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X-Men: the adventures of South African Fanboys and other tales of textual poaching

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2013-06-07
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/12777

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Introduction

This research aims to explore schoolboy fandom and identity politics in relation to the television text, 'X-Men: The Animated Series', which aired in South Africa during the early post-apartheid years (circa 1995).

The text dealt with the oppression of and struggle by a band of 'mutants' for 'mutant' rights. The action took place in a fictional world where the 'others' were envisaged as 'freaks', 'muties' and 'mutant terrorists', where societal fear engulfed so-called 'normal' people, resulting in anti-mutant violence and persecution. The texts centred around this band of mutants as they learnt to control and master their powers whilst coming to accept their unique mutant abilities. This animated mutant world, with its forced detention camps, motifs of segregation, militant retaliation and forewarnings of 'Apocalyptic'[1] proportions must surely have rung bells globally for audiences able to relate to the themes of oppression and social marginalisation, not least those of the South African experience.

Following the writings of De Certeau, Fiske, Jenkins and others about textual poaching and audience rewritings of texts, this research, using focus groups and interviews, will seek to establish how schoolboy audiences in Johannesburg in the mid to late 1990s understood societal ills through the text, and constructed 'imagined communities' as Benedict Anderson would describe (1983), through their rewritings of the texts.

This analysis seeks to investigate such 'fan culture', and the ideology underpinning it. Audience perceptions, inscribed meanings and the activation of these audiences are themes that will be examined.

Various narratives and characters will be identified through this 'X-Men' text, as examples of such icons that 'imagined audience communities' then create,

[1] 'Apocalypse' is a nefarious character in the 'X-Men' and his sole intention is to cleanse the world of mankind, who he deems unworthy. He hates both human and mutant, and imagines a future where both are respectively imprisoned under his reign.

claim and mobilise around. In this regard viewers can either ‘conform, oppose’ or ‘negotiate’ with their readings of texts, as Fiske explains (1987). In this light, this research proposes to investigate and explore ‘X-Men’ fandom in South Africa, as a product of an ‘imagined audience community’. To this end, Jenkins' notion of ‘textual poaching’ is explanatory.

Understanding this construction or ‘imagining of communities’ through fandom and fan culture opens up a space to further investigate nationalisms and national identity. On a micro level, the effect of a television text in socialising children and their understanding of societal narratives, and to thereby shape national understandings, is perhaps a necessary diagonal of interest.

The influence of popular culture and its various manifestations on successive generations, in specific contexts, cannot be ignored in identity formation. In some cases popular culture has reached audiences and moulded generations through subverting mainstream trends; none the less just as art and music history have been used to define generations or periods, one cannot deny that the popular culture of a period reflects societal identities, conflicts and narratives. Andersson’s (2010) work on interpreting the popular and controversial South African television drama ‘Yizo Yizo’ is a primary example of this. In a world of new media, social networking, globalisation and cultural imperialism popular culture is now more than ever a reflection of societal interests and behaviour. And while previous generations may have experienced radio broadcasts or print media as a popular medium, ever since the 1940s when the label ‘soap opera’ initially surfaced with US soap manufacturers Procter and Gamble sponsoring television series (Andersson 2002), television has been the prime medium for advertising and producers reaching ever increasing audiences with their texts. And even though the landscape of new media is constantly advancing and so the television may one day be obsolete, its presence in the family room, as a shrine of middle class worship, has been embedded in contemporary society as if it were an independent family member or an omnipresent window on the world.

As a popular medium the television has been a socialising tool, for audiences exploring contemporary narratives, indulging in collective and political memory, or experiencing emotions such as nostalgia or regret. The significance of such a tool has been recognised by Jenkins, among others. Television allows the 'imagining' of a collective community, invisible beyond the scope of television and personally unknown, and yet simultaneously connected, engaged and self aware of the membership of others in that community. The implications of such a device on power relations, cultural formation, and education are of interest.

While seemingly a children's animated television programme the 'X-Men' texts, a total of five seasons' worth of episodes, with their specific narratives and received by audiences (often schoolboys and girls) in the specific context of South Africa post-apartheid, offers one a unique lens with which to understand identity politics and the forming of cultures, fandom and even 'imagined communities'. Could nationalism then be understood in terms of fandom? Using literature on that regarding a rewriting and re-imagining of texts (De Certeau, Fiske, Jenkins) as well as theorists on fandom (Hills, Pustz, Wandt, Fingeroth); this research seeks to explore the notion of fan boys and girls on a new level.

The concept of the 'fan' also needs examination, as not everyone interviewed in this research would equate their degree of interest with fandom. Pustz's work on fan culture is integral here as it breaks down the intricacies of fan culture through a look at the comic book industry (1999). Furthermore, to assume that the 'X-Men' texts have had such a large impact on South African youths, in general, is naive. Many South African youths still do not have access to middle class privileges such as television. Inequality in South Africa persists to concentrate such aspects of popular culture to urban areas, and this research is sensitive to this.

At this point it is integral to expand on my own involvement in this fan culture I seek to explore. Notwithstanding the academic debates about writing in the first person, my experiences as a South African youth have offered me the

unique opportunity to become a participant observer with regards to this particular research into popular culture. Certain communities and fan bases could not have been otherwise traversed or sincerely penetrated as an outsider. Re-igniting and trying to account for my past interests that brought me close to obsession over popular programming such as 'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles' and the 'X-Men', collecting merchandise and commodifying my devotion, and then sharing this passion at school with my like-minded peers and friends, brings a particular understanding to the work. And while this analysis is particularly interested in the 'X-Men', it is a work located within a broader investigation of fan culture.

As will become apparent from the data obtained from focus groups and interviews, not every viewer remembers the 'X-Men' in exactly the same way. Some remember being fans of other shows yet having maintained an interest in the 'X-Men' franchise.

The 'X-Men' franchise has come a long way from its comic book origins that the television texts are based on. Multiple spin-off big blockbuster movies, video games and even new animated television programmes have been created to appeal to new generations of youths. Other youth fans are more concerned with new interests, for example sports fanaticism is alive and well in South Africa.

The reality of my own childhood as a South African youth, and those of my friends and peers, many of whom participated in this research, was unique in that we all attended school at Sacred Heart College in Johannesburg between the years 1994-2004. The significance of this private school cannot be understated in relation to my research. Besides providing scope for an obvious class analysis, which perhaps explains collective interests in popular culture and access to such mediums as television, the unique nature of Sacred Heart College is a pivotal aspect to this research. Being one of the first multicultural and multiracial schools in Johannesburg (albeit a Catholic school), with a reputation for being progressive, and particularly during post-apartheid as a school housing the children of activists and political leaders

amongst others, Sacred Heart provided a location for the growth of a new generation of South Africans. It was a melting pot for the 'Generation X'[2] , the last remnants of South Africans born during the tail-end of apartheid, who were simultaneously the new order of post-democracy South African youths, working out their realities, and learning about this 'apartheid past' they had come from but were too small to remember. And while the school yard and recess break periods would represent a time to catch up with friends, play sports or games and eat lunch together, it was also a place and time that formed an integral part of socialising us with others of different races, religions, genders and backgrounds – where we began to form our own identities. Interests and hobbies would naturally dominate conversations. And just as fads of marbles, trading cards, yo-yo's and spinning tops would dictate agendas, the contents of popular children's television programming were of utmost importance. At times one would feel left out when a majority of pupils discussed an episode that one had missed. At other times the oral nature of fan culture meant you would be filled in, in great detail, by friends. Recreating battle scenes with action figures, donning super hero costumes at themed dress-up parties – these were all early voyages into fan culture. Perhaps this fan culture began in primary school with 'Ninja Turtles', 'Biker Mice', 'X- Men', 'Smurfs' or 'Little Ponies', developing in later years of high school to big 'UEFA Champions League' football matches that were the highlights for weeks of schooling. These matches were discussed and analysed before and after by soccer supporter-shirt wearing youths. In the case of adolescent girls, the plots of teen dramas such as 'Dawson's Creek', where certain characters, being either idolised or rubbished, were the hot topics during free-time gossip.

Ultimately, this work looks to explore the significance of the 'X-Men' texts and their influence in retrospect, as identities and subject positions are formed and reformed by school-children at a private school in a post-apartheid South Africa grappling with violence, traumatic memory, amnesia, even 'unsettled memory' (Werbner 1998:3) and a cohesive national identity that belies a

[2] 'Generation X' also makes reference to a series of titles released by Marvel in the 'X-Men' universe, one might also say that in South Africa 'Generation X' better describes a generation similar to that of former ANC YL president Julius Malema. Perhaps 'Generation Y' is a more accurate description of my generation.

selective collective remembering and even retains a culture of latent prejudices. To what extent had the ‘X-Men’ narratives affected that generation of school kids that attended Sacred Heart College in the mid 90’s? Was this an individually isolated experience that I alone could claim? Given the context of the newly born South Africa, and the specificity of the ‘X-Men’ narratives of otherness and oppression, and while appreciating the unique experience of being schooled at Sacred Heart College, this research also looks to examine the ‘post memory’ of school children, post-apartheid in relation to popular culture. To this end, references to theory, such as Hirsch and Smith (2002), on collective and cultural memory, are also made.

There have been moments of insecurity during this research because of a fear that the topic would be dismissed as trivial by peers, mentors and sceptics. This research is not a glorified championing of cartoons or fans, as a crude interpretation may suggest. And to counter this, this research does not blindly or aggressively defend such criticism, but rather seeks to explore a topic with significance for cross-disciplinary debate in academia. This research hopes to investigate a moment within popular culture, as it intersects with the political and social realities of a South Africa that has been in the process of post-apartheid transformation. Hence notions of ‘fan-scholars’ and ‘scholar-fans’ as described by Hills (2002), and the debates surrounding the space for notions of fandom or fan culture in academia must be explored. This research hopes to add another dimension to this debate by exploring a ‘subaltern’ experience of fan culture and nationalism, focusing on a South African imagining on what is historically a western and particularly American terrain, since the text under discussion is an ‘imported’ one.

While the title of this research suggests a neglecting of gendered perspectives, the ‘fanboy’ label has been deliberately included as opposed to ‘fans’ or ‘fan boys and girls’ as it conjures up preconceived notions of fans with relation to patriarchy, sexism and the stereotyping that excludes girls and women from fan culture. The popular imagery and caricatures of geeky nerdy adolescent boys obsessing over fan culture at the expense of their social lives and relationships with girls, has become widely accepted and as such over

generalised and limiting. This research is conscious of this and attempts to explore this theme that is synonymous with notions of fan culture.

Background Literature

"To be popular, the television text has to be read and enjoyed by a diversity of social groups, so its meanings must be capable of being inflected in a number of different ways. The television text is therefore more polysemic and more open than earlier theorists allowed for… 'The message is not solely in the 'text', but can be changed or 'worked on' by the audience as they make their own interpretation of a programme'." (Fiske, 1987: 66)

John Fiske envisions the reading of a text as a 'dialogue between this text and its socially situated reader' (1987: 66). According to Fiske this reader is the bearer of social subjectivity, based on lived social experience and a textually constructed subjectivity. This textually produced subjectivity is however only created in the moment the text is read…the moment where this 'dialogue' between text and reader exists (1987: 63). Subjectivity should furthermore be considered as 'disunited' or as a 'site of struggle', rather than a 'unified site of ideological reconciliation'. As Fiske describes:

"Both the text and the subjectivity are discursive constructs and both contain similar competing or contradictory discourses. It is out of these contradictions that the polysemy of the text and the multiplicity of readings arise."(1987: 67)

Fiske gives the example of a text containing a sexist joke (1987: 66). The joke is situated in a 'discourse of gender' and plays on gender difference. It is based on the suggested 'incompetence' of women in the public sphere, and alludes to a dominant patriarchal narrative that rather designates women's duties to the domestic. As Fiske further describes, it is text aimed at a masculine subject position and yet may encounter a 'nonpatriarchal subject' and must be able to be read from this contrasting subject position (1987: 66). Understanding television in terms of these texts, housing multiples of potential meanings, places the emphasis on the reading of texts (1987: 67). The ability to infer meaning and the activity of reading itself as a social and cultural

practice becomes a many faceted experience, one that can be shared and yet also experienced individually – on one's television, in one's own home.

Fiske explains this through another example based on the research of Hodge and Tripp (1986), which examined the popularity of the television series 'Prisoner' with Australian junior high school students. As Fiske describes, Hodge and Tripp were not so much concerned with the effects television had on audiences, nor over the audiences' use of television, but rather how a specific television text envisaged as a 'polysemic potential of meanings' 'connects' with the social lives of audiences and then how meanings are activated by these audiences (1987: 67). Set in a women's prison, the television text was well received, as it drew many parallels between prison and school life (Fiske, 1987: 68). The students could recognise the roles of characters in 'Prisoner', and identify these same roles in their own school experience:

"…the hard-bitten old warden/teacher, the soft new one, the one you can take advantage of, the one you can't, and so on. Similarly there were prisoners who resisted the institution and fought it in all ways, those who played along with it and were goody goodies, those who played along with it on the surface, but opposed it underneath, and so on."(Fiske, 1987: 68)

The popularity of the program grew to the extent that eleven and twelve-year-old girls re-enacted the previous night's episodes on the schoolyard, with instances of even teachers being drawn into the role of wardens (Fiske, 1987: 69). Fiske explains that 'Prisoner' gave the students a language to help them establish their own subject position in their lived experience as students in a school structure. Just as the powerless inmates struggled against the prison system, so the schoolchildren could relate to this narrative of resistance and minor victories, as they faced the ubiquitous school authority:

"The contradictions and struggle between authority and resistance to it existed in both the program and their subjectivities, and the meanings that were activated and the pleasures that were gained were ones that made social sense to the subordinate and the powerless." (Fiske, 1987: 70)

Fiske's work goes further to identify other examples of a subculture inferring meaning out of a text that reflects a dominant ideology. In the example of Australian Aboriginal children relating to the program 'Diff'rent Strokes', the text's plot centres around a white American family adopting a black American child, whom these Australian children imagined as being Aboriginal (Fiske, 1987: 70). Without delving into the example, the narrative of the white 'foster parents' adopting a black son, is one that resonates with the Aboriginal people and to this extent those affected by the colonial experience in general. The trend appears accurate in that where lived experience of such narratives of the powerless exist, audiences activate sets of meanings that challenge the dominant narratives offered to them in the text (Fiske, 1987: 71).

As Fiske explains, the finding of discourse in texts allows for one to understand one's own lived experience of social powerlessness and therefore present the first step towards changing or challenging this status quo (1987: 71). Another example Fiske provides is the identification that the socially powerless have with American Indians in Western films, the dominant Western perception that imagined the 'cowboy' as brave, bold and truly American as opposed to the perception of the American Indian as barbaric, villainous and violent is one that is re-enacted on many a school ground, with the socially marginalised often routing for the 'villains' or 'Indians'. Referring to Mattelant's (1980) similar conclusions in his study on the Third World reception of Hollywood television, Fiske describes how the messages of mass culture can be subverted or negated by the powerless classes who can conjure up their own 'seeds of a new culture' which can be contradictory (1987: 71).

Later in this research, when considered in terms of the South African experience, this trend will be investigated further.

Fiske's work is important in understanding the reception of such television texts, and also describes the politics involved in the modes of reception of television and the incorporation of its viewing into everyday lives of audiences. As Fiske explains of his work, children's engrossed attention rarely lasted for

ten minutes yet was usually accompanied or combined by a range of other activities (for example eating or whilst doing homework):

"Palmer (1986: 63) lists…watching with pets was very common, even the family gold fish which were repeatedly reported to share the children's viewing by swimming on the side of tank nearest to the television set!" (1987: 73)

The role of television in the family set up and its use as a tool of subverting power relations is also described by Fiske. Referring to what Morley (1986) labels 'the politics of the family', Fiske explains that patterns of power and resistance exist in the family structure and culture. These battles for power centre mainly around, firstly, parents and their children and then secondly between men and women (1987: 75). Parents would often use television, or the deprivation of television, as a means of punishment. The meanings activated and the pleasures received that children would find in cartoons, and that women might find in soap operas, were directly related to their situation in the power structure of the family and thereby in defying this parental or masculine power rested the pleasure:

"Similarly, the male's preference for news, documentary, sport and realistic or 'muscle' drama becomes translated into the 'natural' superiority of these genres, which in turn, allows the male to impose his viewing tastes upon the household, not because he is more powerful, but because the programs he prefers are innately 'better'. This also gives him the right to impose his viewing habits, generally those of undistracted attention, upon the rest of the household and to demand that the women and children refrain from talking while he is viewing…" (Fiske 1987: 76)

In terms of oral culture, and its relation to the reception and activation of audiences, Fiske's work is a vital stepping stone towards understanding what Benedict Anderson (1983) describes as 'imagined communities'. As Fiske explains, it is this relationship between mass culture and oral culture, whereby the later "…brings its activeness to that process by which the viewer becomes the producer of meanings…" (1987: 78). The strength of a mass produced text in appealing to a broad spectrum of audiences, relates to the ability of its social 'comentions' to productively engage with the 'comentions' of the speech

community wherein it is circulating (Fiske, 1987: 79). In this regard, discussing a television text unveils the particular meanings that are active or 'work' for specific audiences. These meanings are then activated in subsequent viewings of the text:

"In this way solitary viewing can be experienced as group viewing, because the viewer knows well that other members of his/her group are viewing at the same time. Gossip works actively in two ways: it constructs audience-driven meanings and it constructs audience communities within which those meanings circulate." (Fiske, 1987: 79)

It is this construction of 'audience-driven meanings' and 'audience communities' that relates most pertinently to Anderson's (1983) notion of the 'imagined community'. While Fiske may be dealing with audiences of television texts producing and 'imagining' meanings across an 'imagined audience community', Anderson's notion of an 'imagined community' deals with a 'national imagining' of a people or community, and while perhaps the contexts are different, the reality of communal imagining is somewhat similar. Describing the nation as an imagined political community, and imagined as both inherently limiting and sovereign, Anderson explains:

"It is *imagined* because members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion…" (1983:15)

This 'communion' for Anderson can perhaps be read as an 'activated meaning' for Fiske. And while Fiske describes 'solitary viewing' experienced as 'group viewing', so Anderson describes this 'imagining' of 'members' who do not know each other yet are aware of each other's membership in that very community. In Fiske's work the television is the tool for imagining, producing or a rewriting of meanings by audiences. Anderson goes further to describe the nation as imagined as limiting because even the biggest nation has "...finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond which lies other nations," (1983:16). There is no nation that imagines a mass recruitment and incorporation of all of humanity, beyond its own boundaries, into its nation. In terms of the 'audience communities' that Fiske describes, they too do not imply a generalised

subscription of limitless audiences, but rather a community of a particular audience group for whom television text meanings 'work' (1987: 79). Importantly then, Anderson also describes the nation as imagined to be sovereign (1983: 16). While Anderson's text on 'imagined communities' is pivotal in understanding the formation of national sovereignty and the nation, on a smaller scale, this understanding of 'imagined communities' also allows one to further understand other 'imagined communities', of not just audiences but fans, through a similar lens. In turn, understanding popular culture, subcultures and fandom can lead to answers of national questions. While suggesting a similarity but without limiting the equation of the obsession of a fan with the blind belief of a citizen, this research seeks to explore the activation of such 'imagined communities', whether it be through a national rhetoric or a television text.

