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"That Weird, Unbearable Delight": Representations of Alternative Sexualities in Joss Whedon's *Astonishing X-Men* Comics

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[1] What does it mean to be a mutant? This has always been the central question of Marvel's X-Men comics, which tell the tale of a team of young mutant superheroes. Clearly, to be a mutant is to be different. Douglas Wolk has argued compellingly that X-Men stories tend to be "allegories about difference and identity politics"; for Wolk, the stories are "often specifically about sexual identity" (95). Most crucially, the X-Men model a world which neither understands nor tolerates sexual difference.

[2] This intolerance becomes most clear in the "cure narratives," those X-Men stories which propose that it may be possible to eliminate the gene which causes mutations. "What's next?" demands Joss Whedon's Emma Frost, "eliminating the gay gene?" (Whedon and Cassady, *Astonishing X-Men* #5). As longtime comics editor Louise Simonson says, "the urge to eradicate those who are different—and the utter *wrongness* of this urge—is one of the central themes of *X-Men*" (139). Mutants who seek the cure represent closeted members of sexual minorities (gay, lesbian, bi, trans, kinky, etc.) who try to conform to heteronormative cultural standards. Those who refuse the cure represent the political members of such minorities, who accept their sexuality and embrace the identity which that sexuality implies. Here the comics play up the crucial tensions between those whose subtle differences allow them to pass as normal, and those who are too queer to pass. Patrick Hopkins argues that in Whedon's "cure" story, the mutants who line up for the cure are mostly those who cannot pass (11). Hopkins concludes that Whedon's comics endorse only those forms of difference which allow one to be powerful, to be beautiful, and to pass (12). I argue, however, that Whedon's representation of sexual difference is actually far more radical than that. Whedon's award-winning *Astonishing X-Men* (2004 – 2008) endorses not only the subtle difference of those who can pass, but also the radical difference of mutants who cannot pass, e.g. the Beast.[1]

[3] Ramzi Fawaz has argued persuasively that the X-Men's female characters visualize the comic's absorption of gay and feminist public cultures (362; see also Vary). I would add two things. With Joss Whedon at the helm, the male characters visualize these things just as effectively. And while Whedon's comics certainly continue the X-Men's longstanding tradition of endorsing gay and feminist cultures, *Astonishing X-Men* also offers important endorsements of several other alternative sexual cultures. These include the sexual culture of the disabled and those who desire them, the sexual culture of the human-animal hybrids known as furries and the "furverts" who desire them (Gurley), and the culture of erotic dominance and submission.

[4] Through the relationship between Kitty Pryde and Peter Rasputin, Whedon's X-Men comics affirm the sexuality of disabled people. While Kitty can usually control her mutant phasing power, she phases involuntarily during her first sexual encounter with Peter (#14). This dramatic event sets the tone for their subsequent sexual relationship. As Kitty and Peter work together to devise a sexuality compatible with Kitty's occasional

impairment, they model a successful, mutually satisfying sexual relationship between a disabled woman and an able-bodied man. Since popular culture rarely represents such relationships at all, and almost never represents them as potentially successful, Whedon's representation of Kitty/Peter holds considerable potential for disabled people and disability theorists. Whedon Studies should therefore add a consideration of Kitty/Peter to the excellent work which Whedonists have already done on disability narratives in Whedon's television shows *Buffy*, *Angel,* and *Dollhouse* (Iatropoulos 2012, Burnett 2012).

[5] Through the relationship between Emma Frost and Scott Summers, Whedon's comics endorse the kinky public culture of sexual dominance and submission (DS). Scott's submission to Emma helps him learn to control his mutant power, helps him become a better team leader, and satisfies his erotic needs. Emma's dominance gives her self-respect and confidence. The sexual power she enjoys as Scott's Mistress merges with the social and cultural power she enjoys as Headmistress of the Xavier school, enabling her to be successful in both the sexual and professional realms. Emma, Scott, and their colleagues benefit from Emma's dual dominant identity as Mistress and Headmistress. Not bad for a former supervillain! Whedon's representation of Emma/Scott presents erotic DS as an ethically viable sexuality with substantial benefits in all areas of life. Thus Whedon makes this important minority sexuality available to an audience of mostly young comic book fans.

[6] Through the relationship between Hank McCoy and Abigail Brand, Whedon's X-Men comics endorse the sexuality of the Furry Fandom subculture. This culture includes "furries" who often dress in head to toe animal costumes or fursuits, as well as "furvert" fetishists who are attracted to furries. Hank resembles a full-time furry in some ways. In the *Giant-Size* #1 issue of the *Astonishing X-Men Omnibus,* he is a self-described "blue furry monster" known as the Beast (Whedon and Cassady). McCoy's would-be lover, Brand, is like a furvert. Brand desires McCoy not despite his Beastliness, but rather because of it. The comics authorize her Beastial desire. Whedon's representation of Beast and Brand endorses that most marginal of sexual minorities, the furries and the furverts who love them.

[7] In the 1980s, Gayle Rubin famously described modern American sexual culture as profoundly hierarchical. For Rubin, the "charmed circle" of "good, normal, natural" sexuality stood in opposition to the "outer limits" of "bad, abnormal, unnatural" sex (281). Similarly, Jeffrey Weeks pointed out that sexual thinking has been dominated by a "grand polarity" between the normal and abnormal (85). *Astonishing* offers radical endorsements of the sexually abnormal. The furvert Brand provides a positive representation of female fetishism. The DS relationship of Scott and Emma expands the "outer limit" of sadomasochism; Rubin described this limit in the early 1980s, but by the early 2000s, SM had joined forces with DS and BD (bondage/discipline) to form the "coalitional" acronym BDSM (Weiss 231). *Astonishing*'s treatment of disabled sexuality adds an entirely new element to Rubin's outer limits. Though not mentioned in Rubin's original model, disabled sex clearly exists outside the charmed circle. By expanding and enhancing the categories of the outer limits, *Astonishing* challenges the very notion of a normal sexuality, suggesting instead that sex is always socially and historically constructed. This in turn enables "a more realistic politics of sex" (Rubin 277). While the notion of a "natural" sexuality has been central to sexology (Weeks 68), Kinsey already knew in 1948 that the concept of the normal blocked the investigation and understanding of sexuality (Weeks 89). As Weeks points out, the limits of this

normalizing, nature-seeking sexology have clearly been reached (95). *Astonishing* challenges the hegemony of the normal by celebrating the abnormal. Whedon's X-Men comics present disabled, DS, and furry sexualities as sensible, ethical responses to erotic, genetic and political needs. *Astonishing*'s sympathetic portrayals of mutant sexual relationships imply that unorthodox human sexualities should also be viewed in a positive light. *Astonishing X-Men* thus promotes acceptance and tolerance of radical sexual difference, both in the fictional Marvel Universe and in our world.

