Developing Mutational Identity Theory: Evolution, Multiplicity, Embodiment, and Agency

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Abstract

This article extends poststructuralist theories of the self, expanding the discursive possibilities for (re)creating identities. Building on intersectionality, crystallized selves, and identity as assemblage, mutational identity theory works to increase the available discursive resources for conceptualizing identity as kinetic, diffuse, embodied, and contextual. Developed through a cultural analysis of contemporary mutants, mutational identity theory consists of a four-part framework— evolution, multiplicity, embodiment, and agency. Traversing multiple lines of flight and articulation, mutational identity faces the paradox of the self as generative and symptomatic of the radically contextual nature of existence within the (post) modern-day conjuncture.

> Identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty.
>
> (Mercer, quoted in Du Gay, 1996, p. 1)

Judging from the ubiquitous presence of identity-related topics in communication research (i.e., gender, race, sexuality, etc.), it is apparent identity continues to be an issue worthy of investigation (and thus may be characterized as in crisis based on Mercer's observation). Jackson (2002) has gone so far as to declare identity as the "primary crucible" of the current century (p. 359).

Informed by poststructuralism, scholars have begun responding to this crisis of identity by offering increasingly sophisticated conceptualizations of identity and the processes of subjectification. These discursive theories of identity have each made contributions to our understanding of identity, tracing the relationships between our experiences of our selves and the language we have to constitute those selves. To use Butler's phrase, identity has been revealed as a "necessary error" (1993, p. 230), one that is enabled and limited by the discursive resources we have at our disposal. This article offers the metaphor of mutants, and its attendant vocabulary, as a pragmatic and pedagogical extension in this poststructuralist project. I begin by recounting recent theories of intersectional, crystalline, and assemblage identities, and distilling three challenges that remain for a discursive approach to identity necessitating further theories. Drawing on cultural studies and rhetoric, I turn to mutants in popular culture as a productive and heuristic metaphor for understanding identity in our time. From this cultural analysis, I construct a theoretical framework of mutational identity for interrogating contemporary identity work. The article concludes by exploring the power of mutational identity to overcome the challenges faced by discursive approaches to identity.

Identity Theory

In this section, after illustrating the difference between subjectivity and identity, I offer a brief sketch of identity as intersectional (Crenshaw, 1991), crystallized (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005), and assemblage (Puar, 2005). These three theoretical perspectives are productive forays into the "messiness of identity" (Puar, 2005, p. 128) and represent the recent increase and variety of transdisciplinary work in identity theory. Before looking at these three approaches, it is important to differentiate between subjectivity and identity. Subjectivities are "the vectors that shape our relation to ourselves" (Rabinow & Rose, 2003, p. xx), the positions we recognize as intelligible and offer as discursively possible within the current

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conjuncture. Alternately, identity denotes our relationship to ourselves. Identity is where our sense of self is continually (re)constructed among, over, and through various (and variously shifting) subjectivities. Although our immediate focus is at the level of identity, we cannot separate contemporary identity from various subjectivities that work to hail and subjugate individuals. From a Foucauldian perspective, "the self is both constituting and constituted, motivated by self-agency yet produced and created by historical and discursive forces" (Tracy, 2000, p. 114). Consequently, despite some lines of thinking in posthumanist theory, theories of identity must acknowledge the fragmented nature of the self without abandoning the self, its material conditions, or the desire for coherence (even if temporary and partially illusory; McKerrow, 1993; Zipin, 2004). In other words, it is possible to embrace the instability of identities along with their "made-up yet necessary character" (Gamson, 2006, p. 249).

The term "intersectionality" is often attributed to Crenshaw (1991) and continues to receive widespread scholarly attention (Phoenix & Pattynama, 2006). The term articulated an established and growing body of feminist work throughout the 1970s and 1980s by scholars such as Angela Davis, bell hooks, Patricia Hill Collins, and Audre Lorde, which sought to highlight the interlocking oppressions based on multiple facets of identity (Collins, 1998; Vakulenko, 2007). Over the past 25 years, the concept has been utilized, adapted, and extended in scholarship from a number of fields. For the purposes of this study, I am primarily concerned with the role of intersectionality as a theory of identity; however, I acknowledge it has been used in widely diverse and contradictory ways (McCall, 2005).