To become familiar with the fan culture around the 'X-Men' television texts, it is also necessary to understand comic book culture, where the 'X-Men' first originated as a product of Marvel Comics. Matthew Pustz's work 'Comic Book Culture: Fanboys and True Believers' (1999), is significant in this regard. Pustz's interest in comic book culture also serves as an example of how culture in general is formed:

"Nearly every member of comics culture – nearly every reader of comic books – is an active participant, not just a consumer. Whether participation occurs at comic book conventions or the comic shop, in letter pages of fanzines, on web pages or in the imaginations of readers dreaming of one day becoming professional writers or artists, it is more widespread than in any other culture centred around popular media. This book will show how this culture can serve as an important example of how culture in general is created through participation and boundaries." (1999: xiii)

This notion of 'participation' and of 'boundaries', again reminds one of Anderson's definition of an 'imagined community'. Pustz's focus is in exploring the centre of conflict between mainstream and alternative readers in the comic industry. Alternative comic culture, as Pustz describes, acts as a separate culture within a larger one, a subculture of sorts in opposition to its mainstream counterparts (1999: x). As Pustz explains, alternative comics

target an educated adult audience interested in more 'realistic' or 'slice-of-life'[3] narratives as opposed to the themes of 'heroic fantasy' that dominate the medium. As such, alternative comics are typified by being political, of criticizing social morals, cultural trends and even voicing anti-corporate ideals (1999: x). Pustz thus demonstrates that these communities of audiences or readers (both mainstream and alternative) are not just separate entities with different ambitions, preferences and practices regarding their favoured texts but are also part of a wider culture that is not necessarily unified (1999: x).

The popularity of comics as a medium of popular culture, should not be dismissed. Pustz reveals that by 1940 the medium had 95% of American children followers reading comics (1999: x). Given the context of American involvement in World War II, the popularity of comics with children and soldiers alike soared as comic heroes such as 'Batman' received young sidekicks, while other comics depicted "…groups of urban boys banded together to fight for themselves and against the Nazis and Japanese," (1999: xi).

Comics represented a means through which young readers could become involved in the war effort, through the narratives of patriotic heroes such as Marvel's 'Captain America', which were simultaneously being read by soldiers as light entertainment during their service. Pustz explains that upon the return of soldiers, the subject matter of most comics shifted towards more realistic genres such as crime and romance. By this time, cooperation between readers and creators was already evident in the example of 'EC comics', which had letter pages, allowing fans to interact with each other and with the creators (1999: xi). As Pustz describes, the direction of the comic industry would, however, take a sharp turn:

"Both of these trends of the late 1940's and early 1950's came to an end in large part because of the controversy over comics (fuelled by Fredric Wertham's 'Seduction of the Innocent') and the eventual passage of the comics' code. This list of what could and could not

[3] Rodney, the owner of Zed Bee's Comics in Edenvale (Johannesburg), whom I interviewed, refers to these as 'Slice-of-life' comics that indulge in everyday stories of everyday people. He gave the example of characters who contemplate suicide after a tough day or those who have drinking problems.

be depicted in comics helped bring about a sharp decline in comic sales and many companies were forced out of business." (1999: xi)

This should be recognised as a sign of the times, demonstrating the significance of comics to a generation of youths, as a popular medium reflecting societal narratives that were at times controversial. Other companies, such as DC Comics, survived this period by reverting back to superheroes for their subject matter, which as mentioned had done so well during World War II (Pustz, 1999: xi). This revival helped to create what Pustz describes as 'comic fandom', as "…older readers who enjoyed both the original heroes and their new counterparts began to contact and meet each other," (1999: xi). The early Marvel Comics of the 1960's appealed to these fans too, but what really solidified this success and appeal for Marvel was a following of the EC example to maintain co-operation between creators and fans:

"Marvel created a group of 'true believers' who thought that they were reading cutting-edge literature that made them superior to people reading the comics of other companies as well as those who did not read comics at all." (Pustz, 1999: xi)

In this regard, Marvel fans and their 'imagined community', can be described as obsessed with these favoured texts and activated meanings on a level possibly akin to religious worship. Referring to Stan Lee the creator of Marvel's greatest titles (including the 'X-Men' and the 'Fantastic Four'), Pustz remarks that, "…Lee is even more important than god," for fans of Marvel's comic universe (1999: 49).This trend towards superheroes, often with divine powers, is still present to this day in mainstream comic markets.

What Pustz then begins to explore is the notion of the fan or 'fanboy'. Pustz explains that this 'phenomenon' of obsession by audience communities of superheroes, is where the term 'fanboy' originates. It is often used divisively to describe young adolescents who buy comics (that they sometimes never open, thus preserving resell value) based on reviews and tastes of popular magazines such as 'Wizard', which promote the 'in' or 'hot' creators and characters (1999: xii). While the term 'fanboy' is infamous in comic book

culture, other mainstream readers have re-appropriated it to describe their love of reading comics with a sense of fun and fascination (Pustz, 1999: xii).

Alternative comic audiences have a much greater diversity amongst their audience communities, and as Pustz describes, are often more literary minded, include more women, are frequently independent (non-corporate) and are politically and culturally considered more liberal (1999: xii). Often involved in other alternative mediums, such as alternative music, Pustz gives the example of alternative audience favourites such as 'Sandman', 'Preacher' and other DC Vertigo productions that are typified by their themes that are moody, theological and involving mythological speculation. Some alternative readers, Pustz suggests, are 'snobs'. This category includes academic readers, who only read 'European comics' or obscure and rare 'minicomics' (1999: xii). Despite the differences between mainstream and so-called alternative readers, comic book culture is somewhat unified by mutual devotion to the medium, explains Pustz. And it is this same devotion or 'communion', of almost religious proportions, that Anderson refers to in his definition of 'imagined communities' (1983:15).

This audience activation, collective following and 'imagining' are indicative of fan behaviour. Jenkins' work 'Textual Poachers'(1992), becomes seminal in understanding such audience imaginings in this research. Jenkins' work starts as a response to the 'Star Trek' star William Shatner (he played the role of Captain James T. Kirk), who in a guest appearance in a satirical sketch on 'Saturday Night Live' told 'Star Trek' fans to - "Get a life, will you people? I mean, I mean, for crying out loud, it's just a TV show!"(1992: 10). In the sketch Shatner spoke like this in response to two 'Trekkies' diligently inquiring about minor characters in specific episodes. As Shatner takes further snipes, the sketch satirises the dominant stereotypes that have come to describe 'Trekkies' as: nerdy introverts, laden with fan merchandise, who are obsessed with their fantasy of 'Star Trek', devoid of having relationships and intellectually immature (Jenkins, 1992: 10). Jenkins sets out to defend fandom and fan culture, against media-postured questioning that echoes and circulates Shatner's advice for fans.

As Jenkins describes his own interest in fan culture being questioned by students and colleagues, he suggests that this very sceptic image of fans is rather located in a broader discourse on fans, their culture and their reading of texts (1992: 12):

"Rejecting media-fostered stereotypes of fans as cultural dupes, social misfits, and mindless consumers, this book perceives fans as active producers and manipulators of meanings. Drawing on the work of Michel de Certeau, it proposes an alternative conception of fans as readers who appropriate popular texts and reread them in a fashion that serves different interests, as spectators who transform the experience of watching television into a rich and complex participatory culture. Viewed in this fashion, fans become a model of the type of textual 'poaching' de Certeau associates with popular reading." (1992: 23)

The notion of 'textual poaching', poses questions for media producers and their texts that constrain, circulate and reflect meanings of dominant narratives in society (Jenkins, 1992: 23). Such 'poaching' or 'raiding' of a text for those meanings that are useful or pleasurable, creates a tension between the readers and the writers of a text, as readers activate their own meanings "…like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write" (Jenkins, 1992: 24). Fans appropriate meanings from texts, and recreate their own meanings, where texts fail to supply this desired reading effect. As Jenkins describes:

"Because popular narratives often fail to satisfy, fans must struggle with them, to try to articulate to themselves and others unrealized possibilities within original works. Because these texts continue to fascinate, fans cannot dismiss them from their attention but rather must try to find ways to salvage them for their interests."(1992: 23)

Understanding fans in this light, Jenkins thus provides a framework explaining 'how fans rewrite texts', as described and outlined by Muff Andersson (2010). Andersson, in reference to Jenkins, explains that "…fans' response involves not just adoration, but also frustration and antagonism over the 'refusal/inability of producers to tell the kinds of stories viewers want to see'…" (2010: 192). Andersson describes and simplifies Jenkins's ten ways in which fans rewrite television shows and become involved in textual production,

under these headings: recontextualisation; expanding the series timeline; refocalisation; moral realignment; genre shifting; crossovers; character dislocation; personalisation; emotional intensification and eroticisation (2010: 192). Andersson gives examples of each, interpreting audience rewritings and re-imaginings of the popular and controversial South African TV drama 'Yizo Yizo' through Jenkins' categories. For instance, Andersson's example of 'recontextualisation' in 'Yizo Yizo' describes the anger of fans at certain controversial characters being 'cut out' or sanitised, as is evident in this email received by the producers:

"I would like to remark on the complete and utter disdain with which the *Yizo Yizo* producers hold the nation by cleaning up the series surreptitiously after the outcry over the sodomy scene [in *Yizo Yizo 2*]. The subsequent episodes had no jail scenes and I challenge the producers to state that suddenly the fortunes of Papa Action and Chester are meaningless to the story – when it is the declared intention to show that prison is no fun and crime does not pay…"(2010: 192).

Jenkins describes this as the fan 'rewriting' or producing 'missing scenes', that are explanatory of a character's on-screen actions (Jenkins, 1992: 162). It is also interesting that the author of the email refers to a 'nation' being held in 'disdain' by the producers, and takes it upon himself to speak on behalf of an imagined 'nation'.

Another example of such fan 'rewriting' is the 'expanding of the series timeline' (Andersson, 2010: 193). As Andersson adds, the 'prequel' extends the timeline of a text by imagining the origins or 'back-stories' of the original primary text and its characters (2010: 193). The second 'Star Wars Trilogy' is perhaps the most famous example of this. Beginning with 'Episode 1: The Phantom Menace', the second 'Star Wars Trilogy' reintroduced the world of 'Jedi's' and 'light-sabres' to a newer generation via a narrative venturing into the childhood of one Anakin Skywalker who others might know as Darth Vader[4] from the initial 'Star Wars Trilogy'.

[4] Darth Vader, in what would become a classic cult moment in popular culture references, is revealed as Luke Skywalker's father in the 'Empire Strikes Back', the final film in the original trilogy. In this epic moment, Vader remarks, "…Luke, I am your father," during an epic light-sabre battle.

It is then noticeable, that once one applies Jenkins' lens to texts and their appropriation by fans, fan culture becomes a retort to mass media, and the producers' power to construct and circulate a dominant narrative. Indeed, even academia has its own dominant structures that circulate ideology and resist changes in the power relations of other subject positions. The greatest criticism of Jenkins does co-incidentally come from academia and its denial of fan culture as within its realm of esteem:

"Michael criticises Jenkins for projecting the values of the academic community onto fan culture: 'Describing fan culture in the idealized terms of a perfected university seminar – a place in which cultural products and the issues they entail are subjected to widespread and lively debate and a multitude of decodings – is to pay fan culture a very high compliment. *But we should never forget that this is a compliment within a value system that particularly or most reliably pertains to academic intellectuals who have internalized these ideals*'." (Hills, 2002: 10)

Matt Hills (2002), deals with 'Fan Cultures' at a very intimate level. Not only does Hills raise pertinent literature regarding fandom and the theoretical boundaries of fan culture, sketching a map of the contradictions and limitations that has seen fans previously been stereotyped and taken light-heartedly, but Hills also follows in the steps of Jenkins in exploring the duality of being both fan and academic, that is the subject position of the 'scholar-fan' and the implications as such in challenging critical academia (2002: 10). Hills thus diligently defends Jenkins and his work from criticism, while posturing this new position of the 'scholar-fan' (and also the 'fan-scholar' which Hills differentiates) and its implications for cultural studies (2002: 11).

This is finally a good departure point for the purposes of my proposed research, as Hills suggests:

"…it becomes apparent – given fan-academic tensions – that the scholar-fan and the fan-scholar are necessarily liminal in their identities (that is, they exist between and transgress the regulative norms of academic and fan imagined subjectivities). This 'between-ness' is what underpins the defensiveness and anxiety of both groups, since both are marginalised within their respective primary communities. Equally, neither fan-scholars nor scholar-fans can

‘properly’ belong to the other, secondary community unless they temporarily adopt its institutional norms of writing and practice.”(2002: 20)

The ‘X-Men’ franchise has become enormous and continuously grows, as earlier in 2011 the latest in a string of films and spin-offs, ‘X-Men: First Class’ (2011) was released. Although the film, if anything, revived a tradition of spin-offs that have been haunting fans of the original comics and animated series, it is this very film that is introducing ‘X-men’ to the new generation of youths, or expanding their vague knowledge of ‘X-Men’ texts. While fanzines are saturated with fan complaints and arguments, perhaps at times even begrudging compliments, as will be seen through the analysis of certain focus groups, current generations of youths are only being exposed to the ‘X-Men’ through this latest offering. The fandom around ‘X-Men’ is international, yet this research ‘imagines’ or claims an ‘X-Men’ narrative from a South African context, and reads specifically the original ‘X-Men’ animated series of the early nineties as its primary text. Even though Marvel Comics released the ‘X-Men’ comics many years preceding the animated TV series, my generation of youths were exposed first and foremost to the television text, which is not to say that this never led to a love of the comics. In this way, one must appreciate that the ‘X-Men’ films reach newer audiences who may perhaps lay claim to a different ‘imagining’ and attachment to the ‘X-Men’ franchise and all its guises.

If successful this research, will also contribute to a fan rewriting or ‘poaching’ of this ‘X-Men’ text, much in the ilk of the ‘Star Trek’ fanzines that house the interpretations of ‘Star Trek’ fans, that are circulated years after the TV shows finished (see Andersson, 2010: 192). Yet this interpretation makes scholarly analysis of such fan readings in order not only to understand ‘imagined fan communities’ but also ‘imagined’ nationalisms[5].

[5] This can be read as the ‘imagining’ of a nation, or alternatively the ‘imagining’ of a political community, invoking the spirit of Benedict Anderson.

Methodology

The type of research methodology primarily used in this research, is that of a qualitative nature. Erica Burman (1997) explains the difference between qualitative and quantitative research methods:

"What the motley collection of approaches to research that are termed 'qualitative' have in common is that they are interpretive; that is, they reject the possibility of arriving at an understanding of actions, events, or objects outside practices of representation…Traditional criteria for evaluating empirical work – of validity, replicability, and generalizability – are therefore either irrelevant or in need of redefinition according to this different starting point. The difficulties that beset quantitative research correspondingly turn into resources for qualitative work. So rather than being methodological horrors, as Woolgar (1988) puts it, problems of indexicality… of inconcludability… and reflexivity…become topics for analysis, once we accept that research is inevitably contextualized…'Qualitative research does not pretend that we can fill the gap between objects and representations once and for all. Rather because it is an essentially interpretive enterprise, it works *with* the problems – the gap – rather than against it'…" (1997: 793).

Without being drawn into the debates that rage on in academia over the merits of qualitative research versus those of a quantitative nature, the scholarly approach to this research, which is involved in understanding school boy and girl interpretations, imaginings and fan culture through the example of the 'X-Men' texts, clearly calls for a qualitative analysis.

George Gaskell (2000) describes the importance of qualitative interviewing in mapping and understanding the respondents' 'life world', as an entry point for the social scientist who then subjects these accounts to interpretive frameworks allowing for more conceptual and abstract accounts. There are many more viewpoints and interpretations, than the researcher's own 'thesis space' allows for. However, Gaskell appropriately for this research describes the necessity of the qualitative interview in understanding the relationships between certain social actors and their specific situations, "…the objective is a fine-textured understanding of beliefs, attitudes, values and motivations in relation to behaviours of people in particular social contexts," (2000: 39).

My own position in this research has been that of a participant observer and this is important in terms of the research and its investigation of fan culture and 'imagined audience communities'. As mentioned earlier, it would be difficult to explore such communities and collect honest information if it were not for the 'insider' perspective of participant observer. Frequently, the interviews and focus groups that I have compiled, would not have been as richly textured if it were not for my own confessions and admissions, which in turn allowed for the confidence of interviewees or respondents to also 'open up' honestly. In their work Burnham et al. (2008) suggest the benefits of such participant observation:

"The participant observer shares in the life of the community being studied, being involved consciously and systematically, as far as circumstances allow, in the activities of the group and even in their interests and affections. If this aim is achieved, there will be two consequences: first, the subjects of the study will learn to take the researcher for granted and will thus behave almost as though he or she were not there; and second, the researcher will get 'under the skin' of the subjects and learn to think almost as they think." (2008: 267)

Burnham et al, (2008) with reference to the work of Gans, give an example of the use of participant observation in the study of urban communities. Gans and his wife, bought a house as a means of investigating the creation or 'imagining' of new communities in a new suburb in 'New Jersey' (Burnham et al. 2008: 269). Through research methods such as questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and particularly participant observation, Gans also sought to "…challenge the denigration of suburban life that was common in academic circles," (Burnham et al. 2008: 269). Gans' investigation lead to interesting results regarding local government and decision-making processes over public policy, which were harder to penetrate than were the realities of social life in the community of this new suburb named 'Levittown' (Burnham et al. 2008: 270). In this example the local political structure proved difficult for Gans to gain access to, while the social realities of the community were accessible through his participant observation. Burnham et al therefore describe the advantages of participant observation:

"The results of participant observation studies tend to be highly readable and detailed accounts of small groups and communities. They are rich in details about the activities, beliefs and rationales of the groups. They are all the more interesting because they are generally about groups and communities that are little known to the reader, for example gangs, sects, gypsies or government departments. Participant observation is often praised for its flexibility, because a wide variety of groups, tribes, communities and institutions have been studied using this approach. Indeed, it may be the only method of researching particular groups." (2008: 278).