"Everything Is So Fragile": The Disabled Sexuality of Kitty Pryde and Peter Rasputin

[8] I read the relationship between Kitty Pryde and Peter Rasputin through the lens of disability theory. Specifically, I invoke the influential "social model" of disability, which holds that "disability is socially constructed not biologically determined" (Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells, and Davies 2). In this model, people are disabled not by the malfunctioning of their bodies, but rather by the cultural prejudices and psychological pressures which those malfunctions inspire. The social model allows us to read Kitty Pryde as a disabled woman. She occasionally loses control of her mutant phasing power; when this happens, she experiences a lack of bodily control. Many real-life disabled people experience the same thing (Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells, and Davies 74). This lack of control leads many real-world disabled people to dissociate from their bodies (Ibid.). Kitty represents this dissociation in a most radical way: when she experiences involuntary intangibility, her body temporarily *ceases to exist*. Sometimes Kitty becomes solid when she intends to remain intangible. Either involuntary intangibility or involuntary solidification can provoke profound anxiety in Kitty; either condition can inspire grave concern in her teammates. Kitty is like a disabled person whose impairment manifests only intermittently—an epileptic, for example. Just as the mere possibility of a seizure in enough to code the epileptic as disabled, the possibility of uncontrolled phasing, and the anxiety which that possibility produces, code Kitty as disabled.

[9] Like a person with an intermittent impairment, Whedon's Kitty is usually, but not always, in control of her body. In this as in most things, Whedon is very faithful to the original spirit and history of the Kitty Pryde character. Writer Chris Claremont and artist John Byrne introduced the character in their classic 1981 story “Days of Future Past.” Claremont's Kitty phases "with an ease that thrills and excites her more than almost anything she's ever known" (69). Yet part of that "thrill" comes from the fact that "she's not used to her nascent superpowers" (163). Young Kitty can't always control her power. When she gets scared in the Danger Room, she's "too rattled" to phase (114). Whedon's Kitty also occasionally finds herself unable to phase when she needs to do so.

[10] The social model suggests that people can be more disabled in some contexts than in others. The impaired or uncontrollable body is especially susceptible to sexual disability. Someone who might be considered able-bodied in other contexts can be sexually disabled. Kitty may be perfectly able when she is teaching class or going on a mission. But she can still be disabled when she is in bed with Peter. Her sexual relationship with Peter is largely defined by their mutual anxiety about her phasing power. Kitty experiences performance anxiety; she worries that without full control of her body, she won't be able to please her lover. Peter worries about his lover's health and safety; he fears that sex will hurt her, emotionally or physically. Thus Kitty and

Peter represent the anxieties which typically inform relations between the disabled and the able-bodied.

[11] They also resist these anxieties. Kitty challenges the presumed asexuality of the disabled. Tom Shakespeare and his colleagues point out that disabled people are often infantilized; like children, the disabled are assumed to have no sexuality (Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells, and Davies 10). Kitty Pryde was always the littlest X-Man. As a young, female "X-Girl," Kitty has always projected a certain aura of sexual innocence. Her fellow X-Men tend to see Kitty as passive and asexual, as did comic book fans until *Astonishing*. But Whedon's Kitty Pryde is an active sexual agent. She boldly initiates sex with Peter, and works with him to make the experience pleasurable and satisfying for them both.

[12] Kitty and Peter have a longstanding romantic relationship, but they never actually managed to consummate that relationship until Whedon's *Astonishing X-Men*. This was partly due to the fact that Peter was dead, until Whedon brought him back. Kitty wants to resume their relationship, but fears that she is crowding Peter. He assures her that she is not crowding him "nearly enough" (#11). Artist John Cassady provides a full-width panel of Kitty's face as Peter says these last two words, so we have a full view of her wide-eyed astonishment. The next time we see the couple alone together, they are cuddling under a tree. Colorist Laura Martin uses a brilliant palette of oranges and yellows to give the scene a lush, vibrant look. "So what do you think?" Kitty asks. "Does this qualify as 'crowding' you?" (#13). "It is what I would call a good start," Peter replies, smiling. "And uh . . . what would you call a good finish?" Kitty inquires awkwardly. This is where Kitty first hints at the idea that she may experience a disabled sexuality. The phrase "good finish" is a clear reference to male orgasm, comparable to the "happy ending" of sex work. Kitty may already suspect that her sexual disability could make it difficult to give Peter the "good finish" she so clearly wants to give him. Peter's response is equally awkward: "Uh, I'm not sure I—" Peter doesn't actually know how sex with Kitty should conclude.

[13] The scene is interrupted by the arrival of Kitty's dead father, and we learn that we have been watching Kitty's nightmare, which Emma prompted telepathically. Since Emma presumably drew the raw material for this nightmare from Kitty's subconscious, the dream provides evidence of Kitty's anxiety about having disabled sex with Peter. The real Peter, unsurprisingly, turns out to be far more understanding than his dream doppelgänger. Kitty awakens, shaken, to find herself in the real Peter's arms. His first thought, as always, is for her safety: "Are you all right?" Smiling, she nestles in his huge arms and replies: "Gettin' better already."

[14] Peter and Kitty attempt to negotiate their reborn relationship with spoken language (#13). Naturally, these efforts end in spectacular failure. (Think Buffy and Riley in "Hush" [4.10] .) Kitty threatens to go through Peter's body. Her anxiety tempts her to abandon self-definition. Peter expects to get yelled at some more, and so stands around "like a big dumb big guy." Finally they abandon their futile efforts at spoken communication, and suddenly everything *works*. Cassady spends a full wordless page on their kiss. He shows the two lovers embracing from the side, then from behind Peter's head. He provides a tight close-up of the lovers staring adoringly into one another's eyes. The final panel on the page shows Emma walking by in the hallway outside Peter's room. As the architect of Kitty's recent nightmare, Emma is in some sense midwife to the disabled sex which follows this kiss.