In terms of identity, one consistent quandary throughout intersectional scholarship is the level of analysis. Crenshaw's (1991) formulation of the concept consisted of "structural" and "political" intersectionality. Structural intersectionality refers to how "the location of women of color at the intersection of race and gender makes our actual experiences of domestic violence, rape, and remedial reform qualitatively different from that of white women" (p. 1245). Political intersectionality explains how inequalities often place women of color, as members of multiple subordinated groups, within competing political agendas. Political intersectionality has not received much attention during intervening years (Verloo, 2006). Conversely, structural intersectionality has received considerable attention (e.g., Collins, 1998). However, intersectionality has also been critiqued for its tendency to treat categories and identities as stable entities (Staunæs, 2003). Structural intersectionality, working at the level of social and cultural intelligibility, functions to name categories of subjectivity at the expense of identity. It represents specific subjectivities as static and unchanging over time or space, and it negates the role of the individual in navigating the intersections for political and/or everyday purposes.

Based on similar critiques, Vakulenko (2007) and Prins (2006) suggest the overemphasis on structural intersectionality is problematic and especially evident in U.S.-based research. Rather than a return to political intersectionality, Prins recommends a shift to "constructionist intersectionality" at the level of the individual, and based on a view of power as dynamic and relational. Prins advocates viewing identity not "as a matter of naming but of narration" (p. 281). This move embraces a subversive posture but is overly reactive. Prins's conceptualization largely overlooks structural intersectionality, and social subjectivities, which provide the discursive resources required to narrate one's self. In a move to reassert individual agency, a purely constructionist intersectionality ignores the cultural power formations exerting influence on, even if not overdetermining, identity. Vakulenko posits a moderate approach that interrogates both the individual level of identity construction and the structural level of power relationships, observing, "The inseparability of the individual identity from social structural factors is crucial in the contemporary understanding of the term 'intersectionality'" (p. 186).

Despite this expanded conceptualization of intersectionality, certain limitations still burden the theory and its applications. The dual-level approach allows for more interplay between categories of subjectivity and individual identity negotiation; however, this framework still relies on naming seemingly stable and discrete categories, such as race, gender, sexuality, and so on. These components are viewed as "separable analytics and can be thus disassembled" (Puar, 2005, pp. 127-128). Postcolonial work on hybridity challenges the stability of such subjectivities, as hybridity is "the dialogical re-inscription of various codes and discourses in a spatio-temporal zone of signification" (Kraidy, 1999, p. 472; Kraidy, 2002). Yet scholarship on hybridity is often theorized on the structural level (as an exception, see Ceisel, 2009) and "is generally understood as relevant to race and ethnicity" (Shugart, 2007, p. 119), neglecting other subjectivities or their intersections.

Further limiting the efficacy of intersectionality and hybridity is the tendency to use a "minoritizing view," treating intersectional identities as only of concern to a small fixed grouping of marginalized individuals (Sedgwick, 1990). This limitation is not inherent in these theories; indeed, Staunæs (2003) advocates for a majority inclusive version of intersectionality, and Shugart's (2007) analysis suggests hybridized ethnicities reveal the instability of both marginalized and dominant ethnicities. Such a "universalizing view" sees identity negotiation as "an issue of continuing, determinative importance in the lives of people across the spectrum of" privileged and marginalized identities (Sedgwick, 1990, p. 1).

The second approach to identity, Tracy and Trethewey's (2005) work involving crystallized identity, addresses some of these concerns with intersectionality. Moving to a multidimensional, instead of planar, theory of identity recognizes the interplay between discourses of subjectivity and identity negotiation practices when they claim that "crystallized

selves have different shapes depending on the various discourses through which they are constructed and constrained" (p. 186). Whereas intersectionality was largely static, crystals allow for a sense of movement, as organic crystals do "grow, change, alter" over time (p. 186; Richardson, 2000, p. 934). At the same time, crystals "may feel solid, stable, and fixed" (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005, p. 186), which prevents the continual shifting of identity from feeling schizophrenic. The crystallized self is an explicitly positively valenced concept, the complexity and shifting nature seen as contributing to the beauty of the self. Although some facets of the crystallized self may be constructed as socially marginalized, as a whole it remains constructed as valued and beautiful. The crystallized self is conducive to acknowledging the complex ways we are all always already marginalized and privileged in particular and contextual ways.