As mentioned this research therefore looks to use methods of qualitative interviewing to study and identify fan culture and audience 'imaginings' of groups of people that were schoolchildren during the 1990s in the specific context of South Africa. Gaskell differentiates between two different forms of qualitative interview, the individual interview and that of group interviewing. While describing the benefits and downfalls of both, Gaskell also describes a third option used by researchers that is a mixture of both or a 'multi-method' approach that has its own justifications (2000: 49).

This research will take a 'multi-method' approach and involve both focus groups and individual interviews. Despite the form of interview, Gaskell also suggests that the prior preparation or planning involved, begins with two essential issues, "…what to ask (the specification of the topic guide) and whom to talk to (how to select the respondents)," (2000: 40).

The 'topic guide' for interviews, is as Gaskell describes, used to capture the aims and observations of the research:

"It is not an extensive series of specific questions, but rather a set of paragraph headings. It acts as a prompt to the interviewer, a security blanket when the mind goes blank in the middle of the interview, a signal that there is an agenda to follow…A good topic guide will create an easy and comfortable framework for a discussion, providing a logical and plausible progression through the issues in focus. As the topic guide is drawn up it is a reminder to the researcher that questions about social scientific issues must be pitched in ordinary language using everyday terms adapted to the interviewee. Finally, it acts as a preliminary scheme for the analysis of the transcripts…However the topic guide is, as the label suggests, a guide, and it should not be followed slavishly as if the success of the research depended on it." (Gaskell, 2000: 40).

And this was accurate for my own research. The structure of my interviews went along a particular format outlined by my own ‘topic guide’. Initially, as an introduction, I would thank the respondents for participating, before introducing myself, my early childhood memories of popular culture and my own admissions of participating in fan culture both as a child and a young adult. I would then ask the respondents or interviewees to take turns in sharing with the rest of the group, beginning with their own name and age, followed by their own experiences of popular culture and its many texts. I would ask them specifically to describe the cartoons and television programming they were ‘into’ as children; the ‘fads’ (such as marbles, toys, card collecting, tops or any other school yard pastimes) they participated in; whether they would consider themselves as fans of any particular interests, both in the past and the present; and finally their understanding or past experience with the ‘X-Men’ in any of its formats.

As Gaskell describes, I addressed my questions in ‘ordinary language’ as a fan rather than an academic. To this end, in attempting a line of questioning around fan communities or ‘imagined audience communities’, instead of going into a description of Benedict Anderson’s work, I would attempt to reach respondents that were ‘fans’ through soccer analogies. The love for soccer or football in South Africa does not need to be documented. The success of the 2010 FIFA World Cup is testament to this, yet this international tournament held every four years does not fully express the devotion of South African’s to the sport and its television viewing.

While local favourites like Orlando Pirates and Kaiser Chiefs have massive fan bases in both South Africa and the rest of Africa, international clubs such as ‘Barcelona F.C’, and particularly the British clubs such as ‘Manchester United’ and ‘Liverpool F.C’, have passionate, and even obsessed, fan bases worldwide that don their supporter-shirt replicas out of pride and support for these football clubs whenever they are playing matches. And much like other ‘imagined audience communities’, as Fiske (1987) explains, where ‘solitary viewing’ can be experienced as ‘group viewing’, soccer fans know well that other members of their group (for example ‘Manchester United’ fans) are

viewing at the same time. While South African 'Manchester United' fans may not physically attend football matches at 'Old Trafford'[6] in Manchester, or attend fan-pub screenings that are synonymous with 'big match days' across Manchester and the rest of the U.K., such 'imagined fan communities' exist in relatively small pockets throughout South Africa watching big matches with like-minded football enthusiasts in pubs and sports bars in a similar way. Reminding us of Anderson's (1983) definition, these 'imagined communities' of fans might never know, meet, or hear of each other but in their minds 'lives the image of their communion'.

Without over indulging in this example of soccer fandom, this topic would often spark conversation in the group between rival fans, which as will be discussed later, has interesting consequences. This soccer example seemed to explain, in a language that was easily accessible, the theory of socially 'imagined communities' that was being explored in my research, to the respondents.

As Gaskell proposes, my 'topic guide' was not always followed 'slavishly'. I allowed for conversation to flow and at times had to modify my order of questioning to allow for such conversation, or to prompt areas of discussion I had not expected would arise, but which became of great importance. A secondary round of group questioning and sharing allowed for this. Usually respondents were already 'opening up' by this point, and so were willing to share their childhood experiences, such as those of participation in fantasy role-play (for example dressing up as superheroes or pretending to be certain characters or sports stars) and also their involvement in oral cultures (gossip) at school. Other themes on my 'topic guide' involved 'politics of the family' in terms of television viewing, as well as gendered readings and audiences.

In the case of the focus groups, I would give a description to the respondents of the specific 'X-Men' television texts to be screened, before finally pausing the audio recording of the Dictaphone, signalling the end of the first segment

[6] Considered a cathedral of worship in footballing terms, 'Old Trafford' often referred to as the 'Theatre of Dreams' by commentators on big European tournament nights, is one of the most revered stadiums in world football.

and allowing the interviewees to then view the specifically chosen episodes. This viewing would then be followed by another round of recorded group discussion, focusing on the themes of the texts that had been viewed (and sometimes questions that were unanswered from previous segments). Important moments in these texts were discussed, as well as characters that the group 'liked' or 'disliked'. One particular topic of interest that I would revert to in this segment of the interview would be the groups' remembering of the 'X-men'. Did respondents remember these particular episodes? How did they experience the viewing of these episodes in retrospect? Were these narratives familiar? Living in South Africa, could they relate to certain characters or themes?

As my study progressed, it became apparent that for each variety of focus group there would be specific questions that were more pertinent for particular sets of respondents than for others. Similarly, after my first focus group it became clear that not every focus group would be able to endure as many 'X-Men' texts or episodes as I had initially intended to screen for subsequent groups. The first focus group sat through three separate periods of screening and discussion respectively. This translated to a total of five episodes and an exclusion of a sixth which could not have been managed due to time constraints. It was not that there existed no interest, but even amongst self-admitting 'fans', interest levels began to dwindle when too many texts or episodes were screened successively. The original 'X-Men' animated series was after all screened on a weekly basis.

With this in mind I tailored the structure of successive interviews for each of the focus groups, in terms of the texts I screened and the extent to which questions were asked. There was, however, a consistency of certain topics explored and episodes watched that became a constant part of the interviewing process. Certain questions about the experience of attending Sacred Heart College, were for example, specific to focus groups containing former students of the school. Certain episodes, namely 'Proteus Part 1' and 'Proteus Part 2', were screened for every focus group while other texts were not. What is also important to note, is that individual interviews which I

conducted, as well as an interview with the staff of a local comic book store, did not involve the screening of episodes, and were utilised more to expand the scope of respondents, in search of different experiences of fan culture. In these instances my ‘topic guide’ was utilised selectively.

The second criterion of importance in preparation for such interviews is, as Gaskell (2000) describes, the ‘selection of respondents’. Gaskell intentionally prefers the use of the term ‘selection’ as opposed to the term ‘sampling’. Gaskell explains that ‘sampling’ conjures up notions of surveys and opinion polls, of ‘systematic statistical samples of a population’, that then leads to generalisation (2000: 41). The purpose of qualitative research is, however, not concerned with counting opinions but is rather more concerned with exploring the range of opinions that exist, that is, the variety of positions taken by members of a certain social milieu:

> “In summary, the objective of qualitative research is to sample the range of views. Unlike the sample survey where the probability sample can be applied in most research situations, there is no one method for selecting respondents for qualitative inquiries. Here, because the numbers of respondents are necessarily small, the researcher must use his or her social scientific imagination to inform the selection of respondents. While standard socio-demographic characteristics may be relevant and clearly are for consumer and political issues, it may be more efficient and productive to think in terms of the relevant social milieus for other issues in question.” (Gaskell, 2000: 42).

As this research is concerned with school boy and girl interpretations, from the mid to late 1990’s, of the ‘X-Men’ texts received in the specific context of South Africa post-apartheid, the selection process for my focus groups involved tracking down that generation of youths that were born during apartheid, who were too small to remember it and who attended school in its aftermath. As has already been described, my own experiences of Sacred Heart College, have informed this understanding of the specific generation or social milieu necessary for this selection process. My primary focus groups, would therefore be comprised of respondents that were former Sacred Heart students of a similar age to me.

Yet as Gaskell explains, it is necessary to get a range of respondents, enabling a variety of accounts from differing positions. Getting a focus group together of friends and peers from my own matric year would not be sufficient. A gendered perspective on fan culture from that year would be equally necessary, as would a contemporary collection of school boys and girls currently attending Sacred Heart College.

The break down of my focus groups and interviews is as follows:

The 'Fanboys'

A group of boys who went to school in the 1990s, possibly of different years but a group that has also come from Sacred Heart – a group known to me, through whom I could explore if my personal experience was one that was shared with this group. I would be an insider in this group, and hopefully the respondents would be comfortable enough to share honestly with me.

The 'Fangirls'

A group of girls, assembled according to the same criteria as the first group. Their experiences would be unique, as the gendered divides over fan culture are often exaggerated during early school years. While these respondents would be known to me, the extents to which we shared experiences as school children would not be. I have not maintained many friendships with girl learners of my age since leaving school, and this would be a reunion of sorts. In this regard, I would be an outsider to the school girl experience of popular culture.

The 'Scholar-Fans', Academics and Contemporary Peers

A mixed group of boys and girls, who did not necessarily go to Sacred Heart but were in school during the 1990's, this group would be comprised of post-graduate university students and peers that I had met at university. The respondents in this group would however be in differing academic fields,

extending my scope of respondents outside the realms of social science. Respondents in this group would also provide different accounts of childhood encounters with popular culture, than those of strictly former Sacred Heart students. I was also interested in the levels of scepticism with regards to my research, in the accounts and responses of these respondents who represented different academic disciplines.

The 'New Fans'

A mixed group (girls and boys) of a younger generation, of roughly twelve years of age, who had not encountered the 'X-men' through the original animated television texts, but through more recent movies, TV series, comics, action figures, videogames and social media. These respondents would be contemporary students at Sacred Heart, unknown to me, but having been socialised through the same institution. This age group[7] is significant in that it is, according to my own experience, approximately the age at which children become self-aware of their own 'fan' interests (even if these interests began at a much earlier date), and become able to articulate them.

Interview at 'Zed Bee's Comic Universe and Book Exchange'

This interview with the staff and customers at 'Zed Bee's' was an attempt to again reach a greater range of respondents and their accounts of fan culture. The staff of 'Zed Bee's' are experts on not only comic book culture, but fan culture. The shop in Edenvale has been open for the last sixteen years and the staff deal with countless fans. And yet, they also offer different readings, as an older generation of different class and cultural backgrounds than the respondents I had interviewed from Sacred Heart. While I had been exposed to the 'X-Men' through the popular medium of the television, and sought comics to further my obsession, the staff at 'Zed Bee's' had been exposed to the 'X-Men' in its original comic form and had never cared much for the

[7] As mentioned in the 'background literature' of this research, Fiske refers to Hodge and Tripp (1986), who examined the popularity of the television show 'Prisoner' for school girls of approximately 12 years of age. It is also the age of my brother, Kamil Saloojee, who offers a further example of the school boy 'fan'.

animated television texts. Although hesitant at first, my familiar if infrequent presence at their Edenvale shop was enough to gain entrance into their world. Following in the steps of Pustz (1999), who investigated mainstream and alternative comic book subcultures through interviews in his local comic book shop, I attempted to investigate similar themes in a South African context.

Interview with Kamil Saloojee

My brother Kamil Saloojee, who is twelve years old, provided me with the unique opportunity of interviewing a respondent who I knew to identify himself as a schoolboy 'fan'. While not only going to a different school, Kamil has also grown up under different circumstances to those which I experienced. Regardless of my influence on his tastes in terms of popular culture, he has acquired his own, and despite his young age there could be no better placed authority when it comes to 'Star Wars' or 'Halo' and the readings of these texts by younger audiences. His passion for Lego, his recreation of battle scenes, his obsession over paraphernalia and his imagining as a 'fan' have often reminded me of my own childhood. Besides offering a different account, he has in his own way inspired this research.

As a last set of notes before engaging with my research findings, these focus groups and interviews have contained ethnically and culturally diverse sets of interviewees. The interviewees have been identified primarily by their knowledge of the 'X-Men', but also of fan culture in general. There were also logistical difficulties, at times, with regards to the setting up of such focus groups, and personal anxieties with regards to the potential for criticism such research would inevitably entail (particularly amongst academic peers). This research does also not foreclose the possibility of further investigation.

Besides using literature readings, television texts and qualitative interviews (both focus groups and individual interviews) this research also draws on other sources such as blogs, social media, fan-fiction sites and Marvel comic forums. Interviews were recorded, before using Jenkins's method and the themes of my 'topic guide' as a framework of analysis to get a holistic

understanding of the forms of reading and rewriting in place within them. I then tried to establish (through literature on Marvel Comics and the 'X-Men') how these fan readings differed from their producerly intent. In addition, the 'rewritten' texts generated by the interviewees were examined in terms of a critical analysis – class, gender, race and genre. The texts (episodes) commented upon by the interviewees were subjected to a content and critical analysis discussing characters and narratives.

Research and Findings

1. The 'Fanboys'

The first and primary focus group took place on a Saturday morning, in my own home in Kensington, Johannesburg. The significance of the location, besides for the access to the technological requirements needed to screen the specific 'X-Men' texts, was also due to the level of comfort I sought to encourage within the group.

The respondents I had contacted and invited to the group were made up of friends and peers that had been in school with me at Sacred Heart. Of the seven respondents that participated in the interview, five were in the same year as me, while the other two respondents were in older years. Hosting this focus group in the privacy of my own bedroom reveals the level of intimacy and trust between me and the respondents. Most of them, having known me for many years, were already comfortable in this environment. As they arrived they were surprised to find large boxes of pizza[8] as well as a variety of beverages awaiting them. The early arrivals tucked in, while we awaited the arrival of all the remaining respondents. Two of the respondents were running late, so we began as planned and incorporated them as they arrived. When the group was ready I began the audio recording of our interview. My initial nerves were shared with the group, as for some reason the mere act of recording our conversation with an imagined audience in mind led to an

[8] Pizza is also the staple diet of the 'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles'

anxiety that can also be heard in the recordings. Nonetheless my introduction seemed to calm my own nerves as well as those of the respondents.

Outlining my love for ‘Ninja Turtles’, ‘X-Men’, comics and arcade games like ‘Street Fighter’, I encouraged the respondents to follow suit and explain their own experiences of popular culture, including their love of football teams. ‘Zishaan’ (25 years old), one of the respondents who was a year ahead of me at school, immediately drew nostalgic nods and laughter as he described collecting ‘GI-JOE’s’, watching ‘X-Men’, ‘Animaniacs’ and ‘Thundercats’. As I enquired about the ‘Liverpool F.C.’ shirt he was wearing and as to whether he was a ‘fan’, Zishaan responded, “…Yes, I am…A big Liverpool fan!” Zishaan then explained that Liverpool’s stadium, ‘Anfield’, was also referred to as ‘the Kop’ and had been built by South Africans.

Eugeshin (24), described how ‘pop culture’ had played a big role in his life, describing his shared love of ‘Ninja Turtles’ and ‘X-Men’ as a youth, and then explaining that it still played a large role in his life as he regularly watched ‘South Park’. As I enquired into the ‘Manchester United’ shirt that Eugeshin was wearing, he explained that as a “huge United fan” he would wear it every single day of the week if he could. The significance of both these respondents wearing their teams’ supporter-shirts, on this particular day, had to do with a big ‘English Premier League’ match between the two rival teams that was to take place later that day.

Shanial (24), while not a major sports fan, expressed the big influence cartoons had in his life as he rattled off the titles ‘Spider-man’, ‘Conan’, ‘X-Men’ and ‘Beast Wars’ to the laughter of the respondents.

This sentiment for cartoons was also shared by Angelo (25), who explained that his favourite shows had already been mentioned but added that shows such as ‘Dexter’s Lab’, ‘Johnny Bravo’, ‘Pinky and the Brain’ and ‘Freakazoid’ were also part of his viewing tastes. Angelo also expressed that he too was a ‘Manchester United fan’.

Vijay (25), revealed that he too enjoyed many of the cartoons that had been described, but was disappointed that no one in the group had mentioned 'Biker Mice From Mars' which he described as his biggest influence. Vijay also described that he collected a lot of toys. In terms of being a sports fan, Vijay explained his passion, "…Sports wise, Arsenal's played a huge part in my life…I used to cry when they'd lose, I never used to eat". Interestingly, Vijay also mentioned the influence of music in his life. When asked what his favourite genre was, he explained that it was broadly 'alternative rock' music. At this point I explained the football fan analogy to the respondents, and thereby without referring to Benedict Anderson directly, his notion of the 'imagined community'.

Joining us late, but nonetheless with important contributions was Komnas (27) who was two years ahead of me in school. Komnas also described his love for cartoons. In particular, he mentioned 'Bravestar' and 'He-Man'. He described reading a few comics, including 'Superman', and some fantasy literature but did not remember being a massive comic book reader or collector as a school boy.

Komnas' entrance sparked other ideas, as Angelo remembered and described his collection of 'Marvel Masterpiece' and 'Spiderman' trading cards. This reminded me of my own card collection and I shared this with the group, "…let me also just add, those Marvel collectable cards were such a big thing for me, because it like commodified my love of the Marvel Universe…you know what I mean…its like they were things to buy that represented this…and I just wanted all of them… And I think of the like thousand or whatever, I came within fifteen [cards] …and I think you (Angelo) came within three of those". This admission sparked conversation about the varieties of cards including 'hologram' and 'canvas' versions. Zishaan also described how he had just about the entire collection as well as 'doubles' of certain cards.