[15] Peter and Kitty have sex for the first time. Meanwhile, an unsuspecting mutant student is watching television on the lower floor of the X-Men's mansion headquarters. Suddenly Kitty Pryde's naked body falls *through the floor* (#14). Kitty races back upstairs to Peter. When she reaches the bedroom, a wide-eyed Peter deploys his go-to question: "Are you all right?" (#14) "Oh my God!" Kitty gasps. "I phased!" Peter is an unstoppable Colossus of care. He must ascertain Kitty's mental and physical health before pursuing any other topic of conversation. "Are you all right?" he repeats, gazing deep into Kitty's eyes. "Are *you*?" she replies. Kitty's question is a manifestation of her anxiety about disabled sex.

[16] It seems likely that Kitty phased before Peter reached orgasm. "It was strange," he admits. He does not say that it was scary, grotesque, or horrible. Kitty continues to obsess about her involuntary intangibility. "I can't believe I phased just then! That's never. . ." If Kitty is being honest here, the word "never" suggests that masturbation doesn't trigger involuntary phasing, though great sex might. Here Kitty stumbles upon an effective cure for the guilt that derives from her (mis)perception that she can't please Peter. If it truly takes a superior orgasm to activate Kitty's phasing power, then her bout of involuntary intangibility is grounds for celebration, not guilt. "It was totally your fault," she concludes. "I like to think so, yes," Peter agrees. Peter understands that he should take pride in his ability to activate Kitty's phasing power. The bedroom door closes, separating the audience from the delighted lovers. Kitty giggles through the door: "Tee hee." She has every reason to be happy.

[17] Kitty and Peter enable a powerfully progressive transformation of our concept of sex. Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells, and Davies note that sex is often taken to be synonymous with heterosexual penetrative intercourse; they argue compellingly that this "fucking ideology" is particularly oppressive to disabled people (97). Kitty's involuntary intangibility may have caused coitus interruptus, but neither she nor Peter experiences this as a tragedy. Instead, and again like real-world disabled people, they recognize and enjoy a "continuum of sexual practices—of which penetrative sex is only a part" (Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells, and Davies 99). Although Kitty and Peter are straight, their sexuality is thus fundamentally queer.[2] Indeed, it has strong structural similarities to lesbian sex. As Corbett Joan O'Toole observes, there is no requirement, in lesbian sex, for both partners to climax (213).

[18] Kitty and Peter encourage their audience to develop a broader understanding of erotic love. Much like real-life disabled people (Siebers 151), Kitty and Peter find that sex may not conclude with an orgasm, may extend beyond the limits of penetrative sex, and may seem kinky compared to what others are doing. But perhaps these are good things. Kitty, in particular, provides a perfect representation of Anna Mollow's idea that sex *is* disability. As Mollow argues, we desire what disables us (301). The pleasure that Kitty shares with Peter has the potential to disable her in a very literal sense. Indeed, that pleasure can cause her to *lose her body altogether*. Margrit Shildrick suggests that the coming together of bodies "is encompassed within an implicit anxiety about the loss of self-definition"; she argues persuasively that this anxiety "is at its most acute where the body of the other already breaches normative standards of embodiment" (226). It is hard to imagine a more perfect illustration of this argument than Kitty and Peter. Their first sexual encounter radicalizes what always happens during (good) sex: the dissolution of the boundary between self and other.[3] Kitty and Peter confront their mutual anxiety about this dissolution together, as lovers.

[19] Peter and Kitty travel to the alien Breakworld, where they make love again. Sex with Kitty remains confusing for Peter, which is typical of disabled sex. Whedon and Cassady spend two pages on the negotiations which precede Peter and Kitty's second sexual encounter (#21). Peter is "so confused. . .so tired." The top third of the next page features Peter, wide-eyed in the background. Kitty stands naked in the foreground, facing Peter, her back to the audience. The remainder of the page consists of three full-width panels, all tight close-ups: Kitty's bedroom eyes, blue-eyed Peter saying "now I am *more* confused," and finally Kitty looking down, smiling, powerful, triumphant, as Peter concludes: ". . .but somehow not as tired." Already Peter has learned not just to accept the confusing strangeness of sex with Kitty but to cherish that strangeness, to desire it. He understands that a successful, satisfying sexual relationship with Kitty must be based, in part, upon that strangeness.

[20] The off-screen sex which follows these negotiations appears to have been highly satisfying for both partners. We see Kitty and Peter in bed together, big smiles on their faces (#22). Kitty is on top of Peter in this panel. Like many real-life disabled people, Kitty may have discovered that her impairment is more compatible with some sexual positions than others. She seems to have remained substantial long enough for both her and Peter to reach orgasm. Kitty says "Whoof." Peter wants to talk. He has important questions: why so soon? So suddenly?

[21] Peter's questions allow Kitty to articulate the central thesis of Whedon's *Astonishing X-Men*: "Everything is so fragile. . .If happy comes along—that weird, unbearable delight that's actual happy—I think you have to grab it while you can. You take what you can get, 'cause it's here, and then. . ."[4] Clearly, the happiness that an occasionally intangible woman shares with her sometimes steel boyfriend is both weird and unbearable. Yet Whedon's Kitty Pryde insists that people have not only the right but the responsibility to seek such happiness. The audience may be reminded here of Dracula's exhortation to "find what warmth you can" in the *Buffy Season Eight* comics, which date from the same time period as *Astonishing*; Buffy fulfilled that imperative with vampire Slayer Satsu (Whedon, Goddard, and Jeanty).

[22] Kitty and Peter successfully build a sexual relationship which unites her phasing body with his metal body. This turns out to be good news not only for the triumphant lovers, but also for the Earth itself. The narrative of Whedon's final story arc, "Gone," hinges on Kitty's ability to phase through the weird alien metal of the Breakworld. Kitty initially finds this difficult and painful. She must phase herself and Peter through the strange skyscrapers of the Breakworld when their spaceship crashes. Kitty protests: "The metal—like Ord's ship, it's. . .I can't. . ." (#20) Kitty inadvertently solidifies. Kitty and Peter crash into a window and through a floor, coming to rest stunned but unharmed.

