he takes advantage of the blackouts to seek revenge on his old social services case worker, who recommended to his parents that they not take him out of state care when they got their lives together. Although Hobbes is at times portrayed as a child looking for his parents, he is made out to be ultimately irredeemable. Ortega refuses to kill Hobbes when he has the chance, but this sympathy is repaid only by the boy escalating his killing spree. Adding to Hobbes' list of crimes, and sealing his Otherness, it is also revealed that he is a cannibal (#11–12).

The 'tunnel rats' have well-known real-world precedents. Groups of homeless people living in abandoned tunnels under New York have been reported on for years, the most famous being one that lived in the Amtrak tunnel running beneath Riverside Park until they were evicted in 1996 (Voeten 2010). *District X's* dreadlocked Melek shares several characteristics with Bernard, one of the Amtrak tunnel homeless who himself repeatedly articulated a homespun critique of civilization (Voeten 2010: 20–22) and who made numerous media appearances over the years. Unlike Melek, however, Bernard was much more likely to respond to police mistreatment by alerting the media than resorting to violence (cf. 66).

Journalist Teun Voeten, who lived in the Amtrak tunnel for five months, notes that when New York's 'tunnel people' first caught the public's eye, '[t]he subterranean world was painted as Dante's Inferno, making Dickens' gloomiest scenes seem just a picnic' (2010: 2). They were called 'mole people' or CHUDs, 'humanoid cannibalistic underground dwellers', inspired by the 1984 horror film of that name. Urban legends about subway workers who ended their days as food for these people flourished. In short, they were sensationalized.

Similar things happen in *District X*. The entrance to the 'rat's' tunnel is tagged with a Dante reference: 'Abandon all hope ye who enter' (#7: n.p.), suggesting that life for those living underground is hell. More noteworthy is 'Underground's' use of the CHUD label (#9: n.p.; #10: n.p.). Bugman, a fanged and inhuman-looking mutant, tells a newcomer what it means: 'They make up stories. Say we eat dogs 'n' rats. And when we get **really** hungry ... we eat **each other** ... Ah, don't worry. It ain't true ... I never ate me a **dawg** yet'. At the last sentence, the visuals zoom in on Bugman's face, prominently displaying his sharp teeth (#9: n.p.). This scene is intentionally ambiguous as to whether he has truly eaten a human being or is just being facetious. But while the term is bandied about by cops whom readers are supposed to regard as narrow-minded, any effect this negative figuration might have is counteracted by the macabre final-issue discovery of a chamber full of bones and corpses that confirms that Hobbes indeed habitually imbibes of human flesh (#12: n.p.).

Beyond 'Underground's' simultaneous rejection and confirmation of homelessness-related fears, it rhetorically punishes the 'rats' for their refusal to participate in society even when it rejects them, much like other series have done with the Morlocks and other mutant foes (cf. Shyminsky 2006: 395–96). Making a speech to his 'tunnel rats' on the eve of the blackout, Melek goes

from evoking sympathy to painting the homeless as a menace in the course of a single full-page panel:

Today, once again the so-called **welfare services** have **raided** our community. Once again they have taken **children** from us. Once again the parents have been promised their children will be **returned** to them when they leave the tunnels and find “acceptable” occupations. **You** know how their song goes. You **also** know how often their promises are **kept**. Their world has **rejected** us, but they will **never** leave us in peace. [...] They give us no choice. Today we stop running. Today we stand and **fight**.  
(#8: n.p.)

Telling his people about the explosives that have been placed around Manhattan, Melek ends his speech by saying that those who live above ‘will learn how **fragile** the structure of their so-called civilization truly is’ (#8: n.p.). When police continue to raid their homes, Melek responds that ‘[a]pparently, they didn’t **hear** our message. This time we’ll have to shout **louder**’ (#9: n.p.). Through this, the arc figures the homeless as threats to society, rather than as examples of its failure (cf. Feerick et al. 2003: 1, 12; Voeten 2010: 136–50; Alexander 2012: 146–48).