Angelo remarked on the movie industry, where with ideas running dry, producers have reignited or sparked the industry by reverting to comics as

material. He gave the example of ‘The Watchmen’ and ‘V for Vendetta’ which he had re-read since the movie adaptations.

Noticing that Komnas was wearing a ‘Flash’ t-shirt, I also inquired about his rediscovered love for DC Comics, to which he responded, “…Oh ya, definitely… I’m collecting comics now in a way I never used to before. It’s because I have a little money now… And um ya, as Angelo was saying…I’ve been reading a whole bunch of graphic novels…‘Watchmen’…but I actually like the more mainstream superhero graphic novels as well like…I’ve got Alan Moore’s ‘The Killing Joke’…I really like mainstream, straightforward, male-orientated super heroes…”.

This prompted me to explain that while there were no girls present, I intended to have future focus groups with girls. I also expressed that perhaps as a youth there was the impression that girls found fan culture to be ‘nerdy’.

My attention then shifted briefly to a discussion on Sacred Heart College. Explaining my knowledge of the school as being progressive and multi-racial, I asked Komnas of his views on the school, being the oldest respondent present. Komnas joked that he was not old enough to remember the ‘80’s, and then proceeded to explain that Sacred Heart was the second Marist school he had attended, since he had originally been to another Marist school in Durban. He explained that this other Marist school was a “proper Catholic school” and while it was also multi-racial one could see that it was far more conservative and set in its ways. Sacred Heart, as he described, while being progressive, allowed one to think for themselves and form one’s own identities. Komnas recalled mocking religion teachers and classes, toleration of which mocking he considered to be a strength of Sacred Heart, given that it was a Catholic school. He suggested that perhaps we took certain things for granted at school, that people in other environments were not the same as we were used to, and that we only realised this later or when we were in different environments. Yet, he remarked that Sacred Heart was not perfect and that we should not idolise the school. Sacred Heart was as Komnas describes:

"…a microcosm…of free thinking, which produced a shit load of tensions and problems among us students, amongst students and teachers, but you know at least there were those tensions there…at least we acknowledged them and at least you know we tried to manage them and move forward and I think actually that's one of the great strengths of the school, it didn't shy away from acknowledging when kak was bad…"

I also asked the respondents about their experiences of oral traditions at the school, through the example of 'Dragon Ball Z', which up until as late as Matric was a daily hot topic for discussion before classes and during break. I gave another example of the mid-week 'UEFA Champions League football' matches, which we would discuss the build-up of and then dissect results post-match, as these big matches represented the 'highlights' of our weeks. Eugeshin reminded us of falling asleep in class the night after such big 'Champions League' matches, the majority of us (who did not have satellite TV) stayed up very late in order to watch the delayed screenings of these matches on 'E-TV'.

At this point I stopped recording and screened the first two 'X-Men' texts, namely 'Days of Future Past, Part One' (1993) and 'Days of Future Past, Part Two' (1993). These two episodes form season one of the 'X-Men' series, contribute to a single narrative and therefore work better when viewed together.

This narrative begins in a future of 2055 AD, where two unknown mutants flee from sentinels[9] before running into an aged 'Wolverine'. The dark and mysterious future alludes to a post-apocalyptic era where mutants are either in the process of being hunted down, are dead or imprisoned in forced-labour camps. The text introduces the audience to the character of 'Bishop', a black time-travelling mutant, who is sent back in time by 'Forge' and 'Wolverine' to stop a significant political assassination, blamed for destroying mutant-human peace relations and causing a great war where 'Sentinels' were used to first detain mutants before then turning on humans. 'Bishop' is sent back in time to

[9] This group of giant robots known as the 'Sentinels' are first introduced in the very first episode of 'X-Men: The Animated Series', entitled 'Night of the Sentinels, Part 1' (Original Airdate 31st October 1992). Their main purpose is to process the identities of all mutants into the 'mutant registration database', before as we learn in later episodes, detaining these mutants in forced labour camps.

stop a member of the 'X-Men', revealed later to be 'Gambit', who has been held responsible for the assassination. Upon reaching the 1990s, 'Bishop's' time-travel leaves him with amnesia, and so he seeks the 'X-Men's' help in remembering. The sudden appearance of 'Gambit' jolts 'Bishop's memory, and Bishop attempts to kill him. Preventing this and learning of a plot by the mutant 'Brotherhood'[10], who also intend to assassinate 'Senator Kelly', the 'X-Men' head to Washington D.C. to prevent any assassination attempts. There, the audience learns that it is through shape-shifting mutant 'Mystique', servant of 'Apocalypse', disguised as 'Gambit' that 'Bishop' is sent back in time to stop. The 'X-Men' must then deal with the threat of both 'Mystique' and the 'Brotherhood' to prevent the dark future that 'Bishop' comes from.

Interestingly, comic book fans might recognise the title 'Days of Future Past', the original comic version of this television text followed a similar plot. This later rewriting as a television text did, however, see the notable change of the character 'Bishop' replacing the original role of the character 'Kitty Pryde'.

After the screening of these texts, Louis (25) joined us. Louis was in the same year as me in school, but is also Komnas' younger brother. Sharing with us, Louis explained that he could never really escape cartoons, comics and fantasy because of the influence of his brother Komnas. Louis also shared this experience of owning 'Biker Mice from Mars' and 'Ninja Turtle' action figures. Describing his cartoon interests he also noted in the same order as his brother had before, that he used to watch 'Bravestar' and 'He-Man'. This encouraged Komnas to describe some of the fantasy role play games he and Louis created as kids. As Komnas explained, he used to call this participation in sci-fi fantasy, 'star games', and because he was forced by his parents to play these games with Louis, who would usually ruin the game by saying something 'stupid', he would make Louis play the role of an animal in the background of the action. One particular 'star game' saw Louis playing the role of a whale confined to an existence of swimming in his tank only, while

[10] A band of extremist mutants led by 'Magneto', who tiring of mutant oppression, seeks to create a new world order with mutants at the helm.

the adventure raged on around him. The sharing of this memory drew great laughter from the group.

Angelo shared a similar memory, explaining the importance of gendered roles and norms in such role play. He described how when he was younger he used to play ‘Turtles’ with his cousins. During these games his cousin Nikki, as a young girl, would insist on always being ‘April’, the female reporter from ‘Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles’ television series.

We then began to discuss the texts, ‘Days of Future Past, Part 1’ and ‘Part 2’. I initially began by explaining that I had chosen that set of episodes, because of the themes of futuristic realities, memory and time-travel that had stood out for me when re-watching the episodes. I then described the mutant identity cards, that ‘Bishop’ has to present to a ‘Sentinel’, which made me think of the ‘dom pass’ that the apartheid government in South Africa had subjected people to. I also brought up the character of ‘Beast’[11] who throughout the first season is incarcerated as a political prisoner, and who, even though his mutant abilities permit him to escape, refuses to do so out of principle. Encouraging the discussion of such moments in the text, I asked the group which characters they ‘liked’ or ‘didn’t like’ and which of those they identified with.

Shanial remarked that he used to like ‘Gambit’, but could not for the life of him remember why. I admitted that ‘Gambit’ and ‘Wolverine’ were my two favourite characters. Zishaan commented on the sexual innuendo that ‘Gambit’ always spoke with. This was discussed in the group. While we could not remember ‘getting’ this innuendo it was quite blatant in retrospect that ‘Gambit’ did after all always flirt with ‘Rogue’, whose mutant power forbad her to touch other mutants for fear of draining their powers. Komnas suggested that perhaps we were sexually frustrated as kids and girls seemed like another species, which would explain why we identified with ‘Gambit’. Watching these texts again, we

[11] In describing ‘Beast’s’ imprisonment, I also referred to an early episode in the season where ‘Beast’ refers to Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s classic novel ‘Crime and Punishment’. ‘Beasts’ involvement in ‘Days of Future Past’ in minimal though.

noticed different things, some things were not as funny as they used to be, explained Zishaan. Angelo described that as children these episodes seemed a lot simpler and watching them now the episodes seemed more complex and layered. The plots of time travel and the righting of wrongs in the past for future realities seemed more complicated than we remembered them. Angelo also added that the notion of time paradoxes was testament to this, describing how an aging future 'Wolverine' found 'Bishop' familiar even though he had never met him before.

Komnas also admitted that he did not agree with the earlier analogy that I had drawn between the mutant identification cards and the 'dom pass', explaining that 'Bishop' was perhaps a 'good mutant' who went along with the regime. We agreed that perhaps 'Bishop' was more of an 'Uncle Tom' type of character. I also gave another analogy between 'Genosha'[12], a mutant detention camp where mutants were forced into labour, and 'Robben Island' in Cape Town.

Komnas brought up the topic of 'Beast's' incarceration again. He could not understand 'Beast's' strategy as a political prisoner wanting to be vindicated by the law instead of escaping. When human prejudice had been the reason for his imprisonment why would he submit himself to being tried by humans? This sparked great discussion. I pointed out that 'Beast' wanted to be subjected to societal law so as to prove that he was not acting outside of it. Komnas commented that when 'Beast' was being treated like an animal by that very law, why then bother with being subjected to this societal law. Eugeshin offered that 'Beast' was struggling to be a normal person, he had always wanted to be a human, to be accepted. I added that in relation to South Africa's own history, if the political prisoners would have been freed from prison 'unlawfully' (which is not to say that they were lawfully imprisoned), they would not really be free. Komnas argued that here in South Africa, people used their own trials to get across political messages as they

[12] An earlier episode in the season entitled 'Slave Island' (Original Airdate 13th February 1993), explored this island of 'Genosha' where mutants were forced into special power-preventing collars, imprisoned and forced to work as slaves building a dam which would power a 'Sentinel' factory. In a later focus group this analogy of the concentration camp is further explored.

had no other choice, as they knew they were going to be subjected to such laws but did not choose this subjection. Eugeshin retorted that such activists did choose to be vindicated through the law, and faced their sentences rather than being seen to be cowards in the eyes of their people, to this end Eugeshin agreed with ‘Beast’s’ strategy. When I thought of ‘Beast’s’ position, as I shared with the group, it reminded me of ‘Madiba’s’ lengthy incarceration. Vijay added that it reminded him of Burma and Aung San Suu Kyi.

Komnas also raised an interesting point in trying to describe the analogy of mutants as an oppressed race. While this was an analogy evident in the texts, Komnas questioned whether it was not more accurate to liken the discrimination of mutants to a discrimination of a younger generation. He said this referring to the text where the anti-mutant sentiment spread the fear amongst society of a next generation of mutants, “Do you know what your children are?” Clearly two white parents could not have a black child and vice versa, which complicated this idea that mutants were an oppressed race for Komnas. I accepted this point, but explained that in my view, it was not just about race but about their identities, that the mutant analogy stood for any societal ‘othering’. The ‘X-Men’ comics had, after all, had their origins amidst the American civil rights struggles. The group agreed that the texts related to a variety of historical narratives.

I suggested that perhaps on a personal level the idea of ‘Professor Xavier’s School for the Gifted’ reminded me of our own multi-cultural and multi-racial institution that is Sacred Heart. Zishaan noted that ‘Xavier’ only seemed to take in mutants that appeared physically normal, ‘Beast’ was an exception though. Other mutants, who could not pass as normal and who were persecuted on the streets, sought refuge by living underground in the subways.

Referring to the latest ‘X-Men: First Class’ film, Komnas also described how one could read the major ‘Magneto’ versus ‘Xavier’ cleavage around mutant liberation, in terms of a ‘Malcom X’ type character versus an integrationist. Perhaps the ‘X-Men’ was ultimately about depicting ‘militant self assertion’ of

marginal groups, he continued, who didn't want integration and this strategy would naturally lead to a fascistic mindset and other problems. I expanded on this arguing that the 'X-Men' world was divided between 'Magneto' with his separatist ideals, and 'Xavier' with his dream of harmony between mutants and humans. Eugeshin interjected that the 'X-Men' texts were very 'generic', in that one could draw many comparisons with real life. I agreed with this and added that as 'fans' we constantly rewrite these stories in our own heads, we make these characters who we want them to be and then relate to them for our own reasons.

We then viewed the next set of 'X-Men' texts, namely 'Proteus, Part 1' (1995) and 'Proteus, Part 2' (1995). This two-part stand-alone narrative, tells the tale of 'Kevin MacTaggert' – the son of 'Moira MacTaggert' – who battles with his uncontrollable mutant powers. 'Kevin', also known as 'Proteus', has been sheltered from the rest of the world and kept at the mutant research centre on 'Muir Island' in Scotland. Here his mother 'Moira', who runs the centre has been working on a cure to help him control his powers, but has also hidden his identity. 'Proteus' has the ability to literally recreate the world around him, as he sees fit, being limited only by his imagination. At the age of seventeen, having been stuck on 'Muir island' his whole life, he is emotionally immature and escapes the island in search of his father on the mainland. This prompts 'Moira' to contact the 'X-Men', who she has a history with, for help. As we learn through a series of flashbacks, 'Moira' and 'Charles Xavier' were once engaged. Previous episodes featuring 'Muir Island' allude to this, but in this episode it is engaged with.

Searching for his father, 'Proteus' learns that his father is now a prominent politician with a new family. Having run out on 'Proteus', because he was a mutant, his father now seeks to be elected mayor by 'ironically' propagating himself as a 'family man' who will bring back wholesome family values if elected. As 'Proteus' disrupts his father's campaign trail and speeches, in order to be acknowledged by his father, he is further angered by his father's fear and rejection, becoming even more violent. 'Proteus' does not appear physically as a young boy, and due to his inability to control his powers, he

appears as a big and frightening energy monster, that not even the ‘X-Men’ can control. ‘Professor Xavier’ is forced to intervene to protect others and ‘Proteus’ from himself.

As we began our discussion again, I shared with the group, my experience of these texts as being quite ‘surreal’ or ‘trippy’. Eugeshin had commented during the screening that it had similarly reminded him of the work of artist Salvador Dali. I brought up ‘Wolverine’s’ role in these texts. During a confrontation with ‘Proteus’, ‘Wolverine’ is twisted inside out, he is melted and his apparently indestructible metal claws are turned into worm-like creatures. ‘Wolverine’ is left as a puddle of liquid, only reforming and re-emerging to be crying in a quivering position when ‘Proteus’ has left the scene. This text thus completely breaks with the conventional associations of ‘Wolverine’ as the die hard, brave and fearless warrior we have become familiar with. Eugeshin added that one questions their love for him after seeing these episodes. Personally, I could not remember these episodes from my youth, and this was a sentiment shared. Angelo suggested that perhaps the memory of these episodes had been lost in our subconscious. Zishaan described that, referring to ‘Beast’s’ account of the confrontation in the text, this encounter with ‘Proteus’ had been worse for ‘Wolverine’ who had never before experienced fear. Komnas defended ‘Wolverine’, saying that although in subsequent encounters with ‘Proteus’, he had run away twice, each time he had returned to help the rest of the ‘X-Men’. There was also laughter as the group described ‘Wolverine’s’ response to that initial confrontation with ‘Proteus’, saying to ‘Rogue’ that they will never speak of that moment again.

Komnas also described that ‘Proteus’ was a character from Greek mythology. And this is true although Komnas’ definition, which he himself acknowledged to be unsure of, was slightly inaccurate. Relating to our earlier discussion, Komnas mentioned that one could imagine mutants to perhaps be a metaphor for disabled children, whose parents reject them for being physically or mentally disabled. Thinking of ‘Proteus’, as someone who was insane and needed to be institutionalised raises its own set of interpretations about ethics.

Zishaan commented that these were very emotionally charged episodes, describing ‘Rogues’ own flashbacks of her abusive father and also the insight into ‘Xavier’s’ own romantic troubles. I pointed out that one of the things that stood out for me throughout the ‘X-Men’ series was that one went along with characters through their ups and downs, as they battled their own personal demons, before growing as individuals and as a team. Angelo agreed with this notion of the journey that one went on with characters as they battled demons, self growth and self-actualisation. Shanial remarked that it was quite refreshing to watch old cartoons that showed the fallacies of man, as well as their great powers. This was not a trend in contemporary cartoons, he felt. Overall these two texts seemed to be well received and enjoyed by the group. Shanial added that perhaps it felt ‘trippy’ because adults were trying to depict a child’s limitless imagination. Komnas pointed out that the ‘X-Men’ was a cartoon created for an audience of children, but written by adults. The writers were trying to depict what it was like to be a teenager, and Komnas was not sure if they achieved this. As he mentioned in earlier discussion, as children we would not have ‘gotten’ all these themes and subtexts in the way we did now.

The use of the ‘To be Continued’ title at the end of ‘Part One’ was also discussed in the group. This ‘cliff hanging’ sensation encouraged an anticipation of ‘Part Two’. Vijay explained that the effect of the ‘To be Continued’ title was lost in this viewing of both episodes consecutively. Vijay described the thrill when we were younger of waiting an entire week to see the conclusion of such sagas, remembering how he had to often wake up early on a Saturday morning to make sure he caught such finales.

The final set of ‘X-Men’ texts viewed by this group would be ‘Sanctuary, Part One’ (1995) and ‘Sanctuary, Part Two’ (1995). In these two episodes, ‘Magneto’s’ character really comes to the foreground. ‘Magneto’, tired of human repression, of fighting for mutant supremacy and separatist ideals, invites the world to witness the birth of a new chapter in mutant liberation. No longer concerned with fighting humans over their world, ‘Magneto’ literally creates his own, converting an orbiting asteroid into ‘Asteroid M’. As he

envisages it, ‘Asteroid M’, is a home for all mutants where they can live an existence free of human persecution. Spreading this message at a U.N. meeting, ‘Magneto’ gets the attention of all. The human world is suspicious of this, and sends delegates along with the ‘X-Men’ (who are themselves interested) to visit this mutant utopia. ‘Magneto’, assuming the mantle as leader, ruler and father of this new mutant paradise, offers to transport both his mutant followers and this delegation to ‘Asteroid M’. But using his powers of magnetism literally to carry these passengers in large metal containers to ‘Asteroid M’, severely depletes ‘Magneto’s’ powers and his strength. The audience is then introduced to the character of ‘Cortez’, who uses his own mutant powers to replenish those of ‘Magneto’. While posing as a loyal devotee of ‘Magneto’, ‘Cortez’ secretly wants to punish humankind, and betrays ‘Magneto’s’ dream by launching missiles at earth and thereby ruining the trust that had been garnered. When ‘Magneto’ questions him in private, ‘Cortez’ redraws the power that had sustained ‘Magneto’ leaving him so weak that not even the ‘molecules that he is made of could be held together’. Beginning to fade from existence, ‘Cortez’ fires him off into space in an escape pod. Sounding the alarms on ‘Asteroid M’, and with the ‘X-Men’ arriving first on the scene, ‘Cortez’ blames the ‘X-Men’ for the destruction of their old enemy ‘Magneto’.