[23] The Breakworlders fire a massive planet-smashing bullet at the Earth. When Kitty phases through the bullet, the alien metal provokes an existential angst. Kitty struggles to phase the deadly bullet through the Earth. "Come on. . ." she growls. "I can't be that weak." (Whedon and Cassady, *Giant-Size* #1) The point, of course, is that she is the opposite of weak; she is, in fact, the strongest member of the team. This is consistent with Whedon's overall interpretation of the Kitty Pryde character. That character served as the inspiration for Willow Rosenberg, another tiny, courageous Jewish girl of immense, sometimes uncontrollable power (Kaveney 210).

[24] As Kitty speeds towards Earth inside the alien bullet, she tries to explain what is happening telepathically. "Not pain, not. . .just like it got in me. Like I'm meshed to this metal. It wants me here." Kitty speaks of her physical relationship with the metal in surprisingly intimate terms. This is also the first time she speaks of the metal's desire. If the Breakworld metal got in her and if it wants her to be inside it, then this metal sounds an awful lot like a lover. Unsurprisingly, this is the moment when Kitty associates the Breakworld metal with her metal lover, albeit initially in negative terms: "I'm in the cage I freed Peter from." If Kitty can associate the weird alien metal with the metal man she loves so much, she can reciprocate the Breakworld metal's desire, and save the earth. Having learned to love a metal man, she consummates her relationship with the Breakworld metal, phases the bullet, and saves the world. "Disappointed, Ms. Frost?" she asks Emma. "Astonished, Ms. Pryde," Emma replies. If even Emma can say this of Kitty, then Kitty is truly the most Astonishing of the X-Men.

"Such a Submissive": Dominance and Submission in the Sexuality of Emma Frost and Scott Summers

[25] Emma Frost was created by Claremont and Byrne in the 1980s in *Uncanny X-Men*. The adolescent Joss Whedon was a fan of the classic Claremont/Byrne X-Men comics (Kaveney 204).[5] Claremont and Byrne created the villainous Hellfire Club, and gave the Club a strongly fetishistic look. Claremont populated the Club with dominant women such as Emma Frost. Grant Morrison built upon Claremont's fetishy aesthetic during his own run on *New X-Men* (2001 – 2004), which immediately preceded Whedon's run (Morrison and Quitely).[6] Whedon has confirmed that he saw his work on *Astonishing* as a direct continuation of Morrison's work (Whedon, "Joss Talks"). Yet in the first issue of *Astonishing*, Whedon seemed to be stepping back from Morrison's fetishistic style. Whedon's Scott Summers admits that "quite frankly, all the black leather is making people nervous" (#1).[7] But it soon becomes clear that the fetishism is not disappearing; it is simply taking a different form. "Do you at least like the costumes?" asks a delirious Scott, as he hallucinates himself a nice pink tutu (#5). Scott's fetishism has a very specific shape. He is strongly submissive; as a sexual submissive, he has a fetishistic desire to be dominated, especially by Emma.

[26] Emma clearly recognizes Scott's submissive nature. By the end of Whedon's run, she is able to acknowledge that nature explicitly: "If I'd known you were such a submissive I'd've gone with an entirely different wardrobe" (#21). Over the course of Whedon's *Astonishing*, Emma and Scott discover what many real-world DS couples have learned: that "perhaps the single most important element in the power exchange is the solid emotional bond that develops between dominant and submissive" (Brame, Brame, and Jacobs 77). Once they've acknowledged the DS which binds them together, Emma and Scott are able to profess their mutual love for one another. "Stop pretending everything's the way it was," Emma insists (#21). She knows that things have changed between them, and she knows why: because of the DS. Scott agrees with her: "It's not! That's the point! I'm in love with you now." Since this love has taken the form of a DS relationship, Scott's expression of love for Emma is also an endorsement of DS. Scott is wounded in battle. "He said he loved me," Emma marvels, tears streaming down her face as she stands over Scott's unconscious body. "This man, this extraordinary, ordinary man is in love. With me." Emma clearly loves Scott's love, and reciprocates it. Their mutual, reciprocal love constitutes an endorsement of consensual DS.

[27] As the X-Men's team leader, Scott resembles real-world submissives, who frequently have "weighty responsibilities" in their daily lives (Brame, Brame, and Jacobs 74). Real-life submissives do not give up their personal power when they submit sexually: "the submissive in a consensual relationship does not relinquish social or professional power" (Brame, Brame, and Jacobs 54). Indeed, submissives often gain such power. Certainly Scott does. After a particularly intense DS scene with Emma, Scott experiences a dramatic sense of clarity. "Emma broke me right down, and I'm. . . I'm seeing really clearly" (#18). Scott suddenly becomes much more confident, more decisive, more self-assured. He retains these positive traits throughout the remainder of the series. As Roz Kaveney quite rightly argues, this new Scott "is a significantly more effective leader than he has been for some time" (222). He owes it all to Emma, and to the DS relationship he shares with her.

[28] Emma gains as much from this DS relationship as Scott does. Liz Highleyman observes that "erotic dominance may provide the taste of power and agency that enables a woman to empower herself in other areas" (169). Emma fits this model. Formerly evil, she now enjoys a "growing sense of responsibility" (Marx 182). She is a teacher respected by everyone (except Kitty), and a team leader respected by all X-Men (*including* Kitty). When Emma says that she is "clearly the only adult on this entire team," Kitty is deeply skeptical, but the line is funny because the audience knows that Emma can actually make a pretty strong claim to be exactly that (#3).

[29] Emma not only leads the team herself, but also helps Scott gain the self-knowledge, confidence, and inner peace which he needs in order to become an effective leader himself.[8] Without Emma, Scott would fall apart; without Scott, the X-Men would fall apart. Emma Frost is thus the lynchpin of the entire team. Joss Whedon imagines the X-Men as a superhero team whose success depends entirely on a sexually dominant woman. In the language of superhero comics, this amounts to an argument that a dominant woman can not only challenge the subordinate position of women in society (Highleyman 171), but can in fact completely invert that subordination.[9] Whedon's Emma, then, is much more than a strong woman who holds a well-deserved position of authority and responsibility, though even that would be enough to make *Astonishing X-Men* far more feminist than the average superhero team comic. Whedon's Emma is a feminist superheroine whose well-deserved authority derives precisely from her commitment to the erotics of dominance and submission. She shows the audience that a woman who chooses erotic dominance consciously and consensually may be trusted with power in other realms.