As the arc draws to a close, the ‘tunnel rat’ camp is divided. The first group accepts the system’s overtures, despite knowing that they might lose their children if they surface. Indeed, the probability of this and the superficiality of the promises of fair treatment are made explicit when Bishop, the protagonist and ostensible hero of the story, tells a social worker joining him to meet the returnees and bring them up from the tunnels: ‘Just one thing. If it comes up, the kids won’t be separated from their families. Okay? [...] What you say later, when you’ve got them above ground, is up to you. But while we’re down here, I suggest you tell them exactly what they want to hear’ (#11: n.p.). The second group, which chooses instead to move deeper underground, pays for its refusal to play by the system’s disadvantageous rules by being slaughtered by Hobbes, almost to a man (only Melek survives).

Notable in ‘Underground’s’ focus on homelessness are several correspondences with contemporary and recent historical events and discourses. At the time when *District X* was being produced, the City of New York publicized a new, family-focused plan to tackle the city’s ‘surging homelessness’ (Kaufman 2004), and it was noted in several places that almost half of those moving through the shelter system were children (Feerick et al. 2003: 1; Whyte 2004). Thus, as is evident by ‘Underground’s’ repeated mentions of children as a prime concern, the ‘Mutant Town’ situation is figured in relation to the situation on the streets of New York at the time of writing.

The ‘rats’ attack on New York was not the first time that a connection between homelessness and terrorism had been made in the city. Captain Bryan Henry of the Amtrak police explained one important reason for the transit company’s 1996 decision to evict the homeless, who had lived in the tunnel with their consent for years: ‘Listen [...] Not only Amtrak, but also the government wants to bring the tunnels under control. The World Trade Center, Oklahoma City, everybody is scared of new terrorist attacks’ (Voeten 2010: 259). The threat of terrorism was again in the air after the attacks on September 11, 2001. Given the historical precedent and the current political climate, it is entirely unsurprising that it would be applied to a perceived threat in New York in the early 2000s.

Arguably, there are also echoes in *District X* of the forcible eviction of homeless squatters, who had been fenced out of most other public places in the city, from Tompkins Square Park on 3 June 1991 (Kifner 1991; Mele 2000: 268–71). A similar series of events plays out in *District X* and the rhetoric used shows some noteworthy resemblances, although it should be stressed that any similarities are probably unintentional. Nonetheless, rhetoric surrounding events linger in discourse even as the events themselves begin to fade into memory and continue to affect social figuration and reproduction as well as identity formations (cf. Omi and Winant 1994). (It is worth noting parenthetically that Tompkins Square Park is where Ortega first learns about the ‘tunnel rats’ in #8.)

The Tompkins eviction took place as a response to mounting problems with homeless people since January and a riot on Memorial Day, but a main goal was to make the park uninhabitable for the squatters. As Mayor David Dinkins put it:

Tompkins Square Park is the only city park without a curfew. It is the only city park that has become a concentrated tent city for homeless people. It is the only city park that cannot be used by the public as a park – the atmosphere is disturbing, disruptive and dangerous’ (Kifner 1991; according to that same article, ‘[s]everal of the homeless people and their sympathizers said the city was bowing to the wishes of a minority in the neighborhood, traditionally a home of poor immigrants and bohemians, but now increasingly gentrified’).

Thus, ‘[m]ore than 350 police officers, some in riot helmets, converged on the park shortly after 5 a.m. in a show of force that gradually pushed out about 200 homeless people’. Similarly, the eviction of the ‘tunnel rats’ occurs in response to their attacks on New York’s infrastructure and on New Yorkers’ peace of mind, a contemporary concern condensed in mediation, in a manner that is particularly easy for comics to produce given the medium’s penchant (or need) to simplify and stereotype, into a threat that can be (and ultimately is) defeated.