Invoking the spirit of the now martyred ‘Magneto’, ‘Cortez’ takes control of ‘Asteroid M’. While the rest of the ‘X-Men’ escaped, ‘Gambit’ is imprisoned on ‘Asteroid M’ awaiting his sentence. The ‘X-Men’ regroup and attempt to free ‘Gambit’ while preventing the launch of an arsenal of missiles which ‘Cortez’ has threatened to use on the Earth if his demands are not met. But the plot is one dedicated to ‘Magneto’ and as his pod falls through the earth’s atmosphere ominously towards his death, the Earth’s magnetic field revitalises ‘Magneto’ as a “mother does her child”. Stronger than ever, ‘Magneto’ then seeks vengeance on his betrayer while helping the ‘X-Men’ to avert the missile crisis, before dealing with his failed paradise of ‘Asteroid M’.

By this point we had been involved in the focus group for much longer than anticipated, and so I resolved to screen ‘Sanctuary, Part One’ (1995) only.

Because of this, our discussion began with me briefing the group about ‘Part Two’, just as we would have done in school when friends had missed episodes. I revealed that ‘Magneto’ does not die and returns stronger than ever, but I also described a later moment in the series where ‘Magneto’ looks weary, depressed and unshaved having lost the will to live since ‘Asteroid M’ failed. I also describe the very end scene of ‘Part Two’, where ‘Cortez’ awakes to find himself restrained, as ‘Apocalypse’ proclaims that he has finally met his true master[13].

Opening the discussion of ‘Part One’, I shared my experience of the opening scenes of this text. For me this is one of the finer moments of the series, as ‘Magneto’ disrupts a UN conference, where the US and Russian representatives are arguing over a missing astronaut who happened to be a mutant, and delivers his manifesto for a turning point in mutant liberation – the creation of ‘Asteroid M’.

As Angelo describes, for the character of ‘Magneto’ it represented a big transformation from the strategies of violence he had previously pursued. I added that as the ‘father’ of this new nation he literally carried his mutant followers from their discrimination on Earth. It was also the first time that this notion of ‘mutant liberation’ was accurately described as such. Komnas commented that in all the movies, ‘Magneto’ is usually fuelled by a hatred for humans while ‘Professor Xavier’ pushes an integrationist agenda, and that this is first time that a third political alternative is an option. Louis remarked that in a way ‘Magneto’ was appeasing the humans by moving all the mutants of the world away to form a new ‘homeland’. The references in the text to this new mutant ‘colony’ are also interesting positions that ‘Magneto’ takes.

I explained that in the second part, the notion of devotion to the ‘father of the liberation’, is used by ‘Cortez’ to rise to power as the new revolutionary leader, ensuring that the ‘X-Men’ be punished so that their martyr ‘Magneto’ did not die in vain. Eugeshin suggested that this was exactly how a dictatorship works

[13] ‘The Fifth Horseman’ (Original US Airdate 8th February 1997), depicts ‘Cortez’s’ servitude to ‘Apocalypse’ as his ‘fifth horseman’ searching for a host body for ‘Apocalypse’ to occupy in his return from the ‘astral plane’.

and as Komnas added, it starts with a charismatic leader. We also discussed 'Magneto's' own utterance, "…Arise my children…", that did noting to deny him this mantle as an all knowing and powerful ruler. I joked that 'Magneto' was very opulent, entertaining a delegation on 'Asteroid M' to a dinner while drinking wine bare chested in a kimono, allowing a few humans to sit at the corner of his table as a symbolic gesture. This was met with great laughter from the group.

As a group we discussed some of the themes such as nuclear warfare, the race for arms, pre-emptive striking and the frosty US-Russia relations underpinned by Cold War sentiments that are better described as overt references than metaphors in the text[14].

When I asked which characters the group identified with or did not like, Angelo suggested that there were aspects of all the characters that we liked. He gave the example of 'Gambit's' popularity with women, 'Wolverine's' hardcore warrior nature, and even 'Professor Xavier's' intelligence and leadership. I remarked that although not featuring in this episode, 'Cyclops' had many episodes where he came to the fore as the team's leader. This sparked conversation about the missing 'X-Men' in the text. Where was 'Storm', inquired Zishaan. As we described other notable characters that were not present in this text, including 'Jean Grey' who becomes 'The Phoenix'[15], we agreed that there was a character for everyone to relate to.

Discussing villains was interesting in relation to this text. I admitted to being quite fond of 'Magneto', Komnas agreed that 'Magneto' 'kicked ass'. Eugeshin explained that he did not believe that 'Magneto' was the bad guy, 'Magneto's' view of peace was just different to that of 'Xavier'. Zishaan added that it reminded him of the movie 'The Boondock Saints'. The character of 'Apocalypse' was brought up as a true 'baddie', a narcissist as Angelo

[14] I also described the character of 'Omega Red' a former Soviet Union super soldier who makes appearances earlier in the series.
[15] 'The Phoenix Saga' and 'The Dark Phoenix Saga' are amongst the most famous in the series as 'Jean Grey' sacrifices herself and is reborn as the insatiable 'Phoenix' who feeds on entire star systems and is powered by the sun.

described. I commented that ‘Apocalypse’ hated both humans and mutants, wanting to punish the ‘unworthy’ as his hatred spans across time and generation, a ‘proper comic book evil’ in Komnas’ words. I offered the explanation that in societies where there was a subservient or marginalised people, this community often identified and rooted for the ‘villain’ in mainstream movies and television. (see Andersson 2010 on villains Chester and Papa Action being hailed as heroes by ‘Yizo Yizo’ audiences) I asked the group if they had ever rooted for the villain. Shanial, to the laughter of the group, said that he experienced this with ‘Tom and Jerry’; why could Tom never catch that damn mouse? ‘Road Runner’ and the coyote, and ‘Sylvester’ and ‘Tweetie’ were other examples given. Angelo remarked then that generally the ‘baddies’ were always depicted as offish, slow speaking and stubborn characters. Komnas pointed out that in the ‘X-Men’ the stereotypes used were quite ‘thick’, and he gave the example in the text of ‘Rogue’ the ‘Southern Bell’ who was abused by her abusive ‘red-neck’ trucker father. I added that it would be interesting to see what girl audiences felt about characters like ‘Rogue’, ‘Storm’ and ‘Jubilee’.

Reminding the group of ‘Cortez’s’ character feeding ‘Magneto’s’ powers, I suggested that perhaps this was a metaphor for drug addiction or a comment on ego maniacs. Describing a dream of ‘Rogue’s’ where she yells out “No Gambit, No”, Shanial explained that watching this scene now, the incident immediately has sexual connotations while as kids we might have interpreted it as ‘Rogue’s’ dreaming of ‘Gambit’s’ being involved in an assassination.

And with that I thanked the group for joining me on a Saturday and noted that the majority of us would be going out shortly to a bar to watch the soccer. Indeed, the big match up between ‘Manchester United’ and ‘Liverpool’ had been on the minds of some the respondents and I had to make sure that we wrapped up so as not to miss it… “Because the fan culture doesn’t stop”, I commented.

This group interview provided me with essential accounts for my research. Not only did it verify the reality of fan culture here in South Africa, but it proved

that my childhood imaginings as a ‘fan’ were shared with these friends and peers in my community. I was not alone in this imagining, and this group of ‘fanboys’ was a primary example of this, as will be seen from my conclusion.

The ‘Fangirls’

The following Saturday I set up my second focus group, this time of ‘Fangirls’. While the venue and pizza remained a constant, I realised that I would have to adjust the structure of my interviewing drawing on the experience of the previous focus group. The first focus group had taken quite some time, and I could not expect the same of this group. I decided to restrict the screening of episodes to two sets of texts, or four episodes as opposed to six. There would only be three respondents in this group, and while I had intended to have more girls from Sacred Heart present, the smaller number ended up making the group more intimate and manageable. The difficulty in getting girl respondents from school to join the focus group, after not having maintained contact with many of them, proved to be a logistical problem. Nonetheless, the group was made up of two girls from the same year as me, and a third who was the older sister of another of my friends. Again my nerves can initially be heard in the introduction of the recording, as I fought through the anxiety of presenting these concepts to a group of girls who I thought might find such interests ‘nerdy’.

I initially shared with the group that compared to my previous focus group, on this occasion I would participate as an outsider, interested in girl interpretations of popular culture from their youths up until the present. As such, I explained that if the group had ever felt excluded from conversations that boys were having around them about popular culture, leaving them feeling like outsiders, then this was the opportunity to get their own back. I then outlined my research, explaining the influence of popular culture in socialising youths into society, before giving examples of my own interests in much the same way as I did in my first focus group. I then encouraged the

group to take turns in sharing their own experiences of cartoons, collectibles, fads, TV programming, music, hobbies and any sports teams that they were fans of.

Also feeling the initial nerves of this imaginary audience personified in the Dictaphone, Hemisha (27 years old), described how as a kid she used to watch ‘X-Men’, ‘Captain Planet’ and ‘Smurfs’. She then described her ‘sticker book’ housing her collection of an assortment of ‘stickers’. Hemisha explained that she was very ‘into’ sport, and participated in Karate and dancing outside of school as hobbies. On being asked if she was a fan of any contemporary television series or movies, she explained that she was ‘into’ the comedies such as ‘Big Bang Theory’ and ‘How I met Your Mother’, as well as the dramas such as ‘CSI’ and ‘Lie to Me’.

Farah (26 years old), provided a humorous introduction confessing that she “was not an alcoholic”, before describing how she was ‘into’ rollerblading and Karate with her brothers. She described riding her bike in the street, as well as building tree houses in the trees on her street (which brought on laughter as she described that she did not have a yard). Farah remembered watching ‘Tintin’ with her brothers, as well as ‘Babar’ and ‘Sharky and George’. This reminded me of the cartoon ‘Marsupalami’ and I asked the group if they remembered it, to which they all agreed in excitement and nostalgia. Farah added that she too collected ‘stickers’, before confessing that she still collected the little building toys one finds inside ‘Kinder Joy Chocolate Eggs’. This was something that I too used to collect as a child. She also remembered collecting coins from around the world. With regards to television Farah commented that she was not a ‘CSI’ fan, and rather than watching television series’ on her TV, she preferred to watch entire seasons on her laptop. Jokingly she jested that she did not watch ‘porn’, despite what her friend and third respondent Cindy believed. Describing her family’s television watching rituals she explained that her father had his own television set on which he regularly watched news, and so the family TV room was left to herself and her brothers to watch whatever they liked. Explaining that she would sometimes fight with her brothers over the remote, the ‘rules’ of the house dictated that if

you came into that room first you would have control over the remote and could then 'hog' the TV. When asked if her father ever insisted on watching anything, Farah replied that this did not really happen because her father had his own television. Describing a recent incident demonstrating such 'rules', Farah explained how she was forced to watch 'Master and Commander' again for the second time in two consecutive weeks, because her brothers had the remote and had digitally recorded it on their 'PVR'[16] decoder. Despite being a fan, when asked as an after thought, Farah had not watched the new 'Tintin' movie, explaining also that while it had been recommended to her she was not a fan of that particular genre of graphic animation and preferred a more classical style of animation.

When asked if she supported any soccer teams, Farah shared that she was an 'Arsenal' fan by default because of her family's support for the team. Cindy added that Farah did not understand the rules of soccer, and that she had to explain the 'offside' rule to Farah.

Cindy (25 years old) recalled watching cartoons like 'Care Bears' and 'Little Mermaid' as a child. She was big 'into' sports including hockey, swimming and soccer, all of which she still maintained an interest in. When asked which soccer team she supported, Cindy cheered "L-i-v-e-r-p-o-o-l", much like the fans of the club are known to do. I used this moment to once again explain the concept of 'imagined communities' through the analogy of soccer fan communities, also expressing the experience of my first focus group where respondents had been wearing their clubs supporter-shirts in acknowledgement of the big game. Cindy, likewise, noted the importance of the previous week's big game, agreeing with this notion of 'imagined communities'. Farah added that this was also true of her recent travels to Italy, where the 'San Siro' stadium (home of 'AC Milan') was treated like a cathedral by obsessed locals and passionate fans. Interjecting, jokingly, Cindy asked if she could finish her account, to which Farah joked that Cindy had also recently been to the 'Sexpo' convention which once more brought on

[16] A new 'DSTV' satellite television decoder that allows one to record and rewind live television.

laughter from the group. Cindy continued to explain that she also collected ‘World Cup ‘94’ soccer cards as a child, an experience that I also shared in as a child. Cindy remembered being involved in fads such as ‘tops’, ‘marbles’ and ‘yo yos’ at school. In terms of television these days she too watched ‘CSI’ on regular basis.

The group then commented on ‘reality’ television. While Farah described her hatred for ‘reality’ shows such as ‘Idols’, Cindy loved watching shows like ‘Jersey Shore’. Farah explained that she could not connect and felt embarrassed for contestants in shows like ‘Idols’, a sentiment that I too experienced. We both shared the experience of changing the channel rather than laughing as untalented contestants humiliated themselves.

At this point I again thanked the participants for sharing, and expressed that I had found it difficult to arrange a focus group with a girl collective to discuss these kinds of interests, this ‘nerdy territory’, something I could never have imagined doing as a child slightly afraid of the opinions of the opposite sex. Farah expressed that everyone was a bit of a ‘nerd’ deep down, while Cindy encouraged me, explaining that I had three girls in my house at that precise moment which was not at all ‘nerdy’.

I then lead the conversation towards the topic of Sacred Heart as a multi-cultural and multi-racial school in the mid 1990’s, and our opinions of it as former students. In this regard, I asked Cindy to give us her unique account as someone who now worked at the school. Cindy responded by explaining that the school was integrated, and this made it easy to make friends with people from different backgrounds. She went on to explain that as someone who came from the ‘West Rand’, which was far from the school, she ended up spending most weekends in the vicinity of the school meeting friends and going out in the area. She described that one never felt like an outcast based on where you came from or your race, but that in school cliques of black kids and white kids would generally stick together…this however changed as Cindy describes her mixed group of friends who spread across the body of school. Farah added that Sacred Heart allowed one to leave school with “no

blinkers on" compared to other schools where people left unable to interact with those different from themselves. She gave as example a friend of hers from school who had moved to Cape Town and who had never felt so alone as people seemed to only mix amongst themselves. She gave another example of her cousins who would never go to a club where there was only black people, nor where there was only white people, and so as she explained her cousins similarly would only go to clubs they knew and which were full of coloured people. This sentiment seemed a common theme in South Africa, with the exception of university students who were often also ex-Sacred Heart students or else 'Jo'burgers', Farah explained.

Hemisha commented that she had only been at Sacred Heart since arriving in standard five (grade seven), and had been at an Indian school before then. She agreed with the group that it was very easy to make friends and mix with different kinds of people at Sacred Heart, and once she left it was "back to fresh old segregation again". Describing her university experience she explained that groups of people were very segregated along race lines, excepting where they were members of socially relaxed clubs like 'Capoeira'[17]. Cindy added that Sacred Heart did give you a different mindset. Explaining that being coloured and her boyfriend 'Lyle' being white, she experienced that it took people quite a while to get used to this at varsity, and so they had mainly coloured friends, who then also took time in adjusting when Cindy and Lyle introduced them to their other circles of black and white friends. Farah explains that former Sacred Heart students are usually catalysts in such situations bringing different groups of friends together.

I then briefly shared the experience that Komnas had outlined of Sacred Heart, where although it was a Catholic school, the free thinking nature of the school saw many of students mocking religion. And in this regard if you were religious, it was still a good place to be, and if not you had many accomplices who were like minded. Farah shared a similar sentiment of being Muslim at a Catholic school and still being accepted, although outside of school people

[17] A Brazilian form of martial arts, combining elements of dance and music.

would always question her about this. Cindy added that to this day at Sacred Heart, they still observe other religious holidays like ‘Eid’ and ‘Diwali’, while retaining their Catholic ethos. This was an experience that I had also shared in. Neither I, nor most of my friends in school were Catholic or Christian.

I then proceeded to screen the first set of ‘X-Men’ texts for this group, namely ‘The Cure’ (1993) and ‘Come the Apocalypse’ (1993). These two episodes again take the form of a two-part narrative although they are not labelled as such. My choice of these two episodes directly relates to their in-depth focus of ‘Rogue’, one of the more powerful and popular female characters in the series. Having learnt that a scientist at ‘Muir Island Mutant Research Centre’ has developed a cure for the mutant gene, ‘Rogue’ leaves the ‘X-Men’ to go investigate the possibility of this cure, so that she may rid herself of her mutant abilities and enjoy the ‘normal’ experiences of being touched by others. Simultaneously the plot introduces ‘Warren Worthington’, also known as ‘Archangel’, whose feathered angel-like wings prevent him from leading a normal life and who also learning of the cure, travels to ‘Muir Island’. The time-travelling ‘Cable’ also makes an appearance attempting to track down the creator of the special collars that are used to enslave mutants on ‘Genosha’.

Upon reaching ‘Muir Island’, the audience learns that there is not so much a cure awaiting these mutants, but rather a trap of ‘Apocalypse’ and the shape-shifter ‘Mystique’ (disguised as the scientist who invented the cure) to harness the mutant powers of potential patients. Sensing danger ‘Professor Xavier’ sends the ‘X-Men’ to rescue ‘Rogue’, while the immortal ‘Apocalypse’ puts his master plan into action, using the machine meant to cure mutants to rather enslave them in their rage and hatred. The first to be cured are thus converted into ‘Apocalypse’s’ horsemen, namely: ‘Famine’, ‘Pestilence’, ‘War’ and ‘Death’. ‘Archangel’ is the last of these horsemen, and his rebirth as the more powerful ‘Death’, engulfs him in hatred for humanity. ‘Rogue’ learning of this plot just in time, refuses ‘Apocalypse’, and rejoining the ‘X-Men’, battles these four horsemen as they attempt to lay waste to the world. While being introduced to an array of new characters, ‘Rogue’ is the star of these texts, as

she battles with her own identity as a mutant, her jealousy of not knowing the warmth of an embrace and the loneliness her powers have condemned her to. We also learn that ‘Mystique’ is ‘Rogue’s’ adopted mother in these texts.