[30] Not all X-Men recognize the benefits of the DS relationship Scott and Emma share. Naturally, Kitty objects to Emma's dominance over Scott: "I see him questioning himself, taking orders from you—" (#2) Emma rejects this charge: "I never give—" And in fact she does not give Scott orders, at least not the kind that Kitty means. Emma is Scott's Mistress, so she tends to give him orders that he wants to carry out, as well as orders that will improve his mental health. It is also important to note that Emma is just as happy to receive orders from Scott as she is to give them to him: they switch. Scott gives the X-Men their marching orders as they engage a monster that's attacking Manhattan. "I positively *throb* when he gets that tone," Emma purrs (#7). Emma likes Scott to be dominant as well as submissive. Indeed, she understands that Scott's submissive and dominant aspects are interdependent: his submission to her gives him the strength and confidence he needs to assume a dominant position as team leader. By

submitting to Emma, Scott learns to be both submissive and dominant. Theirs is a sophisticated and mature DS relationship.

[31] In a pivotal scene which occurs almost exactly in the middle of *Astonishing*'s overall story arc, Emma uses her mental powers to stage an elaborate DS scene inside Scott's head. At first this scene seems to devastate Scott, so when we learn that Emma is being mind-controlled by the powerful evil telepath Cassandra Nova, we're tempted to conclude that the scene was nothing more than an attack meant to take Scott out of commission. But this is an incomplete reading. Scott derives so much long-term psychological benefit from this intense scene that we must conclude Emma has found a way to provide Scott with beneficial, loving dominance while maintaining the illusion that she is destroying him. Thus she can appear to advance Nova's agenda, while secretly protecting and helping her submissive. This shows that Emma is both a subtle telepath and a truly accomplished dominant.

[32] Emma lures Scott into the scene by wearing his favorite outfit (#13). Since the outfit in question is the image of Scott's dead lover Jean Gray, this scene invokes not only costume play or "cosplay" but also necrophilia. Scott stands visorless in Emma's mindscape, admiring a bright blue sky for the first time in years (#14). Emma as Jean puts her costume back on; apparently she and Scott have just had off-screen mind-sex. She hugs Scott as he puts his visor back on. "You can let go now," Scott says. Scott gazes through the visor into the green eyes of Jean/Emma and says "I just want you to know, I understand about power that has to be controlled." Scott clearly wants his lover to control his superpower; he desires her dominance and her discipline. Scott needs a strong, dominant woman to control his power. Once he turned to Jean for this. Now he gets it from Emma. It always comes from a powerful telepath.

[33] The scene also reveals that Scott, like Kitty, experiences a disabled sexuality. Scott admits that when the visor's on, he experiences a kind of colorblindness. Scott has just had visorless mental sex with Jean/Emma, so he knows that she's "really" a redhead. She finishes the thought for him: "—and a natural redhead, too." The fact that the whole scene exists only in Scott's mind renders words like "really" and "natural" meaningless. Nonetheless, this exchange reveals that Scott and Emma both view the red hair as a sexual fetish, and they both perceive Scott's inability to see the red hair as a sexual disability.

[34] Scott suddenly realizes that Emma is playing mind games with him, and he snaps out of the scene. "I don't like games, Emma," Scott declares (#14). Emma as Jean as Dark Phoenix delivers a scathing critique of Scott's unkinky "vanilla" desire. "No, you're Scott Summers. You like homework and vegetables. But you do play games with *me*. When Jean was alive, you loved our games." Back then (in Grant Morrison's run) Scott and Emma were having a purely telepathic affair. Here we see once again that among the X-Men, the boundaries of eroticism extend far beyond simple physical sexuality.

[35] Jean/Emma reminds Scott of his failures with Jean: "You couldn't control her." In a DS context, Emma may be suggesting that part of Scott's problem with Jean was that he tried to be dominant with her when what he really needed was to submit, presumably to Emma. Jean/Emma leans in to kiss Scott, and as she does so, Jean's ruby red lips fade to Emma's white. The kiss occupies the top half of the next page. Emma looks like herself again, but Scott now looks like Logan (Wolverine), whom Emma describes as "the love of her [Jean's] life." This is enough to make Logan/Scott thrust his

claws between Emma's breasts and all the way through her. She lands right where she wanted to be all along: in the bed, legs spread, unharmed because, as she reminds Scott, "you don't have any claws." When she lets Scott "claw" her, Emma is suggesting that she would gladly let Scott be on top if that's what he needs. Switching effortlessly, she "de-claws" him, to remind him that she can be on top whenever he needs that. Emma seems prepared to do or be anything in order to satisfy Scott's needs.

[36] Emma is now ready to reveal simultaneously the source of Scott's psychological problems, the essence of her relationship with him, and the thing which will let her save him: "Control. First to last, that's the thing." Emma reminds him that his power is, first and always, a disability. "It's your great setback, isn't it? The source of all your extraordinary self-doubt." She shows Scott a crucial moment from his childhood. Young Scott sits in bed, his eyes bandaged. "The world is a terrifying place for some children," Emma explains—disabled ones, for example. "That lack of control, that fear of abandon." Grown-up Scott watches child-Scott deciding not to try to control his power, choosing to let it be his demon. Emma kisses grown-up Scott's cheek as a single tear rolls down from beneath the visor. "You can let go now," Emma says, and colorist Laura Martin fades to a full-width panel of pure blue. Blue is the opposite of red, so the blue panel means that Scott's red eye beams are now totally disciplined.