Similar to intersectionality, the crystallized self is limited in its ability to theorize how subjectivities also alter, grow, and shift through their interplay and through the discursive practices of identity negotiation. Various facets of the crystallized self may reflect and refract both external and internal influences, but there is no accounting for how that process reflexively alters and (re)constitutes the discourses by which crystals are formed. Where one's identity is shaped through the discourse of race, say Whiteness for example, one's performance of identity recursively shapes the discourse and subjectivities of whiteness. Furthermore, despite the technical invocation of movement, in mainstream parlance, crystals are thought of as solid, fixed objects as often as shifting entities. Consequently, "the messiness of identity" is once again "encased within a structural container" (Puar, 2005, p. 128). Building on intersectionality, the crystallized theory of identity contributes to the multidimensionality of identity but fails to fully mobilize a kinesthetic incarnation.

As a corrective, I offer Puar's (2005) work with the Deleuzian concept of assemblage, which, when applied to identity, contains the potential to characterize identity as spatially and temporally mobile. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), in all things

> there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification. Comparative rates of flow on these lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture. All this, lines and measurable speeds, constitutes an *assemblage*. (pp. 3-4)

So assemblage, "as a series of dispersed but mutually implicated networks, draws together enunciation and dissolution, causality and effect" (Puar, 2005, p. 127). These networks include "connections between bodies, such as bodies of thought, institutional bodies, and even the human body" (Rizzo, 2004, p. 336) and include "both rupture and

continuity, within which the discursive and the non-discursive (nonsensical noise, desire, and intensity) are implicated in the entire process of functioning" (Chen, 1989, p. 45). No longer viewed as an intersection or crystal, which can be viewed as stationary or stable, identity is a morphing collective composed of temporary nodes of connection.

Due to this composition, assemblages are always characterized by an inherent instability. While assemblages may be viewed as "functional conglomerations of elements" (Currier, 2003, p. 325), it is vital to remember that "the components of any encounter are multiplicities themselves, rather than unified objects" (p. 329). These components may achieve a "degree of individuation, stability, and endurance within an assemblage," but this is tenuously maintained and never an inherent quality (p. 331).

Displacing subjectivities and intersectional identities as "visibly, audibly, legibly or tangibly evident, assemblages allows us to attune to intensities, emotions, energies, affectivity, textures as they inhabit events, spatiality, and corporealities" (Puar, 2005, p. 128). Identity becomes process and a product of forming, disassembling, organizing, destabilizing, arranging, disarticulating, and always putting in motion (Chen, 1989, p. 46). In other words, identity as assemblage is "attuned to interwoven forces that merge and dissipate time, space, and body against linearity, coherency, and permanency" (Puar, 2005, p. 128). From this perspective, there can be no fixed notion of one's self, as identity is constantly being (re)constructed through lines of flight and articulation. Indeed, it follows there can be no fixed notion of what is human, much less a permanent conceptualization of subjectivities, such as race, gender, or sexuality (Rizzo, 2004, p. 334). As illustrated in posthumanist and cyborg theory such openness contains the possibility of radically altering consciousness, yet it also demands subjective dispersion and frustrates needs for connection and belonging (Haraway, 1992a, 1999).

Identity as assemblage embraces the instability and mobility of identity processes, yet it is not without certain limitations. Whereas intersectional and crystalline identities explicitly draw attention to the role of dominant power formations, assemblages make little distinction between the social and material antecedents of disparate forces, flows, energies, and lines of flight. "Power relations are very much at play within assemblages. They are, however, operational on an immanent level and do not function as an overarching structure, through which the component elements of an assemblage are ordered" (Currier, 2003, p. 328). Discursive formations are present and at work within assemblages, yet the power of these dominant discourses to organize experiences of the self is not privileged over other exertions of power.

Demoting the role and influence of dominant power structures in identity negotiation, while also dissolving categories of subjectivities, runs the risk of bolstering claims of identity-blindness in postidentity politics. Claiming that race, gender, sexuality, or any other category of subjectivity is no

longer applicable sets the groundwork for denying systemic oppression based on inequitable flows of capital and social resources along lines of identity. There may be no biological foundation for race (Ladson-Billings, 2000), gender (Butler, 1999), or sexuality (Foucault, 1990), yet the lack of a biological basis for these categories does not negate their power in our lives. As Martin and Nakayama (2006) explain concerning race, they are fictions, but they are real (p. 76). Scholars continue exploring the real material and economic consequences in the everyday lived experiences of individuals based on race (Frankenberg, 1993), gender (Sloop, 2005; Trethewey, 1999), and sexuality (Berlant & Warner, 1998; Yep, 2003).