Beginning our discussion of these texts, Farah voiced her opinion of the texts as being ‘cheesy’ and the dialogue being ‘weird’. When asked which characters they ‘liked’ or ‘did not like’, both Cindy and Farah found ‘Storm’s’ character irritating. Farah also commented that ‘Jubilee’, with her power to create energy ‘fireworks’, was also boring if not irritating. Farah did, however, describe being fond of both ‘Rogue’ and ‘Gambit’s’ characters. When I asked the group of their feelings about this narrative of ‘Rogue’s’ desperate longing to be touched, her loneliness and desire for ‘the cure’, they responded in a similar way to the focus group of ‘fanboys’, explaining that as children they did not ‘see’ the messages in the texts. Cindy described this theme of trying so hard to change and not be different, but not accepting why one was different, as a theme that as kids we perhaps missed in anticipation of the action. Farah remarked that she never realised how sexual the ‘X-Men’ series was, or how mutants were referred to as ‘mutant terrorists’, the ‘terrorist’ label being one that is thrown around today in our own reality. Discussing these metaphors and comparisons with real life, I described one of the earlier moments in the series where the forced mutant concentration camp of ‘Genosha’ is introduced, and that always reminded me of ‘Robben Island’. Bringing up the insanity of characters like ‘Apocalypse’, the group agreed that in our own social realities such extremists do exist.

Moving onto the theme of oral culture, I asked the group if they ever experienced times in school where they had missed episodes of their favourite programs and had to be filled in at school. Farah expressed how this was an experience she often had during her school career. Describing ‘Dragonball Z’, she explains that she made sure that she was at home everyday at 4pm to watch each episode religiously, and would feel upset if this ritual was broken. Cindy added that when one missed an episode, you would feel so out of place the next day when you did not know what your peers and friends were talking about. You would be upset that they were

‘spoiling it’ for you, but still wanted to be part of the gossip, she explained. Farah shared that she had recently watched all the episodes of the latest ‘Dragonball GT’ series, on her laptop. This experience of ‘Dragonball Z’ was one that I also shared, as late as Matric, which other respondents of the ‘fanboys’ focus group also confessed to enjoying.

Again the discussion brought up the sexual innuendo in the texts. The group laughed as we recalled ‘Gambit’s’ appeal to ‘Rogue’, “You can drain my energy anytime…”, as ‘Rogue’ considered the possibility of being ‘cured’.

When I asked the group if they would describe themselves as having been ‘fans’ of this ‘X-Men’ series as children their response was mixed. Farah remarked that she liked the series, but would not necessarily call herself a ‘fan’. Cindy expressed that she was a ‘fan’, due to her older brother’s love for the show which rubbed off on her as they watched together. Thinking of the show in retrospect, Farah described how as a child she never thought of the serious themes, she just wished to be like ‘Rogue’. Cindy agreed with this, adding how she would wish that she was also able to fly. Perhaps as an older audience we do not necessarily want to be the characters, but rather begin to understand why certain characters appealed to us, the group agreed. I then asked the group to think of the portrayal of women characters in the ‘X-Men’, as opposed to the portrayal of women in other cartoons such as ‘Batman’ or ‘Spider-man’, where women are usually ‘side-kicks’ or being rescued by these heroes. To this end, Farah commented that in the ‘X-Men’, women had a big role or an equal role as opposed to other such cartoons where they were always being saved. This was a sentiment shared by Cindy, who felt that in the ‘X-Men’ women were not just victims but protagonists, as exemplified by these two episodes which were about ‘Rogue’. I noted that ‘Rogue’ was also very powerful, being able to throw villains through walls, fly and drain other mutants’ powers to within an inch of their lives if she touched them.

Discussing a kissing scene between ‘Rogue’ and her first boyfriend (depicted through a flashback), which left her boyfriend in a coma after just one kiss, I asked the group if they would have felt awkward watching this as children.

Cindy admitted that she would have felt awkward, while Hemisha explained that she would have been fine watching kissing scenes in cartoons, but the moment ‘real people’ were doing it she would have felt uncomfortable. Farah agreed with Hemisha’s account.

Before screening the next set of texts, the group reverted to a discussion of collectibles at school. Collecting ‘Pokemon’ and ‘Dragonball Z’ ‘Tazos’ that appeared free in packets of crisps, were a common experience in the group and a big fad at school. I also admitted to collecting ‘ FIFA World Cup 2002 Collectable Coca-Cola tins’.

The group remembered how certain cliques of girls would form around popular television shows such as ‘Dawson’s Creek’.

The discussion also touched on newer texts of the ‘X-Men’ franchise, such as the blockbuster movies. Farah commented that she remembered being disappointed at ‘Gambit’s’ big screen counterpart. Hemisha agreed with this, describing how the picture one had in one’s mind was often not captured in movies. The group agreed that these ‘X-Men’ texts felt more ‘original’ than later movie attempts to depict the world of the ‘X-Men’. Cindy explained that the movies had to appeal to a larger audience which explained these diversions. I added that I often felt discontent with the choice of actors in the roles of important characters. Hemisha remarked that there was a similar feeling when one had read a book that was then turned into a film, such as the ‘Harry Potter’ or the ‘Lord of the Rings’ series. I pointed out that as fans we often rewrite stories in our heads. I confessed to having also re-enacted fight scenes between the ‘X-Men’ using my ‘X-Men’ action figures. Cindy described a similar experience of re-enacting fight scenes with ‘Ninja Turtles’, using an empty box to recreate the underground effect of the sewers. The group seemed to share in this ‘Turtles’ phase, defined by an array of paraphernalia like ‘Ninja Turtle’ bed sheets and curtains. I then confessed that as a very young child, my imaginary friends were all four of the ‘Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles’ and that I used to insist that my parents set four extra plates for them whenever there was pizza around. I explained that my

research now was also an attempt to understand this obsession with fan culture, as well as the fantasy world that I engaged in as a young child. I again described the 'Marvel Masterpiece' collectable cards that I had also been obsessed with, which as I explained to the group, had been discussed in my first focus group. I also explained that these days as a football fan, I still wear my supporter-shirts on big games when I want to show my pride as a 'fan'.

I then screened the texts 'Proteus, Part One' (1995) and 'Proteus, Part Two' (1995) for this second focus group. In this regard I had decided that each of the subsequent groups would also watch the two 'Proteus' texts, so as to have a consistent set of texts for interpretation and analysis amongst these different groups.

As I described my own experience of watching these texts again as 'trippy' and 'surreal', I encouraged the group to share their opinions with me. Farah remarked that the writers of this episode "must have been on acid". The scene where 'Wolverine' was turned inside out and melted, seemed to be experienced by this group in a similar way as my first focus group of 'fanboys'.

Describing the character of 'Proteus', Farah explained that all teenagers go through this stage of inner anger, confusion and uncontrollable rage. I added that we could all relate to that feeling of being trapped as adolescents, and fighting with our parents for our own independence. The group also discussed this feeling of being 'like a monster' at that age, the breaking point as such, that defines most youths' identities as they come to grips with growing up. I also explained that the hypocritical nature of 'Proteus'' father, running for mayor on the back of being a man of 'family values', while simultaneously having abandoned his son for being a mutant, was a theme that was discussed in my first focus group. Again Hemisha described how as children, we often missed the themes that are quite obvious in retrospect. She added that there was a lot of content for analysis in these episodes, describing how this young boy 'Proteus' was lost and searching for his father to protect him. Referring to the previous texts that I had screened, with the character of 'Mystique' having the ability to shape-shift and appear normal, in a similar way

to how ‘Proteus’ would posses people on the street to assume their normal appearance, I asked if this described the experiences of being accepted in different cultures by appearing normal, or of living a dual life in a way. In this regard, Cindy commented that there were both positive and negative effects of this experience, as one can be accepted everywhere while honestly not knowing one’s self. This normal appearance thus hides one’s true self, in order to fit in society. As Farah added, “this is what people do in our own society”.

As I described the attempts to break with the conventions in these episodes from the third season of the series, Farah also suggested the producerly intent was to suggest trying new things with this ‘acid trip’ style of animation. I added that this might be factor, aided with depiction of ‘Proteus’ ’ vivid imagination and the themes of youthful experimentation.

Discussing the character of ‘Professor Xavier’, I explained that I was interested by his power of telepathy, to which Farah remarked that ‘Xavier’ knew everything, he was like their ‘keeper’ or father-figure of sorts. This brought up the concept of ‘Xavier’s’ school for gifted youths, an institution that brought different characters together from different backgrounds, a place where they would not be judged as they learnt to deal with their differences despite the discrimination that existed in the outside world. This common interest or common ground, of being different, is what united the ‘X-Men’. I suggested that perhaps as schoolchildren in Sacred Heart, given our own social realities and struggles as we tried to work out our own identities, we could relate to ‘Xavier’s’ school that housed the ‘X-Men’. Hemisha agreed with this, explaining that one of the things she took from ‘X-Men’ as a child, was the ideal that it was ‘okay’ to be different.

Explaining some of the analogies in the ‘X-Men’ texts, I referred to the origins of the original comics during a period where African Americans were fighting for civil rights in the United States. Mutants in this case appealed to a larger audience, but accounted for the narrative of a marginalised people to an otherwise ignorant mainstream audience. The character of ‘Beast’ was

another example, a mutant that appears physically frightening to ‘normal’ people and judged because of this, yet who is supremely intelligent. The group discussed that another metaphor of such ‘othering’ is evident in the character of ‘Cyclops’, a mutant who must always wear his protective eye wear to control his laser vision that is capable of burning holes through mountains. He could be viewed as a hero by children who are teased for wearing glasses. And the character of ‘Rogue’, who is unable to touch others, created a metaphor for girls who fear intimacy. Farah gave the example of other comic heroes, such as ‘Captain America’, which gave children hope during war times.

Hemisha also commented on the themes of divorce that were present in these ‘Proteus’ texts. I admitted that coming from a family of divorced parents I could relate to these themes on certain levels. The group agreed that certain cartoons explained adult themes to children in a language they could understand. Farah gave the example of the animated film ‘The Lion King’, which the group agreed on as one such text that socialised children, explaining concepts such as the circle of life and dealing with the death of loved ones.

The ‘Scholar-Fans’, Academics and Contemporary Peers

This third focus group was logistically a lot easier to set up than I had imagined it to be. While this may have been because I had already done two focus groups, and had begun to understand and feel comfortable with the structure of the interview process, this group of academics and peers from university were also willing to contribute to my research. They were understanding of the pressures and demands of academic research, having experienced similar pressures in their own disciplines, and therefore able and willing to participate. Getting permission from the ‘Political Studies Department’ at the ‘University of the Witswatersrand’ (‘Wits’), I used a seminar room in the department with the capabilities of screening these ‘X-Men’ texts. With the provision of sandwiches and beverages from the canteen, there was an informal atmosphere as the respondents arrived. For some it was their first

experience of being in this department. None the less when everyone was comfortable we began. This group contained five respondents, one of whom was a female respondent. There was also a sixth ‘respondent’ who briefly joined and then left without contributing and the recordings make note of this. One of the respondents, Vijay, was also in my ‘fanboys’ focus group; however though joining the group a bit late, gave a unique account as a ‘scholar-fan’ in this particular focus group.

In what had become a familiar process, I once more introduced myself, my experiences as a youth and my interests as I had done for previous groups, before asking the respondents to contribute. I described to this group, as had been done in previous focus groups, that my friends and peers had been like-minded in their ‘fan’ interests, giving the examples of the ‘X-Men’, ‘Ninja Turtles’ and ‘Biker Mice from Mars’.

Jethro (24 years old), studying his ‘Masters in Engineering’, described how he used to collected figurines of ‘Biker Mice from Mars’ and ‘GI-JOES’. He remarked that these days he enjoyed watching film adaptations of these cartoons, giving the example of ‘G.I. JOE: The Rise of Cobra’, that reminded him of his favourite characters. He did not seem to mind these film adaptations of his favourite cartoons. He also described being ‘into’ ‘Ninja Turtles’ and ‘Batman’, and how he used to look up to these characters as role models. Wearing a ‘Lions’ rugby supporter-shirt, Jethro explained that he was a ‘Lions’ fan especially having come from Johannesburg and the Lions’ being the local rugby team.

Again, I used this moment to encourage discussions of being sports fans and explained the notion of ‘imagined communities’ through the soccer fan community analogy.

Patrick (24 years old), also finishing his ‘Masters in Engineering’, describes not having collected figurines of his favourite series, but of having all the kids’ costumes and apparel of his favourite characters and super heroes. He gave the example of running around dressed as ‘Spiderman’ and ‘Batman’. He

shared that ‘X-Men’ was a series that he really liked growing up, but added that he was not impressed with the film versions or the new spin-off animated series depicting ‘X-Men’ characters as kids. These days, he explained, he watches television series such as ‘The Big Bang Theory’ and not so many animated shows anymore. Patrick also explained that he went through all the ‘stages’ or ‘fads’ at school including: marbles, spinning tops and ‘Tazos’. I recalled that I also collected ‘Tazos’ of the different varieties such as ‘Dragonball Z’, ‘Pokemon’ and the ‘Rugby World Cup ‘95’ ones. Patrick added that he was also a rugby and soccer fan, he supported the Western Cape team ‘The Stormers’ and ‘Manchester United’ respectively. Patrick also explained that both he and Jethro were in the same class at ‘Wits’ studying more specifically ‘Metallurgical and Material Engineering’.

Nelly (24 years old), studying her ‘Masters in Medical Science in the field of Anti-Viral Gene Therapy’, described growing up as a big ‘fangirl’. She described being ‘into’ ‘Power Rangers’, ‘Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles’, ‘Transformers’ and “everything you could imagine”. Nelly used to collect action figures such as ‘Transformers’ which were a big currency on the playground at school. Nelly described herself as an ‘Arsenal’ soccer fan, ‘by proxy’, through her brother, who was a big fan. She described herself as still being a big ‘Batman’ fan, as well as still collecting comics and graphic novels. In terms of television series’, ‘House’ and ‘The Big Bang Theory’ are shows that she still watches. Nelly said she was also still a fan of animated series’, and enjoyed watching old episodes to relive her childhood. Interestingly, she had recently acquired the entire collection of the ‘original’ ‘X-Men: The Animated Series’, texts of which I was going to show the group. I shared with the group, that the fact that Nelly had coincidentally in her own capacity also recently watched some of these ‘X-Men’ texts, added another dynamic to the focus group. In terms of comics, Nelly admitted that she had dipped into ‘Marvel Comics’ for a bit but was not that interested as she has always been a ‘D.C Comics’ fan.

Ollie (24 years old), who studied ‘Film and Television’ at ‘Wits’ and who is also Nelly’s twin brother, explained that he was a ‘fanboy’ of everything. He

described watching ‘VR Troopers’, ‘Pirates of the Dark Water’ and ‘Beetle Borgs’ amongst many others. Again I said this reminded me of ‘Marsupalami’, and the group enthusiastically agreed to having watched the show. Nelly added that she and Ollie were big fans of all the ‘Disney’ movies. As they both explained, their favourite ‘Disney’ movie was the ‘The Lion King’, of which they described their vast collection of paraphernalia, including: marbles, action figures, bed linen, blankets, curtains and stuffed toys. Nelly explained that her family was happy when they got over this ‘stage’. Ollie added that their mother was happiest when they got over the ‘Transformers’ action figure stage, since those figurines were very expensive in the United States.

Ollie and Nelly explained that they had spent the majority of their childhood in the U.S. before coming to South Africa. In terms of fan culture, Ollie explained that in South Africa kids were watching and excited by kids programming that had long since appeared on U.S televisions and were ‘old’ for him and his sister. I remarked that I was probably one of those kids, which drew laughter from the group. Ollie also explained that on ‘Halloween’, he used to dress up as the ‘Black Power Ranger’ and his sister would dress up as the ‘Yellow Power Ranger’.

I then screened ‘Proteus, Part One’ (1995) and ‘Proteus, Part Two’ (1995) for the group. Discussing these texts, Nelly remarked that she did not like the character of ‘Proteus’ at all and found his lack of maturity irritating. She also disagreed with his surreal manipulation of the city and labelled it unnecessarily destructive. Patrick commented that the city did, however, revert back to normal as soon as ‘Proteus’ would leave.

When asked if the group remember this episode, none of the respondents seem to remember watching such a surreal text. Jethro commented that it was a ‘cool’ episode though. Nelly enjoyed the fact that ‘Wolverine’ was shown to also have weaknesses.

Patrick admitted that he liked the character of ‘Proteus’, which prompted Nelly and Ollie to suggest that while they liked his powers, they were not impressed

with ‘Proteus’. Patrick argued that ‘Proteus’ was full of rage and anger because he had been locked up his whole life, asking the other respondents how they would feel if that was them…adding that ‘Proteus’ had so much power he could do anything. Jethro added that it was as if ‘Proteus’ was surrounded by all these bright lights and all these things he had never seen before, having only been used to seeing a metal cage before. Ollie agreed with this.

Discussing the flashback scene where ‘Professor Xavier’ kisses ‘Moira’, Nelly remarked that ‘Xavier’ always got a lot of ‘play’ form the ladies. She went on to describe other episodes and comics where ‘Xavier’ was always romantically involved. Ollie shared that it was weird seeing characters kiss as a youth, wondering “what on earth were they doing”. We also laughed at the ‘cheesy’ dialogue during such romantic scenes.

Catching the tale end of the episode (although having previously watched it), having just joined us, I asked Vijay if he could add anything. Vijay remarked that it was quite interesting to see the ‘X-Men’ actually lose a battle as they did to ‘Proteus’. He also commented that he enjoyed the character of ‘Professor Xavier’, who as he described, had that ‘Batman’ quality where his only power was his mind but that this quality was usually what won the battle at the end of the day.

I once more I admitted to the group that I could relate to certain themes in the text, having myself come from a divorced family.

I then screened ‘Sanctuary, Part One’ (1995) and because Ollie and Nelly would have to leave the group due to prior arrangements, we discussed this part before I screened ‘Sanctuary, Part Two’ (1995) for the rest of the group. I then asked the group to share their accounts about the themes of ‘mutant liberation’ and ‘Magneto’s’ imagining of this new mutant homeland ‘Asteroid M’.