[37] Emma has brought the scene full circle, from Scott telling her that she could let go of his power, to her telling him that he can let go of his power *and everything else*. When a dominant tells her submissive that he can let go, it means that he can let go completely, *because she'll bring him back*, and he can trust her to do so. That trust is not misplaced in this case. "You're free, my love. You're free," Emma says, and she means it, even if she says it in voice-over against Scott's mindless, drooling body. This particular freedom, the freedom of total submissive surrender, is exactly what Scott needs at this moment. True, Scott does spend the next three issues completely catatonic thanks to Emma's mind games. But when he finally comes back, he's a whole new Scott: confident, insightful, decisive. Recognizing that the "Hellfire Club" are merely Emma's mental projections, he starts shooting them with a large-caliber handgun (#17). He begins by putting three rounds into the chest of the White Queen, Emma's projection of her younger, more evil self. A full-page panel shows Scott, visorless, aiming the smoking gun at the White Queen. "I don't have any claws," he says with irony. Scott has "re-clawed" himself: after submitting utterly to Emma in the previous scene, he has landed firmly on top.

[38] Scott reveals to the other X-Men that Cassandra Nova has used Emma's guilt to control her mind. Kitty grabs the gun and threatens to kill Emma. "Doesn't anybody care about what she did to us?" Kitty demands. Whedon lets Hank McCoy deliver the argument that Emma's DS games were actually therapeutic. Natty in his vest, jacket, and bowtie, Hank is the very voice of scientific reason. He can provide a far more effective endorsement of Emma's dominance than could Scott, whose views on Emma's motives are presumably suspect. Professor McCoy lays it out for us: "following Scott's logic, what Emma did was confront us with our worst fears. . . . which we faced, and here we stand."

[39] The Breakworld's Powerlord Kruun captures Scott and tortures him for information. Kruun turns out to be a standard B-movie sadist. He threatens to increase Scott's pain "a thousandfold" and points out that he could take Scott apart and keep him alive in a jar (#23). Kruun's non-consensual political torture contrasts sharply with the

consensual DS that Scott shares with Emma. Whedon plays up that contrast by ensuring that Scott experiences Kruun's sadism and Emma's dominance at the same time. Emma is with Scott telepathically as Kruun tortures him. Even though she is not physically present in the torture chamber, she helps Scott make it through the session, providing him with the same kind of strength, guidance, and support that a dominant might give to her submissive during a DS scene. Thanks in large part to Emma, Scott is powerful enough to blast Kruun into unconsciousness with his (fully controlled) eye beams. He stands triumphant over Kruun, visorless, eye beams ready but held in check, perfectly disciplined. Scott issues Professor Xavier's classic telepathic summons: "To me, my X-Men." This is the sign that Scott has finally achieved true leadership. At long last he *is* team leader, without doubt or reservation, and he owes it all to Emma and the DS relationship he shares with her.

[40] Back on earth, Scott surrenders control to Emma once again (Whedon and Cassady, *Giant-Size* #1). This time there are no mind games: Scott is clear-headed, able and willing to consent. Emma is amazed that he held his power in check for as long as he did. "Clarity," he replies. "It was a beautiful gift. But it'll go, and I don't want to wait for that." Scott has learned that being a submissive means he can surrender control on his own terms, at a time of his choosing. Most importantly, he has learned that he has the right to surrender control to whomever he chooses. He surrenders to the woman he trusts. "I love you," he says. Emma gazes through the ruby quartz as she installs his visor, embracing the sign of his disability, controlling his power, dominating him. "I love you too," she replies. They kiss. This is the final kiss of the series. As Scott and Emma embrace, a voice-over repeats Kitty's words of wisdom: "Everything is so fragile." The voice-over suggests that Scott and Emma's DS relationship counts as "actual happy." In this way, Whedon's *Astonishing X-Men* endorses relations of erotic DS, particularly those f the female dominant/male submissive form.

Loving a "Blue Furry Monster": The Furry Sexuality of Hank McCoy and Abigail Brand

[41] The relationship between Dr. Hank McCoy (Beast) and Special Agent Abigail Brand models the sexual culture of furries almost perfectly. Beast resembles a "fursuiter," those members of the furry community who dress in head-to-toe animal costumes or fursuits. Brand represents the "furverts," people who are sexually attracted to fursuiters. As Shari Caudron observes, the furry subculture favors "animals who speak English and wear vests and clean house" (182). It is no surprise, then, that Brand likes the dapper, articulate Dr. McCoy. Furry males are less likely than most males to be strictly straight, and there is a high incidence of bisexuality among male furries (Gerbasi et al. 206). Like many male furries, Hank belongs to what Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin called the "considerable portion of the population whose members have combined . . . both homosexual and heterosexual experience and/or psychic responses" (639). On Kinsey's famous seven-point scale for sexual preference, Hank would probably be rated a 1 or 2: he is "predominantly heterosexual," but at least "incidentally" homosexual (1), perhaps "more than incidentally" so (2) (Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 638). Although Hank has no homosexual experience that we know of, his "psychic responses" are quite queer. In Grant Morrison's *New X-Men*, Hank came out as gay, in order "to challenge preconceived notions of language, gender and species" (*New X-Men* #131). He's been a bit queer ever since. The bearish Beast embodies the furry slogan that "by and large

furries are bi and large" (Caudron 202). Like real-life furries (Gerbasi et al. 220), McCoy is perceived by those around him as an unconventional individual with strong aesthetic interests.

[42] Hank McCoy presents as a kind of gender-queer Victorian aesthete. While most of Whedon's X-Men are skeptical about the team's new superhero costumes, Hank is "the only one who's dying to see the outfits" (#1). He offers a queer eye for straight guys like Logan and Scott. Hank continues to play the role of queer aesthete as Whedon's narrative progresses. He compliments Emma on her taste in coffee: "Peruvian blonde, first beans of the season" (#3). His extremely precise language suggests that he has a very strong interest in matters of taste. The apotheosis of this interest occurs as Hank rides a crashing spacecraft down to the alien Breakworld. As the ship plummets towards the planet's surface, Hank spends his time in a mental simulation of a tasteful parlor, thoughtfully provided by Emma (#20). Scott and Brand look very uncomfortable as they take nonexistent tea with Emma, but Hank looks right at home as he sips delicately from a china teacup, his furry blue pinky extended.