I am not suggesting we jettison any of these theoretical approaches to understanding identity. As Sengupta (2006) reminds us, "Identities are minefields, and the mines have been lain by armies that have forgotten the map" (p. 634). To make our way through this terrain, we need every available theoretical tool, but we cannot afford to ignore the limitations of existing theories of identity. Rather, I recommend an integrative approach through a theory of identity that addresses the structural and individual influences on identity (re)construction without using static connotations of identity or subjectivity. This theory should address the crystalline nature and the mutually constitutive role subjectivities play with each other. Finally, it is imperative such a theory address the movement of flows, forces, and energies within identities.

Theoretical Limitations: Complicating the Discursive Self

Identity as intersectional, crystalline, and assemblage indexes the challenges and limitations of theorizing identity and highlights the overlapping (and contradictory) needs for multiplicity, coherence, movement, and temporality. There remain three problems facing those who view identity discursively prompting the need for further theorizing of identity. First is the tendency to focus on discourse, continuing to ignore the material bodies of subjects. Even those scholars who seek to acknowledge and work with the body are hampered by the reliance of academe on linguistic texts (Ashe et al., 1999). The body provides a "sensuous way of knowing," an embodied knowledge that cannot be accessed through symbol systems alone (Conquergood, 1991, p. 180; Hamera, 2002). Given the historical division between mind/body and the parallel binaries of masculine/feminine, rational/emotional, and so on, to deny or suppress the relationship of the material body to identity would further support current racist and patriarchal structures of domination (hooks, 1994, pp. 134-138). Any discursive approach to identity must explicitly address and implicate the material body in the process of identity.

A second challenge for discursive models of identity is a lack of practicality and applicability. Despite robust scholarship on identity, poststructuralist theories have failed to materialize in vernacular discourse (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005) or public policy (Squires & Brouwer, 2002; Verloo, 2006). As demonstrated by Tracy and Trethewey, much popular press literature and everyday conversations continue to speak of the self as a stable, unitary, true entity. For scholars who study identity, the challenge remains to develop strategies, vocabulary, and theories that not only engage the body but also members of the public in ways that make sense of their everyday cultural practices while challenging the true self–fake self dichotomy and its essentialist underpinnings (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005).

The final problem regarding a discursive model of identity stems from the limitations of any discursive system. As Burke (1945) has pointed out in his work on representative anecdotes, any inquiry will be bound by the presuppositions of the language system it uses (see also Crable, 2000). Concerning identity, I contend the current language, specifically the terms we have to discuss identity, is inadequate to represent our experiences of ourselves. This remains the largest exigency for developing new theories and models of identity and the need to further complicate available discourses to describe and explain our conceptions of self in ways that resonate with the embodied experiences of individuals. We need a vocabulary that more adequately and accurately symbolizes the ways we as individuals and collectives experience ourselves. Hybridity has offered some productive work on this front, such as Kraidy's (1999) concept of "glocalization." Still, hybrid identities are often focused on explorations of a singular subject position, such as ethnicity or race (Ceisel, 2009; Shugart, 2007). Such a project, while still discursive in nature, must also be grounded by the pragmatic, performative, and embodied facets of identity. Scholarship must seek to develop discursive resources that are useful not only theoretically but also practically in vernacular speech. I suggest using contemporary popular cultural visions of mutants, such as those found in the *X-Men* films, as a conceptual map of identity offers a pragmatic and accessible corrective to the academic elitism of traditional identity research while also utilizing a flexible vernacular vocabulary to account for the shifting, or mutating, characteristics of identity. The *mutant* metaphor is uniquely crafted to account for the embodiment of identity and is based in a pragmatic and generative language system.

Conceptualizing Mutational Identity

To theorize identity as mutational, I rely on the cultural analysis of two prominent popular cultural depictions of mutation, specifically the *X-Men* franchise and the television series *Heroes*.[1] The blockbuster *X-Men* films are based on the "best-selling comic book series in the history of the medium" (Baron, 2003, p. 52). Concurrently, *Heroes* has

amassed a dedicated following on NBC and, despite slipping in ratings after its acclaimed first season, has created a constant presence in the mediascape over the past 4 years through its online content between seasons. Both artifacts demonstrate the continuing cultural currency (and profitability) of mutants in mainstream culture and rely on a narrative conceit where human subjectivities and identities are bound only by the imagination. While I would argue the liberatory potential of such a plot exigency is far from realized in these texts, there remain discursive ruptures capable of transgressing dominant formations of identity theories and discourses. At present, my goal is to detail the characteristics of approaching identity as mutational and how this theoretical perspective integrates the benefits of intersectional, crystalline, and assemblage approaches. A mutational lens views identity as characterized by evolution, multiplicity, embodiment, and agency. Each of these facets of mutation possesses strengths useful in responding to contemporary problems identity theory faces.