Also part of both evictions is the destruction of the make-shift homes made out of scrounged materials, performed by police and sanitation workers in Tompkins Square Park and by the NYPD in *District X*, a mission explicitly mentioned when Ortega and Bishop accompany a couple of officers underground. However, even the most hardened and seemingly racist ‘Mutant Town’ cops serve a good end in doing this: ‘These people live down here with the rats. They live in **filth**. They scavenge food from dumpsters’, one NYPD officer tells Ortega and Bishop. ‘Up in the world, there are official shelters where they can get food, clothes, and a bed. They **ask** us, we **take** them there’ (#10: n.p.). Here, too, long-standing rhetoric about homelessness is reproduced. Police, government agents and citizens often stress the existence of shelters, presenting them as a solution rather than a limited stop-gap measure.

But the homeless themselves are often critical of shelters. The Tompkins Square homeless did not welcome the offer of shelter. As one reporter noted, ‘[a] number of the homeless people said they were afraid to go to city-sponsored shelters because the shelters were dangerous’ (Kifner 1991). While Teun Voeten stayed with the Amtrak ‘tunnel people’ in the mid-1990s, police in Riverside Park told him that they could bring them to shelters, to which he replied that ‘it is pretty ok down there’ (2010: 66). One of the ‘tunnel people’

himself echoed the sentiment, adding that the shelters were 'just like jail' (2010: 105–06). Others had even worse things to say (cf. 2010: 34, 86, 150, 167, 207). Furthermore, while the shelter system took in many of New York's homeless families at the turn of the millennium, the eligibility among young families was around 50 per cent (Feerick et al. 2003: 20–22). Homeless New Yorkers interviewed about shelters in January 2004 remarked that it was difficult to find a spot. Some had serious issues with how the system treated them: 'They are supposed to be helping us, but they are not', said one, while others remarked that '[l]iving like this is like living in a prison' and that '[c]onditions here are terrible [...] They treat people like garbage' (Whyte 2004).

A self-described advocate and teacher for the homeless said in 1991 that by sending the homeless away, '[t]hey [the city] are about to assassinate people' (Kifner 1991). While there is some questioning of the purity of the officers' motives and a seeming expression of pity for the homeless in *District X*, the situation in the comic is the same as in 1991; the intransigent 'Mutant Town' homeless are similarly rhetorically 'assassinated' by their writer. No attempt to imaginatively 'shift identities' or to empathize with the marginal is made; they are either vilified and punished or their agency is discounted. The fact that the 'rats' who choose to stay underground are slaughtered en masse sends a disciplining message to the homeless that they, of course, will likely never hear: the choice is between shelters and oblivion. To readers, this provides an alibi for not taking notice of the homeless outside the shelter system; they have made their choice.

### **MUTOPIA X: NO LONGER DIFFERENT**

The entire Marvel Universe changed (temporarily) in June 2005, as the company-wide crossover 'House of M' began. Branching out into multiple tie-ins, the event was centred around the miniseries *House of M* (Bendis et al. 2006). In it, the mutant Scarlet Witch suffers a nervous breakdown and uses her powerful reality-altering abilities to remake the world. After a flash of white light, Earth is transformed into a place in which her friends and family's wishes have come true. Since her father is the mutant supremacist villain Magneto, this world is one in which mutants rule and most humans are second-class citizens. A resistance movement emerges, composed of superheroes who know roughly what has happened and set out to put the world aright. The series ends with a confrontation in which the Scarlet Witch proclaims that there will be 'no more mutants' (#8). After another flash of light, the world is restored, but the mutant population has been decimated from anywhere up to an estimated million down to 198.

As a tie-in to this event, *District X* was retitled *Mutopia X* for a five-issue run before it was cancelled (September 2005–January 2006, reprinted in Hine and Medina 2006). Given Marvel's track record with the use of mutantcy as an anchor for allegorical Otherness discussed above, 'House of M's' premise could easily have led to a terror-fantasy about the Other's revenge. But the writing is arguably sensitive enough to that potential to frame dialogue and events in ways that escape this trap. *Mutopia X* similarly stays more or less away from this thread. Instead, it focuses on intertextually rehashing various narrative elements from *District X*, like retelling the conflict between Kaufman and Zapruder, revisioning a few peripheral characters and seeing Ortega's daughter shot, as she had been in an earlier issue (Hine et al. 2005: #5, n.p.), all with slight differences connected with the new privilege enjoyed by mutants.