Ollie explained that this theme of ‘mutant liberation’ was one of the most important themes in ‘X-Men’, as he explained the ‘Sentinels’ were like ‘the S.S.’ repressing the mutants. As I mentioned the island of ‘Genosha’, this prompted Nelly to explain to the group, that ‘Genosha’ in the ‘X-Men’ world was a republic of the coast of Africa where under the pretences of being a mutant only island, mutants were lured their before being forced into labour as a work force. I shared with the group that ‘Genosha’ reminded me or sounded like ‘Robben Island’. Nelly added that it reminded her more of the ‘Holocaust’, and as such a ‘concentration camp’. The power-preventing collars that mutants wore on ‘Genosha’, was a form of ‘branding’ that further exemplified this.

Jethro commented that this version of ‘Magneto’s’ liberation was not necessarily a good thing, because once separated from society they were then under the control of ‘Magneto’, who would become a dictator of sorts…and in this way could ‘Asteroid M’ not itself become a detention camp? Patrick responded by saying that they wanted to be separate due to persecution, and were not forced to live on ‘Asteroid M’, and so a better description would be a ‘cult’ of sorts rather than a detention camp. Nelly remarked that it reminded her of George Orwell’s ‘Animal Farm’, in the sense that similarly ‘the animals’ liberated themselves from ‘the humans’, before ‘the pigs’ took over in true dictator fashion.

Nelly also noticed that ‘Magneto’s’ character in this text was different to the one we are accustomed to, explaining that he was usually very ‘anti-human’ and violent, a much different character than the ‘Magneto’ who wanted peace in ‘Sanctuary’. I commented that I felt some of the subsequent movies had used moments from these texts and particularly ‘Magneto’s’ opening speech in ‘Part One’ as a reference for his character. Ollie agreed with this, describing similar moments in the ‘X-Men’ movies.

Nelly identified with ‘Professor Xavier’s’ character and his attempts to resolve situations in a peaceful manner. Jethro also sympathised with ‘Magneto’, who he described as meaning well, but who was ‘blackmailed’ by ‘Cortez’ and his

reliance on him as an energy source. Explaining that when I was younger I sometimes identified or routed for the so-called villain, I asked the group what their thoughts on this were. Ollie shared this view saying that the villains were often more interesting, explaining that ‘Magneto’ was a lot weaker in this episode, he added that he preferred a more militant ‘Magneto’.

At this point Ollie and Nelly, left the group, and the rest of us proceeded to watch ‘Sanctuary, Part Two’ (1995). Beginning our discussion again, Jethro explained that he was interested by the role of ‘Magneto’ who he described as being a ‘saviour’, which was different from his usual role as the ‘bad guy’. Vijay added that by the end of this second episode, he became the ‘bad guy’ again as he returned to extract revenge on his betrayer ‘Cortez’, Patrick also agreed with this account.

Jethro did, however, inquire about the absence of certain characters such as ‘Cyclops’ and ‘Storm’ in these texts…explaining that ‘Cyclops’ was one of his favourites. I explained that in these particular texts the focus was on ‘Magneto’, and while other episodes from the series gave ‘Cyclops’ and others a leading role, these texts dealt with ‘Magneto’s’ dynamic character and made one question whether he really was a villain.

The ‘New Fans’

With this being my fourth and final focus group, my technique of interviewing had become established. I was confident and well prepared, which belied the difficulty I had with initially setting up this focus group. Perhaps my initial hang-ups centred around returning to Sacred Heart College, which since leaving as a matriculant in 2004, I had not returned to. It seemed a logistical nightmare not only to get twelve year olds to participate in this research, but to also get the consent of both teachers and parents to do this. And to this end, I depended upon Cindy Niken. Cindy, who participated in my ‘fangirl’ focus group (which also might not have happened without her involvement), encouraged me to make contact with the staff at the school where she would later assist me in putting together this group. Cindy, as has been described,

now works at the school, and therefore provided me with a contact and ally at this seemingly impenetrable institution. After attempts to contact the principal of the school electronically had failed, I went in person to the school early on a Monday morning when the school was a hive of activity. This in itself was a surreal experience, as I walked through passage ways and past classrooms that housed so many of my own memories. Explaining my research and the limited time I had at my disposal, the principal of the high school, Mrs Heather Blanckensee, was very accommodating. Yet it was left to Cindy, who not only got five interested students (perhaps more interested at the promise of pizza) to agree to participate, but also the necessary consent from all the parties concerned that would allow this focus group to take place. Later that day, armed with a large pizza and 'X-Men' episodes, I returned to conduct my focus group of 'new fan' accounts amongst contemporary Sacred Heart students.

Against the backdrop of a Geography classroom, with the ability to screen the 'X-Men' texts via a HD projector and having watched as the five respondents (three girls and two boys) ploughed their way through pizza, I began recording my final focus group. Following a similar structure to the earlier groups, I outlined my fan interests as a school boy at Sacred Heart and shared my experience as a very young child of having imaginary friends that were all four of the 'Ninja Turtles'. These accounts made the young respondents feel comfortable about sharing their accounts honestly. I then revealed to this group, that I was also a big soccer fan and that my favourite soccer team was 'Barcelona F.C', which was met by cheers from the boys in the group who seemed to be 'Barca' fans too.

Nikail (12 years old), began by explaining that when he was younger he used to watch a lot of 'Boomerang'[18] cartoons such as 'Tom and Jerry'. Nikail described how these days he watches a lot of 'Dragonball Z' because it's 'fun' and, as Nikail described, "because its made up for teenagers even though it's a cartoon". He went on to explain that he watched a lot of soccer and was

[18] A 'Cartoon Network' channel, dedicated to playing classic cartoons such as 'The Flintstones', to give another example.

also a supporter of ‘Barcelona FC’. I commented that when I was at school ‘Dragonball Z’ was on everyday and this was an experience that Nikail explained had not changed, since it was still on every week day at 5pm. Nikail also described watching the television drama ‘Vampire Diaries’, as well as the ‘Twighlight’ films, although films he watched the films “just to say I watched it”. He added that he was also a fan of action movies such as ‘Fast and the Furious’. In terms of his music interests, Nikail said he was a big fan of rap music.

Enrique (12 years old), remembered also watching ‘Dragonball Z’ at a younger age and being ‘crazy’ about the ‘Dragonball Z’ ‘Playstation’ video game. He also described meeting up with Nikail and mixing music on ‘Virtual DJ’. Enrique then described how as younger boys they would pretend to be ‘Lionel Messi’ or ‘Cristiano Ronaldo’ when they played soccer, and try to emulate these heroes by scoring goals just like them. He also described one occasion where he went to a friend’s party dressed up as the ‘Red Power Ranger’.

Khanyisele (12 years old) said she was a ‘big fan’ of the cartoons ‘Phineas and Ferb’ and ‘SpongeBob Squarepants’. She also enjoyed watching ‘Kid Patoski’, ‘Fanboy and Chum Chum’ and ‘Dragonball Z’. In terms of other television programs, Khanyisele described watching ‘Keeping Up With The Kardashians’, ‘Generations’ and ‘Rhythm City’. Her music interests are ‘R and B’ and ‘House Music’.

Tanya (12 years old) said that she was into ‘reality TV’ such as ‘Keeping Up With The Kardashians’ and ‘Chloe and Lemar’. She also watched the ‘E-entertainment’ channel and the local drama ‘Generations’. As an aspiring actress she would imitate certain characters from the shows she watched. She explained that as a younger child she had wanted to grow up having a group of friends like the ones she watched on the cartoon ‘Recess’. In terms of music she was a ‘fan’ of ‘Adele’, ‘Whitney Houston’, ‘Little Wayne’, ‘Drake’ and ‘Nicki Minaj’.

Andiswa (12 years old) liked mostly ‘older’ cartoons like ‘Recess’ and ‘Dragonball Z’. She was also a fan of ‘Power Rangers’, particularly ‘Yellow Ranger’. Andiswa also liked reality shows as well as local dramas like ‘Generations’, ‘Rhythm City’, ‘Zulu For Sale’ and ‘7de Laan’. Her music interests are ‘hip hop’, ‘R and B’ and ‘rap’.

In terms of television watching rituals, Nikail explained that he got home so late that he did not really have time to watch TV, but would often record his favourite programs and watch them before school in the mornings. Enrique described that his viewing patterns were similar but that he would sometimes make deals with his mom to watch TV in exchange for home work being done. Enrique shared that his parents were divorced and when his older brother would come and stay with him he would bully him off the TV.

Khanyisele commented that she got home early from school and would watch TV while her older brother was not there. When he was there, the two of them would take turns, one doing home work while the other watched TV. She also explained that in the evenings she was forced to watch news with her family, which she found boring. Tanya said that while she was made to watch the news at times, her family had more than one TV. She would, however, watch certain shows together with her brother in the family room, adding that her parents would complain if they were caught watching ‘silly reality TV’, and so she often watched TV in her own room. Andiswa said that she had two older brothers, and while one was usually studying, she was often forced to watch the TV preferences of the other. Her parents had their own TV, so she was left to contend with her brothers.

Besides for the local ‘Super Strika’s’ the group did not read any comics.

I then screened the two ‘Proteus’ episodes, which I had decided was enough for this group, firstly due to time constraints and, secondly, seeing as I did not want the respondents to get bored. The texts were received well by the group, Enrique describing the texts as ‘dope’ and ‘boss’. After a while, Tanya seemed to get distracted though and would chat during the text to Andiswa.

She explained that this was because she was not really into this ‘super hero thing’. Khanyisele really liked the episodes and was fond of ‘Proteus’’ character. Nikail described how he was shocked that ‘Wolverine’ “got his ass kicked”. Both boy respondents were also very impressed with ‘Proteus’’ powers, and as they explained, ‘Wolverine’ who despite being weak was still one of their favourite ‘X-Men’. The girls agreed that they did not like the character of the ‘mother’ (‘Moira’), who they found irritating.

While no one in the group had ever seen any of the episodes from this ‘X-Men’ series, as Nikail described, he really liked the idea of these episodes compared to the movies because one could get into the back stories of the ‘X-Men’. Tanya explained that the movies were hard to follow because they did not follow a chronological order, this was because these later movies that she was exposed to were ‘prequels’. The group also noted that some of their favourite characters from the series were missing. Enrique explained that for him the ‘original’ ‘X-Men’ text was the first movie.

The group noted that they did not feel awkward during a kissing scene in the text, but qualified this by saying that it would have been awkward if their parents were there. Discussing the groups understanding of what it meant to be a mutant, I asked them if they thought mutants were experiencing a ‘kind of apartheid’ in their understanding of the ‘X-Men’ world, and they all agreed with this. The group also made comparisons between being bullied as a kid, and being bullied as a mutant.

Enrique also said that it was weird to hear Scottish accents, like that of ‘Proteus’’ character, which he had never heard before in his experience of the ‘X-Men’.

Talking about their experiences at Sacred Heart, while they explained that every now and then there were incidents of racisms at the school, it was a very diverse school where race and religion did not matter and that overall they enjoyed being there. Enrique shared an interesting account that he had heard from his father (also a past student) describing how anti-apartheid

activists had been hidden on the school premises during apartheid. The group was also familiar to an account of the hiding of ammunitions on the property during this same period.

Interview at 'Zed Bee's Comic Universe and Book Exchange'

'Zed Bee's' is a comic book shop in Edenvale (in the East of Johannesburg). It is the closest comic shop to the vicinity in which I live. I explained roughly to Rodney, who is the owner there, what the interests of my research were and he was willing to allow me to interview him.

Rodney explained that he had been working there for 16 years. He agreed to be interviewed but did not give his age. "The thing about comics, it never really goes away. People are always interested, it's a perennial thing. Things that people were interested in 15 years ago…never goes out of fashion."

My focus at 'Zed Bee's' related to concepts of mainstream and alternative comics and I prompted him to give an account along these lines.
To this end Rodney described, "The bulk of the market is mainstream superhero stuff. Apparently shops in the States run purely on Indie comics. Here, it's nice to look at but no one is going to pay money for it."

What followed was a discussion on 'Indie' comic books, as well as 'Fantagraphics' (which he defines as 'Indie'). Titles such as 'Soulfire' and 'Phantom' were not 'Indie', by Rodney's definition, which he explained was a common misconception.

I explained that by my understanding, alternative and 'Indie' comics were more adult comics, and usually 'dark' in content. "No, they are more slice-of-life", said Rodney, "And there are other Indies that are crime books. Those okes are not doing the comic books with the aim of hitting it big with Marvel. That's not going to happen. It's a matter of definition. There's Marvel, DC and then there's the smaller press of which not everyone is an Indie publisher."

We discussed ‘spin-off’ movies based on comic book storylines. In this regard he explained: “There’s no real crossing over between movies and comics for the publics. You have people who read comics and people who watch movies. They think you’ll get someone who watches the movie and then buys the comics but it doesn’t happen. These are different audiences.”

I then asked Rodney if he considered himself ‘a fan’. Giving him the ‘schpiel’ about soccer fans, I explained that my research was also to do with different accounts of ‘fan’ culture.

“Fandom is a very niche thing, I suppose. But if you come into the comic shop and hang out for an hour or two you will get the just of what it’s like [which fans come in, etc].Fan culture if you want to broaden the term…see how many people are walking around wearing Marvel and DC T-shirts, they might not follow the comics but they like a character.”

Before Rodney could go on he was interrupted by a customer and so excused himself. I then turned my attention to one of the junior staff members that appeared free for that moment at least.

This was Devon (27 years old), from ‘Kempton Park’, which is further east of the shop. “I was never a big cartoon kid,” he said. “I used to walk to the café on the street and buy comics. Superhero comics.”

Devon added that he did, however, collect cards and action figures. He explained that he liked action figures, because they represented ‘3D’ versions of the characters. I asked him if he had friends at school who liked the same things, to which he replied, “Ja at school there were some cats who liked comics.”

I told him about the focus groups that I had set up, and a theme that had emerged about the way fan learners ‘caught up’ on episodes they had missed. “Television was not such a big thing,” he said. Instead, he and his friends all used to buy different comics and then swap them. I then asked him

what he had observed about the different buying habits of boy and girl ‘fans’, and what titles were popular with these girl ‘fans’. He said the fandom aspect with girls was ‘not as big as it should be’ because girls liked buying things from malls, but that the girls who came to the shop, had specific favourite titles such as ‘Sandman’. Buying patterns were very different between boys and girls, he said.

Rodney at that point was talking to two customers. I interrupted, explaining that I would be interested in other accounts if they were keen to share.
“You’ve got to have a lot of soap when you talk to me, buddy” said the one customer, who had been shouting as he came into the shop, “I feel like fucking up some nerds today.”

His name was Ryan (36 years old) and he was a regular at the shop. Ryan explained that the old lady, Aida (Rodney’s mom), who was also involved in the running of the shop, was something of a surrogate mother for him too.
“She is awesome,” he explained.

Ryan was ‘into’ British comics and explained that he, “…liked all the 2000 AD stuff… like Judge Dredd.” Indeed, he was clearly a big ‘Judge Dredd’ fan and had a bunch of tattoos to prove this. Ryan described that both he and Rodney were plumbers, and that it was through this profession that they had first met. It was not long before he started to come to the shop regularly, where Rodney introduced him to ‘gross’ stuff, “feeding my inner demons”, as Ryan described.

Devon piped up: “We feed an addiction. Comics are like crack.”

I shared that growing up, I also experienced my ‘fan’ interests as a type of ‘addiction’ of sorts, and that whenever there was a new action figure, I had to have it. I then asked the guys if they collected items that came into the shop.
Devon responded, “You could say that.”
“I worry about people who collect dolls,” Ryan quipped.
“Not blow-up dolls,” I said, and they all laughed.

I also raised questions about themes in the ‘X-Men’ universe that I had similarly put to the respondents of my focus groups, and then asked them if they could relate to any of these themes.
Rodney: “Personally it’s never been something I related to… that Cyclops is an outsider, and I am an outsider...not really.”

Devon explained that as a kid, one related to different characters for different reasons. Sometimes these reasons were very flimsy, perhaps for example, the characters were wearing a costume that you liked.

Rodney said that when one was younger there was a ‘wish fulfilment’ that made you identify with a character, which made you read more about this character, but this did not happen as you got older. “It’s like the Matrix, it’s not because I believe in the Jesus Christ analogy; it’s just that it looks so awesome.”

Devon spoke about the question of the availability of comics and spin-offs as a kid, explaining that there was often no choice and that you would just buy whatever was available in shops like ‘C.N.A’.

Rodney went on explaining that if you liked a comic book character it operated at a sub-conscious level, for instance if you could not get a girlfriend you did not necessarily think about your ability to relate to ‘Spiderman’; it did not work as obviously as that, he said, and nor if you have anger-management issues, would overtly identify with ‘Hulk’.

He commented that what made fans interesting was their extreme dedication and devotion, but that there was a fine line between devotion and fanaticism. I also asked about fan ‘rewritings’ of storylines, the extension of time-lines, fanzines and so on. He said, “I don’t know, I would have to check that out.”

Devon said that although fans felt they could do things better, 99 percent of the time, the producers did it better than fans could. Rodney spoke about how, on a Friday night some groups of ‘Star Trek’ fans sat around moaning

about episodes and movies that they didn't like or about the producers and directors of these texts, that they disagreed with. There was nothing wrong with that, he said. "But if they start sending hate mail, or using Anthrax…" that would be obsessive, he remarked.

I then asked him if he knew any 'fan' groups that met up in a private capacity to play games like 'Magic: The Gathering'. There was a group who played 'HeroClix' who came into the shop, Rodney explained. The main demographic of those who came into the shop was between 18 and 45. These were men who were already 'fans' but who did not have money as students, so they waited until they had jobs and the cash to pay for the comics they always wanted or to recreate childhood nostalgia. With that, I thanked them for their help.

Rodney gave a parting shot: "If your work becomes famous, I want a cut."