Before moving into these four characteristics of mutants, it is important to specify the relationship between mutants as popular cultural phenomena and mutational identity as theory. In pop culture, mutation is a social phenomenon. Mutants—as discrete beings—never operate entirely alone; they exist in community and in relationship with other mutants. A mutational perspective of identity must also be drawn at this level of relationality. Mutational identity leads us to view identity and individuals as composed of multiple mutants or subjectivities. An historical individual is not simply a mutant; rather he or she is composed of a multitude of mutants—a team of subjectivities—each shifting and morphing, with his or her own power, and with unpredictable relationships to others. Identity is analogous to a team of mutants, such as the *X-Men*. Particular subjectivities may be represented by individual mutants, such as Storm (perhaps signifying education) or Cyclops (as gender). From this theoretical perspective, despite childhood fantasies, we are not each a specific superhero or metaphorically represented by a single mutant. Instead, our identity corresponds to *Heroes*, or the *X-Men*, as a collective of unique mutants/subjectivities who function as a unified and quarrelsome team.

Evolution

> Mutation—it is the key to our evolution. It has enabled us to evolve from a single-celled organism into the dominant species on the planet. This process is slow, normally taking thousands and thousands of years. But every few millennia, evolution leaps forward. (Professor Charles Xavier, *X-Men*; Singer, 2000)

> Evolution is an imperfect and often violent process—a battle between what exists and what is yet to be born.

(Dr. Mohinder Suresh, "Better Halves," *Heroes*; Kring, Arkush, & Hammer, 2006)

Mutation is inextricably linked to evolution, a fact both incredibly heuristic and problematic. It is heuristic in its invocation of potentiality.[2] It is problematic in its connotative ties to evolutionary theory. As used here, evolution's conceptual utility comes from its representation of change and movement—its futurity. I am not attempting to ground identity in genetic coding or biological essentialism; rather, my goal is to rearticulate evolution so as to symbolize the always-in-process nature of identity. Examples from genetics or biology function solely as metaphors and analogies, not literal equivalencies.

Despite one's stance on evolution versus creation, it is difficult to deny that the world and humankind have evolved, or changed, over the course of history. Evolution occurs for better or worse and often both simultaneously. Within the last generation we have moved, shifted, and evolved socially and genetically. Advances have been made in a variety of communication media and practices. We have evolved from writing on typewriters to computers to Blackberries. For some this evolution is experienced with joy and technological bliss, whereas others are forced along—fighting the whole way—with pencil in hand. A similar rate of change can be observed in our genetic coding. "In the most recent generation of the world's inhabitants, each base-pair in the human genome mutated, on average, 240 times" (Leroi, 2003, p. 16). In other (cliché) words, the only thing that stays the same is change. The rate of change may vary, but the process is constantly in motion—as are we.

To view identity as mutation is to acknowledge that it is kinetic. Identity is not static or stable; it shifts over time and space. Some of these shifts are slow progressions over the course of one's life. The relationship between the self and the subjectivities of age helps to demonstrate how identity evolves over time. One's identity as a 5-year-old is much different than his or her identity as a 35-year-old. Yet these shifts occur slowly, day by day, only marked at rare, culturally significant occasions. We are hailed differently at 6 than at 10, 13, 18, 21, or 29 and 364 days. We grower older minute by minute and day by day; in this sense, our aged subjectivity and the identities it helps to compose are constantly evolving. This process is slow, monotonous, and generally not actively marked as part of our identity—which is always in process and never fully stable or sedimented. Consequently, the daily shifts in age do not radically change our identity at each increment. The subjectivity of age is rarely an active part of our team of mutants.