[43] The figure of Hank McCoy gives Whedon and Cassady an excellent opportunity to critique the pathologization of furries. Representations of furries in popular culture are at best "unflattering" (Gerbasi et al. 199). At its worst, as in the perpetually pathologizing police procedural *CSI*, pop culture portrays furries as "sex-crazed fetishists who lose all control and inhibition when they see someone dressed in a full fursuit" (Caudron 182). Sadly, scholarly representations of furries are no better. The only significant scholarly study of furries (Gerbasi et al.) attempts to construct a "furry typology" based upon a comparison between the individual's self-perception and the "objectively human" species identity of the person (214). The concept of an objectively human identity is deeply essentialist. This concept also does not take the furries' descriptions of their own identities seriously.

[44] Postmodernism and queer theory have shown that gender is a kind of performance (Butler). I maintain that species identity is also a type of performance. Furries perform a hybrid human-animal identity. They do so because, as Caudron argues, they "like what these human-animal hybrids say about human values" (182). Thus the furries implement Donna Haraway's famous call for "lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines" (154). The lived realities and experiences of real-life furries certainly do not justify the creation of a new diagnostic artifact such as "Species Identity Disorder" (Gerbasi et al. 220). Ever since Stonewall, sexual minorities have been struggling to get alternative sexualities and minority gender identities *out* of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. We certainly do not need to add more.

[45] The most radical forms of furry culture go beyond fursuited roleplaying to embrace a full-blown posthumanism. For some furries, furriness is about embracing the connection between human and animal, and erasing the distinction between the two. The Beast models this radical posthuman furriness. Beast is a "monster" in Donna Haraway's sense: a "boundary creature" that destabilizes conventional biological narratives (2). Specifically, the ape-like Beast is what Haraway would call a "simian" (2). A monstrous simian like Beast is politically significant: such simians breach the boundary between human and animal (Haraway 151). Haraway finds feminist pleasure in the connection of human and animal (Haraway 152). The gender-queer Beast contributes to

feminism by disrupting normative models of masculinity. Similarly, Brand's desire for Beast disrupts heteronormative models of sexuality. Haraway suggests that "bestiality has a new status" in cycles of marriage exchange (152). We could say much the same of Brand's Bestial sexuality: it redefines the exchange of sexual desire in posthuman terms, subverting the heteronormative to promote a radically pluralist sexuality.

[46] Hank McCoy's furry identity comes, initially, from an accident of birth. But Whedon's "cure narrative" presents Hank with the option of abandoning his furriness. In the end, he chooses to remain a furry. This sends an important message to real-life furries. When Hank chooses to remain the Beast, he is asserting that there is nothing wrong with being a furry, that furriness is not a sickness, that furries can and should find happiness with furverts. This is a message which the real world's Furry Fandom is likely to embrace. It is also a very positive message for members of other sexual minorities. Real-life furries often integrate other alternative sexual practices such as DS into their culture (Caudron 203). Beast and Brand illustrate this inclusiveness nicely: he is sexually submissive, while she is strongly dominant. Like many real-life furry/furvert relationships, Beast/Brand contains a definite DS dynamic. Like Emma/Scott, the Brand/Beast relationship is configured as female dominant/male submissive. Whedon seems to recognize the feminist potential of such relationships.

[47] Until Brand comes along, however, Hank and his colleagues assume that Hank would have to overcome his Beastly nature to attain what Kitty calls "actual happy." Logan spins out the scenario: "Lose the fur. . .nice girl, couple of kids and a teaching job somewhere that doesn't get blown up too often?" (#4). Hank initially shares Logan's assumptions and attitude. At first, Hank equates furriness with the impossibility of sex. "I used to have a mouth you could kiss," he growls (#3). His subsequent relationship with Brand will likely reveal that he still does, but at first Hank would rather assert a human identity than embrace a furry one: "I am a human being," he declares. "Wrong," Logan replies. "You're an X-Man." Here Logan reminds us that any mutant is always already inhuman. And the inhuman is not far from the animal. Eventually Hank chooses to embrace his inhumanity. He witnesses a gang of miserable mutants attack the Benetech genetic research facility, demanding access to the cure. He decides that he will not take the cure himself. "I've seen so much self-loathing, these desperate people," he reflects (#6). He assures Scott that "an X-Man doesn't quit. Not with the world watching." If his decision is informed by the fact that the X-Men are under heavy media scrutiny, then that decision is at least partly political, and the kind of politics it points to are the kind that flow from a minority identity: species, gender, sexual, or all of the above.

[48] In a nod to real-world furverts, Whedon argues that Hank McCoy will find happiness not by *losing* the fur, but rather by finding someone who will *love* the fur. That someone is Abigail Brand. Brand is hard-nosed, inflexible, and abrasive. Hank is the only X-Man who is not immediately put off by this blustering bureaucrat. Cassady draws the back of Brand's head as she introduces herself to the X-Men; the audience looks over her shoulders, at the mostly dubious faces of the team members (#6). Brand announces that she is head of the Sentient Worlds Observation and Response Department (SWORD). "The government and their acronyms. . .honestly, it's adorable," Beast purrs. Hank's attraction to Brand is clear from the beginning.

[49] Hank becomes even more fascinated with Brand when he discovers that she is not quite human herself. When Beast and Brand are trapped under a massive snow

drift, Brand removes her glove and produces a brilliant flash and (presumably) a wave of heat. The usually verbose Dr. McCoy is rendered almost speechless. "Oh," says his astonished face, and then in the next panel, from beneath the snowdrift, "My" (#21). Why is Hank McCoy so impressed with Brand's superpower? After all, he has met the Human Torch; Brand's discreet blaze can't hold a candle to that. What impresses Beast is not Brand's power but its significance. Brand can pass for human when she wants to. But her power means that she is not quite human, and when she comes out of the closet about that, she comes out to Hank. This is simultaneously a major act of trust on her part, and an assertion that as a superhuman, she is already outside the mainstream economy of desire. The implication here is that Brand would actually make a suitable companion for the more dramatically inhuman Beast.