As the storyline begins, Ortega is at the entrance to the 'rats' tunnels, complaining about what his private life has become to a 'Mutant Town' resident whose mutation has turned him into a tree. The scene then flashes to Ortega and his wife in a luxurious apartment in the posh neighbourhood that 'District X' has become after instant Scarlet Witch-powered mutant gentrification. This transition occurs just as Ortega opens a fruit that falls from the mutant tree. In the alternative universe, readers are shown how these fruits allow mutants suffering from 'arrested genetic development' to unlock their mutations and realize their full potential (Hine and Medina 2006: #2, n.p.). As the world is restored to its former state, however, and the scene returns to Ortega holding the same fruit, it is instead crawling with insects (#4: n.p.). What empowered the Other in a world where it had power is, in the 'real' world, something disgusting, irrevocably tainted by its environment.

At the end of *House of M*, the disappearance of the great majority of mutants is framed as a tragedy through several expressions of sadness and horror, as 'the extinction of an entire species' (Bendis et al. 2006: #8, n.p.). Conversely, in *Mutopia X*, when Ortega leaves the tunnels and witnesses the effects of the 'Decimation', traumatic losses of identity are pushed to the periphery. There is chaos all over, as people have lost their powers in the middle of 'phasing' intangibly through the ground or while in flight, but the only person Ortega talks to is overjoyed by his transformation. The former mutant Bugman can only think about how he now looks 'like a movie star' and says that he is heading to the 'nearest singles bar ... and I am going to get **laid!**' (#5: n.p.). Again, the mutant franchise's historical tendency towards failures of empathy is realized. The scene recalls, for instance, one of the final issues of the first-run *X-Men* (#63, December 1969, in Thomas et al. 2009), wherein the titular heroes express their own desire to be 'normal' and rid of what sets them apart. In that issue, the X-Men denounced not only separatist identity-based ideology, but also resisted diversity and de-emphasized difference in favour of a fundamental human unity and sameness that condemned those on society's periphery who demanded a change in circumstances (cf. Lund forthcoming). The impression left by the scene is that the Other wants only to be 'normal' (i.e. 'white'). For readers who remember *District X*'s use of blackness as an allegorical touchstone cited above, the Bugman moment in *Mutopia X* invites a similar reading.

The final scene of *Mutopia X* sends a similar message. After a few rapid turns in the Ortega family drama, which include their daughter's death, Ismael is reunited with his wife and son. For the first time in years, the spouses can sleep in the same bed, something they have been unable to do because of her mutant power: upon falling asleep, a protective bubble would envelope her. This caused Ortega much emotional pain, since all he wanted to do was to hold her when she slept (Hine et al. 2005: #2, n.p.). As their son crawls into bed with his parents in their middle-class and ethno-religiously unmarked apartment, the visuals turn to Bishop standing on a rooftop, musing to himself:

This has been a long day. For some, it was a day of tragedy, for others, a blessed relief. I guess they won't be calling this Mutant Town any more, or District X. People will talk about this as the place mutants used to live. There was no plague. No mass slaughter ... they just stopped being mutants.

(Hine and Medina 2006: #5, n.p.)

The last sentence is juxtaposed with a picture of the Ortegas slumbering peacefully; finally happy together, because no longer different.

To solve 'Mutant Town's' problems, then, and in the face of impending cancellation, *House of M's* 'decimation' becomes in *District X* an opportunity to resort to a version of what Marshall Berman described as dissolution, 'the radical solution' to the problem of the urban Other: 'tear the boulevards down, turn off the bright lights, expel and resettle the people, kill the sources of beauty and joy that the modern city has brought into being' ([1982] 2010: 154).