At other points, evolution can speed forward. Some scientists have pointed to epidemics like the bubonic plague as evidence of evolution's ability to leap ahead in bounds (Simon, 1999, p. 127). For identity, this shift can occur instantaneously, such as when a loved one dies unexpectedly. When a child

loses a parent, one's identity is radically altered in a single moment. Butler (2004) has theorized that in these moments we are thrown beside ourselves; we "undergo a transformation the full result of which [we] cannot know in advance" (p. 18). This transformative process begins in a split second, spinning out in ways that cannot be predicted. In this example, one will still be hailed as child, as son, as daughter, yet those subjectivities have been transformed—they are no longer what they once were. To be hailed as a child, offspring, or progeny is now to be hailed otherwise than it was. The effects of this differential hailing cannot be predicted in advance, nor can we can anticipate how this altered subjectivity will influence, and be influenced by, other subjectivities.

Evolution varies in scale as well as speed. While some of these movements result in radical transformations of identities, there are also micromovements from moment to moment and context to context. In many ways this is similar to Derrida's (1982) concept of différance. Just as the meanings of signs are continually deferred and constituted through difference from other signs, so too are our identities. Our sense of self is partially based on differences from others and our exclusion from certain subjectivities. There are some mutants who just will not, or cannot, fight on our identity's team. As we are continually hailed and interpellated through ideologies and subjectivities, the meaning of one's identity at any given point in time or space is undetermined as one waits in anticipation of future hailings. The meanings of these differences and our identity as a whole are constantly deferred. Mutational theory accounts for the movements in and of identity at variable speeds along any number of paths. We, and our identities, are constantly mutating.

Grounded in poststructuralism, mutational identity theory is concerned with understanding the mutations, their contexts, and their meanings. Every identity is a momentary pause amidst the endless deferral and differences of subjectivities. Mutational identity requires attention to the paradoxically sedimented and temporary resting point of the subjectivities' mutations before identity mutates again. In this way, mutant subjectivities are products of mutation as well as part of the process of mutation. Viewing identity through this theoretical lens as mutational prompts the critic to ask: What are the relationships, confluences, and contradictions among mutations and identities?

Taken to its extreme, this constant reconfiguring of identity risks sliding into a Baudrillardian postmodernism, making the notion of a self untenable (Baudrillard, 1988; Best & Kellner, 1991). From an affirmative poststructuralist position, identity is characterized by motion and instability, yet—pragmatically—we must act *as if* we were stable. We seek to reconstruct preferred identities composed of the subjectivities that have served us well in the past and that consistently get along well with each other. We attempt to hang on to those identity formations that assist us in making sense of the world and our immediate contexts.

There are two primary benefits to be derived from applying these characteristics of evolution to mutational identity. First, identity is a process. The invocation of identity is always already one of movement, development, and evolution. To characterize mutational identity as evolutionary is not to imply that it is always moving forward, in some Darwinian, "survival of the fittest" model, toward a civilized ideal. Mutation and mutational identity do not necessarily move in a positive, beneficial, or even new direction. It is possible to mutate back to a previous position. Mutation can move, develop, or evolve in any direction, which leads to the second benefit. This theory has the power to address the movement of flows, forces, and energies within identities, and to trace the lines of flight and trajectories of the self (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987).

Multiplicity

When we embrace what lies within, our potential has no limit. The future is filled with promise, the present rife with expectation. (Dr. Mohinder Suresh, "The Fix," *Heroes*; Kring et al., 2006)

You see Logan, we are not as alone as you think. (Professor Charles Xavier, *X2: X-Men United*; Singer, 2003)

Deep within the Xavier's School for Gifted Youngsters, the base of operations for the *X-Men*, is a completely spherical room called Cerebro. In *X2: X-Men United* (Singer, 2003), Wolverine follows Professor X into Cerebro. They proceed down a narrow, dimly lit path into the center of the round, metal chamber. Using Cerebro, Professor X is psychically connected to all living people, both mutant and human. While Professor X is attempting to track down the mutant who attacked the president, he takes time to engage in a pedagogical moment with Wolverine. The world is displayed on Cerebro's curved walls surrounding and dwarfing the Professor and Wolverine. Continents are covered with white lights depicting all the humans across the face of the planet. The white lights transition to red ones in order to demonstrate the global mutant population. In this illustration, Professor X reveals the vast scope and potentials of mutation—there is literally a world of possibilities.

This world covers the wall of Dr. Suresh's apartment in *Heroes* (Kring et al., 2006). Instead of lights, known mutants are marked with push pins. While Professor X may have more lights on his globe than Dr. Suresh has push pins in his map, there is one significant benefit to the push pin method—they are all connected with string. This visual depiction recurs throughout the series and continually highlights the connected and relational nature of mutants.