[50] Brand is briefly captured by Breakworld soldiers. The soldiers threaten to rape her. Brand informs them that there are "two things you should know about me . . . I never get gang-raped on a first date . . . And 'Brand'. . . is not my given name" (Whedon and Cassady, *Giant-Size* #1). She then proceeds to use her flame powers to incinerate the would-be rapists. But there is more than righteous "take back the night" rage at work in this scene. Hank McCoy is watching from above. "And to think, I wasted concern," he muses. But of course, his concern is not wasted. It is likely that Brand intended Beast to witness her act of superpowered self-defense. Coming so soon on the heels of her cozy flame-kissed encounter with Beast beneath the snowdrift, Brand's dramatic and effective act of resistance suggests that her power is not only a valid physical basis for a possible consensual sexual relationship with Hank, but also a viable defense against non-consensual sexual assault.

[51] Hank's Beastly aspect finally begins to decode Brand's desire. "As a cat. . . The lady is lying," Hank informs Scott. "She's hiding something big" (#24). It makes sense that the animal part of this furry would sniff out Brand's dissembling desire, particularly since it is Hank's Beastliness that drives Brand's desire in the first place. Still, the full truth comes out only when Brand commits an uncharacteristic act of self-sacrifice. She takes a laser blast meant for Hank (#24). He is mystified: "why'd you take that hit?" Hank's the kind of genius who can figure out anything but love. When he pushes her, she finally reveals the truth: "I am so hot for you right now I could frikkin' pass out" (Whedon and Cassady, *Giant-Size* #1). Hank is entirely unprepared for this stunning revelation: for once in his life, the good Doctor is completely speechless.

[52] At the very end of Whedon's run, Beast and Brand acknowledge their mutual desire, and negotiate the terms of their budding relationship. Hank starts by admitting that he hates her. She not only acknowledges his hate but invites it: Brand loves the hate. As for her erotic desire, she pretty much wants to break him like a pony (Whedon and Cassady, *Giant-Size* #1). Suddenly it all makes sense. Just as Emma learned to speak explicitly about her DS relationship with Scott by the end of *Astonishing*, Brand has learned to acknowledge that she sees herself as dominant in her potential relationship with Hank. Like Emma Frost, Abigail Brand recognizes the benefits of female sexual dominance. She seems to understand that such dominance can challenge gender inequalities. It is especially tempting for Brand to take the dominant position in her relationship with Hank, given that he is so much more powerful than she in every arena other than the sexual. Brand's minor flame powers are no match for the awesome physical strength which Beast's mutation gives him, nor can Brand match the intellectual power of Hank's brilliant scientific mind. Luckily, Brand's sexual power mitigates the inequalities which exist between her and Hank. By assuming the dominant role in their

sexual relationship, Brand creates the possibility of balance and equality between them. Hank recognizes the value of Brand's dominance. He does not reject her offer. His only objection to her proposal is based upon his insecurity regarding his own furriness: "I'm a blue furry monster" (Whedon and Cassady, *Giant-Size #1*). This turns out not to be a dealbreaker. Brand's a green-haired alien, on her father's side. She insists that she and Hank are compatible in ways he does not have words for. The audience may be inclined to agree.

[53] The story of Beast and Brand suggests that a mutant furry and a half-alien furvert can successfully share dominance, submission and love. Whedon's story concludes with a scene of Beast and Brand teaching the next generation of mutants, while a voice-over repeats Kitty's words of wisdom: "If happy comes along, that weird, unbearable delight that's actual happy—" Clearly, Beast and Brand have been offered an opportunity for "actual happy." They should grab it while they can. They model this ethical choice for their young mutant students—just as Whedon and Cassady have modeled it for the young people who make up *X-Men*'s real-world audience.

[54] In the end, perhaps the most astonishing thing about *Astonishing X-Men* is its powerful affirmation of minority sexualities. Whedon and Cassady have harnessed the unique power of the comics medium: its ability to unite words and pictures into a coherent, consistent statement of an idea. In this case, that idea is the simple but crucial notion that people should celebrate their sexualities rather than fearing them. Whedon and Cassady make it clear that this idea is important to the disabled, the perverts, the furries. By implication, it is also important to anyone else whose sexuality is a bit different from the rest—which is to say, almost everyone. The lasting gift of *Astonishing* may be its contribution to a radically pluralist sexual culture. Our world needs such a culture at least as badly as does the world of the X-Men. Thanks to Joss Whedon and John Cassady, both worlds just might get what they need.

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Notes

[1] *Astonishing* received the comic book world's highest honor, the Eisner, as Best Continuing Series of 2006.

[2] Peter embodies, and Kitty disembodies, what David Serlin has called the "potentially queer boundaries of the tactile" (161). Peter and Kitty are queer straight people, a category enabled by the radical inclusiveness of the queer. See Thomas’s collection *Straight with a Twist: Queer Theory and the Subject of Heterosexuality.*

[3] Kitty and Peter can literally dissolve into one another. There are precedents for this in late twentieth-century science fiction. SF author Rudy Rucker imagined a drug called "merge," which permits lovers to dissolve their bodies into intermingled pools of liquid (Rucker).

[4] The final panel in this scene shows Kitty's outstretched, open hand. Interestingly, the Open Hand is also the name of the Breakworld's ruling political party, which suggests that their brand of tyrannical, non-consensual political domination is the very antithesis of "actual happy."

[5] Whedon says he grew up reading X-Men comics during the Claremont era, "as much as I can say I've grown up"; for him, writing the book he grew up reading is a "grave responsibility" (Whedon, "Joss Talks").

[6] Grant Morrison says that Claremont gave the X-Men "an added twist of S/M role play" (Morrison 242). Carol Cooper reminds us that during Claremont's famous Dark Phoenix saga, Jean Grey also had a "wildly liberating, S/M-flavored involvement" with the Hellfire Club (198).

[7] Scott's language seems to allude to Frank Quitely, the artist who worked with Morrison on *New X-Men*. Quitely's pseudonymous name is a spoonerism of "quite frankly."

[8] Roz Kaveney points out that Whedon's Emma sounds a lot like Lilah Morgan (211). More importantly, she *acts* like Lilah Morgan. Just as Wesley Wyndam-Pryce benefitted from a DS relationship with Lilah (Call 171), Scott benefits from his DS relationship with Emma.

[9] Whedon is not the first comic book writer to make this argument. When William Moulton Marston created Wonder Woman in the 1940s, he presented her as a sexually dominant woman, and he suggested that female dominance could serve as the basis for a kind of civic feminism (Call, chapter 2).