### **A RIDE-ALONG IN 'MUTANT TOWN': CONCLUDING REMARKS**

By placing 'Mutant Town' in Alphabet City, *District X* cannot escape expressing itself politically. As already noted, at the time the series was produced and published, the neighbourhood was a contested space. Gentrification brought the middle classes into contact with 'undesirable' (homeless, working class and non-white) elements, even as these elements were being increasingly displaced. The neighbourhood's old guard – the squatters and homesteaders, perhaps even the remaining junkies – had 'become, in an odd way, preservationists – both of their buildings and some margin of the neighborhood's eclectic roots' (Ferguson 2002). And as so often before, the homeless kept being pushed out of sight because they were reminders that something is wrong in society (Voeten 2010: 194; Mele 2000). The problem bubbling in the modern unconscious, that surfaces in *District X*, is that these urban Others simply will not go away (cf. Berman [1982] 2010: 148–55; Alexander 2012: 143–44).

As quoted above, Ortega's partner Gus calls the neighbourhood 'District X' because '**X** marks the **spot** [...] where we dump all the trash' (#1: n.p.). This is what happens when Alphabet City is imaginatively mapped and narratively populated. The neighbourhood is characterized as a cauldron of dangerous urban problems 'smack in the middle of what's supposed to be the **safest** major city in the USA' (#1: n.p.), a nowhere land of middle-class urban fears. Urban geographer Jennifer Robinson notes: 'By creating exaggerated, defamiliarizing or satirical but recognizable alternative worlds, *critical dystopias* stir readers to identify the injustices and power relations of the present. They open spaces of possibility for challenging these forms of power, now rendered more recognizable' (Robinson 2010: 220, original emphasis).

Dystopian 'District X' most certainly is an exaggerated, defamiliarized, perhaps even occasionally satirical alternative world. But it is hardly recognizable and the series' identification of power relations is not followed by suggestions for how to challenge them. To the contrary, at times it unreflectively supports them. In Neil Shyminsky's words, '[w]hile its stated mission is to promote acceptance of minorities of all kinds, *X-Men* has not only failed to adequately *redress* issues of inequality – it actually *reinforces* inequality' (2006: 389, original emphasis). While Bishop and Ortega serve and protect the people of 'Mutant Town', the series instead polices a boundary of identity, empathy and imagination. *District X's* 'oppressive' force is ultimately not that of a dominant culture bearing down on the marginalized, but that of the marginal trying to creep out from the shadows and infect the centre. Readers are not asked to inhabit the world of the dispossessed, but rather are invited on a ride-along, a voyeuristic tour of the slum that once was and might be again, unless the wheels of progress and urban renewal keep turning.

Thus, *District X* condenses, mediates and puts a selection of urban problems on display – crime, drugs, homelessness, increased overcrowding and

self-destructive desperation – and proceeds to show how official discipline provides their solution, telling readers that police intervention has the power to get rid of them (cf. Berman [1982] 2010: 154). This places the series in a curious continuity with the history of how the East Village has been represented and rhetorically fulfils goals sought by area real estate developers and speculators since the 1980s, during which time ‘unwelcome, intrusive, or unappealing social behaviours have been increasingly criminalized’. In actions sanctioned by developers, conservative community groups and members of the local community board, the police force has been used to ‘hem in the public social and cultural activities of undesirables, namely the homeless and some minority and poor residents’ (Mele 2000: 299).

Through its example, the comic book tells readers that force in favour of clearing out radical difference in the neighbourhood and making it into a space fit for ‘normal’ people is natural, rational and logical and in the best interest even of those who might be displaced by gentrification, disproportionately incarcerated in the name of ‘law and order’, or put at risk of their lives in dangerous shelters (cf. Mele 2010: 6, 17, 18, 240; Alexander 2012: 208–17). And in doing so, rather than ‘keeping the real world real’, the series lines up with so many neighbourhood representations of the past century and presents for a new readership the middle-class gentrifier’s myth of what Alphabet City could and should be.

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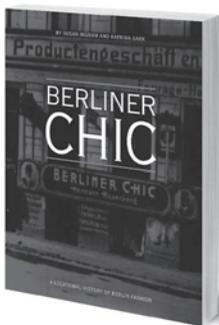
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