There are not a mere handful of mutants living within a lone Westchester school; they do not exist isolated in Japanese

office cubicles. There are millions of incarnations spread across the globe, and they are always already connected to each other. Sometimes these connections are known; at others, the links are obfuscated. Regardless of how apparent the associations may be, to be a mutant is always already to be in relationship with other mutants. There exists a multitude of such mutants, and the potential for infinitely more mutations is ever present. This multiplicity and relationality are sources of power and of hope.

Within the theory of mutational identity, multiplicity operates on a number of levels. The mutational component of identity is attributable, in part, to the mutating of subjectivities on which identities are continually (re)constructed. This is what we might call internal or genetic mutation of identity. General categories of subjectivities remain, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on, yet any specific subject position therein is a house of cards, tenuously occupied. It can be, and often is, reconstructed, renovated, or blown over at a moment's notice. In other words, there are multiple subjectivities composing any one identity, and each subjectivity is itself already a mutating mutant.

As an exemplar, let us to turn to the character of Peter Petrelli in *Heroes* as illustrative of subjectivity. "Peter's specific DNA allows for a blend, like colors in a mosaic, resequencing itself to mimic the abilities of those around him" (Kring et al., 2006, "The Fix"). When he comes in contact with other mutants he absorbs their powers, much like a sponge. As a singular subject position, Peter changes and shifts as he gains greater understanding of and control over his mutant powers. In this regard, he is always in the act of becoming. Furthermore, the nature of Peter's existence is influenced by his interaction with other mutants/subjectivities. He is then permanently changed by the encounter and moves on to adapt to this new form of himself. For others, this influence may only last temporarily, such as with the character of Rogue in *X-Men*. For Rogue, she can absorb the power of other mutants by touching them; however, the effects only last a short time.

Thus, a mutational identity accounts for permanent and temporary mutations. These possibilities and potentialities attend to subjectivities within mutational identity theory. In terms of race, one may be hailed as White, but there are multiple possibilities for this singular subjectivity. What it means to be a White subject is contingent on temporal, spatial, subjective, and social contexts. In other words, just like Peter and Rogue, what it means to be White depends on other subjectivities with which Whiteness is interacting. The powers and weaknesses of being White change when it is coupled with being working-class in Detroit (Hartigan, 1997) compared to being gendered feminine in northern California (Frankenberg, 1993). In this case, the internal multiplicity—or various and varying nature of subjectivities—directs the critic to ask certain questions. For example, in relation to Whiteness, one might ask: What other mutants, or

subjectivities, are interacting with Whiteness within this storyline? How do these other subjectivities influence or transform Whiteness within this space and time? What history exists between them? How many of them are there?

There is also an external or phenotypic level on which we can view mutation as multiple. This is the varied and variable incarnations for identity that are outwardly visible, but based on combinations of the internal multiplicity. Multiplicity on this level can be seen in the mutant teams. To construct a team (identity), depending on the context, one may draw upon a wide number of mutants (subjectivities). The assembled identity exists for a period of time, but can always be reconfigured. Cyclops, Jean, Storm, and Wolverine work together to rescue Rogue in *X-Men*. Shortly thereafter, Jean, Storm, and Wolverine are joined by Magneto and Mystique in their fight to save Professor X, Cyclops, and the children in *X2: X-Men United*. During this mission, Iceman, Rogue, and Pyro are waiting in the wings, should they be called on to join the team. The third film introduces a bevy of mutant additions. Given the vastness of the mutant universe and potentiality of mutation, there is essentially no end to the possible manifestations of teams. Likewise, identities are affected by combinations of shifting subjectivities.

In terms of mutational identity, this construction can be affable and familiar, especially if the combination is frequently assembled. White and male are so often hailed together in mainstream discourse that the powers of Whiteness and patriarchy are often difficult to distinguish from one another. More often than not, however, these groupings are characterized by conflict. Subjectivities do not always work well together. One may exert power in direct opposition to another. In *X-Men: The Last Stand* (Ratner, 2006), Iceman and Pyro are repeatedly in conflict with one another. This tension culminates in the final battle where they fight each other with the powers of ice and fire, respectively. This mêlée is not unusual in identity work. Allen (1998) describes a specific academic context where, as a Black woman, her gendered and racial subjectivities were hailed in direct opposition. A mutational approach to identity is attuned to such tensions. In addition, mutational identity acknowledges the possibility for one subjectivity to overwhelm and consume another. In *Heroes*, Sylar often uses his powers to kill other mutants and to adopt their power as his own. In life, there are occasions where one subjectivity may obscure and overwhelm other subject positions, such as when Chatterjee's (2002) location as an immigrant from South Asia repeatedly makes her "suddenly native again," obscuring the other subject positions she occupies (p. 105).