Interview with Kamil Saloojee

This individual interview with my brother, allowed me to very easily access a contemporary 'fanboy' account, differing from those that I had received at Sacred Heart in my 'New Fans' focus group. I did not show Kamil any of the 'X-Men' texts from the original animated series, and as I understand it, he has never seen these episodes that had such a big impact on me when I was the same age as he is now. I resolved that I would merely listen to his own interpretations and interests as a self-confessed 'fan'. I would not influence his account by pushing an agenda of mutants and 'X-Men'. I knew that he had been exposed to the 'X-Men' in its newer forms of movies, video games and more recent television series. He was also familiar with the characters. With all this in mind, and knowing that the 'X-Men' was far from his biggest 'fan' interest, I wanted to hear his own untainted account.

In the familiar setting of my own home, and one must bare in mind that I do not live with Kamil any longer although I do see him on a regular basis, I

began my interview. My immediate sense was that perhaps he would be more open in his account if he did not know me. I was, after all, his older brother and as such he too was aware of this not wanting to disappoint me. The Dictaphone created a strange atmosphere, but as usual, Kamil was articulate and confident with his responses.

I began by explaining my fan interests as a school boy. I described my love for cartoons and of action figures, and shared that just like him, I too recreated battle scenes with my 'X-Men' and 'GI-JOE' action figures. I also shared with him, as I had done in some of the focus groups, how in my very early childhood all four of the 'Ninja Turtles' were my imaginary friends. I had never told him this before. I then described my obsession with collecting these toys, comics and cards while watching my favourite cartoons religiously. Following my example, Kamil began to share his own experiences. Kamil described his favourite interests as being 'Halo Reach', 'Star Wars' and vast amounts of 'Lego'. When I asked him if he would consider himself a 'fan' of 'Star Wars', he responded by saying that he was a "very big fan" especially with the recent re-release of some the films. Kamil explained that he had fallen in love with the older trilogy, which then introduced him to the world of 'Star Wars' and the newer films and cartoons, and he believed that the 'originals' were always the best texts. He explained that the newer 'Star Wars' films had 'cooler stuff', but watching the 'Empire Strikes Back' as his first 'Star Wars' film made him a 'fan'.

Kamil went on to describe that for the last few years of his life, 'Star Wars' has been everything to him. This was until recently, where he credits me as an older brother who introduced him to the world of 'Halo'. From my side, after exposing him to the 'Halo' video games, I never realised my little brother would become so passionate and even obsessed with understanding the narratives and 'back stories' of the 'Halo' world. Kamil admits to having fallen in love with 'Halo' and becoming a big fan. For the sake of the recording, I then asked him to explain what 'Halo' was, given that it was not a movie or a cartoon. Kamil explained that 'Halo' started out as being a video game, the first title being 'Halo: Combat Evolved', but his interest as a 'fan' was caught

with the release of the latest offering: the ‘Halo Reach’ videogame. Subsequently, the ‘Halo’ universe has been explained through a range of graphic novels, animated movies and action figures. Kamil said he had three such graphic novels, which was quite an achievement, given their rare nature. I added that he had recently got an ‘Xbox’ video game console and was playing the games.

Going back to the conversation on ‘Star Wars’, I asked him to describe some of his paraphernalia. Kamil’s collection included ‘Star Wars Lego’, action figures and an array of DVD’s from the animated ‘Clone Wars’ series. In terms of this ‘Lego’ collection, he joked that if he were to sell it on ‘Kalahari’ his collection is so vast that he would get millions. Kamil, in retrospect, described that most of his fan interests had arisen through ‘Lego’. ‘Lego Batman’ and ‘Lego Indiana Jones’, for example, introduced him to these popular franchises. He remembers seeing a ‘Halo’ action figure and then ‘googling’ ‘Halo’, to also learn more about this exciting new interest, before becoming passionate over everything ‘Halo’.

Speaking about his friends at school, he shared that ‘Halo Reach’ was very popular, explaining that even younger kids would talk about these video games. Expressing my own feelings, believing that not many kids these days read comics that much, I asked Kamil if he though this was true. Kamil answered ‘yes and no’, explaining that at different schools kids are into different things. He explained that at his old school ‘St. James’, kids were mad about soccer, whereas at his new school ‘Pridwin’, kids had different interests. He described how a lot of the kids were ‘into’ classic comics like ‘Tintin’ and ‘Asterix and Obelix’ at ‘Pridwin’. I commented that it was interesting for me to hear this, as I also grew up on those titles. Talking about the new ‘Tintin’ movie, I asked Kamil if he believed this movie was reaching new audiences who had never read the comics. Kamil did not agree, explaining that it was generally fans of the original comics who went to see the new ‘Tintin’ movie and that those who did not know ‘Tintin’ would most probably prefer other films. Considering the possibility of the movie catching new audiences who would then become ‘fans’ of the original comics, Kamil thought this was a

possibility but that the movie had left out many of the big moments from the comic books that had made people ‘fans’.

On the topic of being a sports fan, Kamil admitted that he was not a regular soccer fan but understood it a lot more since coming to ‘Pridwin’. He was a big sports fan of other sports though such as cricket and rugby, and also described playing new sports at ‘Pridwin’ like hockey and athletics.

Discussing his television-watching rituals, Kamil explained that he had to always do his home work first before watching television, but that his parents did not really fight with him over watching TV if his homework was done. When they watched television he would use that time to play with his toys, or read, and sometimes would join them in their viewing of cooking programs or wildlife shows that he was also interested in. Talking about cartoons, Kamil remembered also watching ‘old school’ ‘Ninja Turtles’ cartoons. These days, as Kamil described, he watched a local drama called ‘The Wild’ as well as ‘The Big Bang Theory’.

In terms of fantasy dress up Kamil admitted to owning a ‘Star Wars Clone Trooper’ outfit that he would don every now and then when he was younger. As he explained, he still imagined being famous cricket players, such as ‘Dale Steyn’, when he played cricket with his friends.

Conclusion

“New technologies meant new audiences – and new relationships between artists and audiences. Movies were the country’s first mass medium after print. But although millions of viewers could have the same experience at the movies, they experienced it a few hundred at a time, in individual theatres. Radio was the first entertainment medium to enable a mass audience to have the same experience simultaneously. Even more than movies, radio gave audiences an intensely communal feeling, a sense of being part of something national, as well as a special intimacy with its stars. TV upped the ante by being as immediate as radio and as visual as the movies. Indeed, TV’s mesmerizing hold is something unprecedented. A major TV event is overwhelmingly a shared national experience, and a TV star is a celebrity

of a new order. When Lucy Ricardo has a baby, when 'Seinfeld' goes off the air, it's not something that's happening out there – it's an event in our homes and in our lives." (Porterfield 1998)

The influence and effect of popular culture on South African youths cannot be underestimated. My small study shows that to some extent youths and boys-to-men construct and inform their own identities through their associations with fan cultures and communities. In analysing the findings of my focus groups and interviews, it became apparent that audiences received, imagined and interpreted popular texts according to five particular themes. I have summarised these categories as, namely: 'Fandom: A Reality'; 'Family Television Politics'; 'Memory and Identification'; 'Fantasy'; and 'Textual Readings of both a General and Gendered Nature'.

Fandom: A Reality

Perhaps the most significant finding of my research has been that 'fandom' and 'fan' culture, is alive and kicking within the universe I mapped out in South Africa. My experiences as a child, that brought me close to obsession over my own 'fan' interests, was a reality experienced by my friends and peers, and to this extent, one that successive generations have shared. Cartoons such as 'Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles', 'X-Men', 'Dragonball Z' and 'Biker Mice From Mars' have been immortalised in the minds and imaginations of children around the world, and this is also true of South Africa.

As we 'imagined' ourselves as parts of larger audience communities, connected by our 'communion' of like-minded interests, to not only those we knew but to those who we did not and whom we might never even meet, we formed our individual identities through this multitude of 'fan' imaginings. This 'global communion' was also one that spreads across time and space, as newer genres of popular texts and newer interpretations of popular culture reached communities from different generations, in different contexts, in different countries at differing historical eras.

Evidence of this could be seen in the ‘commodification’ of obsession that was shared to be a common experience in the focus groups and interviews I engaged in. Respondents shared their obsessive collecting of paraphernalia that spanned from the school grounds as commodities of exchange and trade (collector cards, ‘Tazos’ and action figures for example), to their private lives at home, imprinted on everything from their bedding and curtains to the minds of their parents who spent fortunes to appease this insatiable ‘fan’ hunger (often on a conditional basis).

What became evident was that these earlier ‘fan’ interests were being replaced, or at any rate overtaken by, more dominant interests, such as those of sports fandom or academic interests. This was exemplified by the ‘fanboys’ focus group, where respondents cut our interview process short by rushing off to watch a ‘big game’ between ‘Manchester United’ and ‘Liverpool FC’, and similarly by the ‘scholar-fan’ and academic focus group, where some respondents left early to pursue their own pressing academic interests and needs.

The other finding is that fandom has a long lifespan. From my 12-year-old brother to the school learners, youths and young academics to men in their late 30s in the comic bookshop that I interviewed, it became clear that once a ‘fan’, always a ‘fan’ (though the subject/object of fandom might change). This was clearly the case even with Rodney et al’s disassociations from the ‘crazy fan’ concept.

Family Television Politics

As has been mentioned, Fiske (1987) outlines the patterns of power and resistance in family structures around television audience reception. These patterns often involved punishment and reward systems involving the television viewing of children. My own research has similarly found that male interests dominated television viewing rituals.

Female siblings often became ‘fans’ by association or by proxy as a result of the viewing rituals of their older brothers and fathers. Respondents in the ‘fangirl’ focus groups described becoming soccer ‘fans’ of particular teams because of the influence of their brothers. One particular respondent even described ‘the rules of the house’ that were created to prevent a ‘fighting for the TV remote’ amongst siblings. Other respondents described situations where siblings shared the same interests, often because they were of a similar age as in the example of the respondents who were twins in the ‘scholar-fan’ focus group, and thereby worked together to service the needs of their ‘fan’ interests in terms of viewing rituals and the collection of fan merchandise.

The experience of some former and contemporary Sacred Heart students, who are generally of middle class backgrounds, in instances where their family’s owned more than one television set, created a class dimension to the audience reading. These were respondents who no longer battled their parents for TV viewing rights (since the parents watched programs like the news on their own TV sets) but their siblings. Some respondents in the ‘new fans’ focus group experienced being bullied in this regard by their older brothers.

My own younger brother responded with his account of being influenced in his ‘fan’ interests by me. He described of his own experience of television viewing rituals and family politics that it was “best to finish ones homework” first and thereby avoid parental confrontations. This was a sentiment shared with respondents of the ‘new fans’ focus group.

Memory and Identification

Respondents in the focus groups and interviews, tended to interpret and ‘imagine’ particular popular texts through their own, often ‘subconscious’, as pointed out by Rodney, personalisation of these texts. As Jenkins explains:

"This process closes the gap between the character's fictional world and the reality of the viewer's own experience, effectively allowing the viewer to explore the genre of autobiography in reworking TV narrative." (1992: 173).

An example of this could be seen in the accounts of respondents who had suffered the loss of parents, who tended to identify and describe their love for the movie 'The Lion King'. This massively popular text deals with the lion-cub 'Simba' who loses his father 'Mufasa' in a stampede before understanding that death is part of 'the circle of life'.

Respondents who like 'Proteus' came from families of divorced parents, could relate to the character of 'Proteus' from the 'X-Men' texts that I screened during all of these focus groups. Besides my own admissions to relating to this character, this was a sentiment shared with respondents in the 'new fans' focus group. Many said they identified through the representation of 'Proteus's' strength and anger with a feeling of uncontrollable rage that comes with adolescence, the struggle for independence from parents and the feelings of being a 'monster' at that coming-of-age or turning point in one's life. The yearning for a father figure was a theme that struck home for many of the respondents.

Respondents at times also shifted their focus and interests from main characters to secondary ones and villains that they related to more, in a process known as 'moral realignment', as Jenkins explains:

"Perhaps the most extreme form of refocalisation, some fan stories invert or question the moral universe of the primary text, taking the villains and transforming them into the protagonists of their own narratives." (1992: 168)

This was true particularly of the character of 'Magneto'. Respondents not only identified with this militant character but also found themselves questioning his identity as a 'villain' entirely, particularly after screening the 'Sanctuary' (1995) episodes where 'Magneto' is weary of violence and wishes only to create a safe-haven for mutants on 'Asteroid M'. The screening of these particular texts also drew questions from other respondents as to the

whereabouts of primary characters that they ‘loved’ like ‘Cyclops’ and ‘Storm’. Jenkins calls this shift of interest from main characters to minor ones, ‘refocalisation’, (1992: 165) while the concern for beloved missing characters shows a closing of the gap between the world of the respondents and that of the ‘X-Men’ which Jenkins calls ‘personalisation’. (1992:173)

Other popular characters such as ‘Wolverine’, whom respondents remembered having idolised for his warrior-like bravery as children, were brought into question after I screened the ‘Proteus’ (1995) texts where ‘Wolverine’ is shown to be weak and having a paralysing fear of ‘Proteus’. While some questioned their continued love for ‘Wolverine’ in this portrayal, others respondents felt this text was refreshingly honest and showed that even the strongest characters amongst us had their own weak points. The ‘trippy’ and surreal nature of these ‘Proteus’ texts were so unconventional to the ‘X-Men’ world, that some respondents commented that the “writers must have been on acid”.

The childhood memories of these ‘X-Men’ texts and narratives, was an interesting topic of discussion when analysed against a retrospective contemporary experience of respondents. Respondents shared that they did not ‘get’ a lot of the themes and subtexts as children, particularly referring to the sexual innuendo of characters like ‘Gambit’, who was one of the more favoured characters. Respondents from all the focus groups also admitted that some of the kissing scenes in the texts that I screened would have made them feel very awkward as children.

Fantasy

‘Fantasy’ and imaginary role-play also played a big part in the ‘fan’ interests and the childhood memory of respondents. Sharing with the respondents my own experience as a young child of having the ‘Ninja Turtles’ as imaginary friends, encouraged respondents in the various focus groups and interviews to share their own ‘fantasy’ experiences. From running around in ‘Superman’ and ‘Spiderman’ outfits, to pretending to be sports stars like ‘Dale Steyn’,

‘Lionel Messi’ and ‘Cristiano Ronaldo’, this was an experience of ‘fan’ culture that all the respondents could relate to.

Respondents in the ‘scholar-fan’ focus group who admitted to dressing up as the different coloured characters of ‘Power Rangers’ for ‘Halloween’ parties, had this in common with a respondent in the ‘new fan’ focus group, who described going to a friend’s party as ‘Red Ranger’. My own brother also described donning the attire of a ‘Star Wars Clone Trooper’ for a similar ‘fancy-dress’ party. One of the respondents similarly described how one of his cousins, a girl, would insist on being the reporter ‘April’ whenever they used to play ‘Turtles’.

The re-enactment of epic fight scenes from cartoons, through the use of action figures is also an aspect of this interaction with ‘fantasy’. Many of the younger fans described their memories of bashing their toys together. The older comic fans remembered swapping comics. Discussing such ‘fantasy’ allowed respondents to engage and share in a discussion of imaginary realities, without the prejudice of being considered ‘crazy’. The innocent ‘imaginings’ of school kids are somewhat allowed and even encouraged in society, which is interesting considering that as older individuals such ‘imagining’ is frowned upon and associated with hallucinations and drug abuse. The imaginations of youths can therefore provide interesting insights into our own subconscious minds as adults, and the nature of repression. Perhaps these playful youthful ‘imaginings’ can also help us understand more about the ‘imagining’ of a religious nature, as well as that of national identities.

‘Textual Readings of both a General and Gendered Nature’

While not exclusive to the accounts of ‘fanboys’, this research has found that in general, males seem to take their ‘fan’ interests more seriously. They also experience this culture on a more introverted level, almost secretively at times, for fear of being considered ‘nerdy’ and in this way are also unwillingly adding to this very stereotype – although they do admit to having fond memories of sharing their ‘fantasies’ through playing together or swapping.

This is not to say that ‘fangirls’ do not share a love of ‘fan’ culture, but as was evident in the ‘fangirls’ focus group, girls are more open, playful and social around their ‘fan’ interests. As female respondents of the ‘fangirls’ and ‘scholar-fan’ focus groups demonstrated, there are also those girls and women that are openly ‘big fans’ and to suggest otherwise would be naive. School girls especially seem to engage in ‘fan’ culture through the oral tradition of ‘gossip’, and this often involves (at least at a school level) the creation of ‘watching cliques’. Girl learners also participated in collecting, much like boys, although the tendency seemed to be more directed towards ‘sticker albums’. Then again their were ‘fangirls’ who also played with ‘Ninja Turtle’ and ‘Transformer’ action figures, collected comics or participated in the collecting and trading of school ground commodities such as ‘Tazos’.

Powerful female characters in the ‘X-Men’ texts, like that of ‘Rogue’, were also idolised by respondents in the ‘fangirl’ focus groups, and preferred to other popular depictions of women as side-kicks and damsels in distress. These female respondents did not identify with all the female characters in the ‘X-Men’ though, describing the likes of ‘Jubilee’ and ‘Storm’ as ‘irritating’.

My research has attempted to depict South African ‘fan’ culture through the ‘imaginings’ and interpretations of these particular ‘X-Men’ texts by school boys and girls, who experienced these texts in the specific context of a post-apartheid South Africa. Being students at Sacred Heart during this period of nation building, where the rhetoric of a united ‘Rainbow Nation’ attempted to plaster over years of racial segregation and violence, created a unique dynamic as we as children began to form our own identities in this progressive schooling institution that was a ‘sanctuary’ from the harsh realities of a country in the process of transformation.

The power of television during this time (and for that matter the power of radio before it, as Porterfield reminds us) to create a shared national experience and influence amongst an ‘imagined’ audience community is at the heart of

this research. Although, as has been mentioned, the television set is a middle class luxury in South Africa, as a popular medium it reached the imagination of many generations. As children, the television spoke of societal narratives in a language we could understand, socialising us through popular texts.

In watching the ‘X-men’ texts again, and re-encountering the mutants as a ‘scholar-fan’, I was reminded of Frantz Fanon’s ‘wretched’. Of course, one cannot expect school learners or various types of fan groups to have read Fanon, but surely the text of the ‘X-Men’ spoke to them in a similar way. Narratives and characters from ‘Sanctuary’ and the themes of mutant nationalism, liberation and militancy recur – as does an idea of ‘the pitfalls of national consciousness’ – and these were noticed by the focus groups, although spoken about in a different and pre-theoretical language. In this light, understanding ‘imagined’ audience communities of popular texts like the ‘X-Men’ can help us navigate other larger national fictions.

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