The critic's work is to establish which subjectivities have been recruited for *this* team at *this* time within *this* spatial and historical context. He or she must also account for the interplay and relationships between these subjectivities and how each of them changes through their interactions. The power of mutational identity lies in its ability to draw the

critic's attention to the mutually constitutive nature of subjectivities and identities. This entails looking at more than how the lines of flight and trajectories of subjectivities intersect with one another or reflect and refract dominant discourses, but how they fundamentally and continually (re)construct each other. Subjectivities may be discrete, yet they can also overlap and blur into one another, as illustrated by Peter.

An additional power of this theoretical framework of identity is its universalizing perspective (Sedgwick, 1990). As configured here, mutation is incredibly flexible. As such, it is helpful in interrogating any number of identity configurations. It is grounded in the discursive process of identity construction, and from this view, we are all mutational. This is not to say that our mutations are the same or evenly matched. "No one completely escapes this mutational storm. But—and this is necessarily true—we are not all equally subject to its force" (Leroi, 2003, pp. 18-19). Within the social order, certain mutations can have devastating material and psychological effects. Still, every mutation is accompanied by power, power that can be forceful, scary, and unwieldy and power that can also be beautiful, comforting, healing, and even one's salvation. Professor X articulates this potential, claiming, "When an individual acquires great power, the use or misuse of that power is everything. Will it be for the greater good or for personal or for destructive ends? Now this is a question we must all ask ourselves. Why? Because we are mutants" (Ratner, 2006).

Mutational identity is grounded in a Foucauldian notion of power. As such, it reveals how power "is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another" (Foucault, 1990, p. 93). Thus, in each mutational identity, power operates at individual and collective levels, emanating through the confluences of subjectivities. Mutational identities are also characterized by potentialities of resistance, by the availability of engaging in subjective "practices that do not make sense within the available lines of intelligibility or discernment" (Biesecker, 1992, p. 357). Certainly mutational identities may be composed of subject positions that are largely deemed unintelligible, though this is not a prerequisite. Mutational identity is equipped to interrogate the practices of identities that are always already located within matrices of power and resistance. I address the role of agency in the use of these practices below. For now, the important point is that regardless of one's subject positions, there is worth, value, resistance, and power in that mutational location. For some adherents to standpoint theory, certain identities composed of marginalized subject positions possess more important or more valuable powers for critiquing dominant cultural formations (Collins, 2004). Mutation does not discount that view, though it does resist it as a stable universal axiom. Based on the characteristic of multiplicity, identity (which is both marginalized and privileged) must face the specter of being otherwise. Mutational identity demands individuals interrogate

what and how powers are afforded and utilized by identities in radically and contextually contingent ways.

Embodiment

> Not all of us can fit in so easily—you don't shed on the furniture. (Dr. Hank McCoy, a.k.a. Beast, *X-Men: The Last Stand*; Ratner, 2006)

> My body does things before my brain even knows what's happening. (Monica Dawson, "Fight or Flight," *Heroes*; Kring et al., 2006)

Biologically speaking, mutation occurs in the process of DNA replication (Simon, 1999). Some of these alterations affect a single nucleotide, whereas others change entire chromosomes. Leroi (2003) suggests that by modest accounts, the average adult has 295 genetic mutations carried in his or her genes (p. 355). Despite the recent mapping of the human genome, much work remains if we are to understand the language of our genes, not to mention the exceptions to the grammatical rules posed by mutations (pp. xiii-xv).

The connection between mutation and the genetic blueprint for the human body is not limited to scientific laboratories. Within the *Heroes* universe, mutation is most frequently tied to the body through genetic coding and the resident geneticist, Dr. Mohinder Suresh. However, the link between mutation and genetics is also represented in families of mutants, suggesting that mutation is passed from parents to children. For the *X-Men*, this connection is forged specifically through discussion of the X-gene. It is this gene that is responsible for mutations, and it is passed down through the male to the offspring (Singer, 2003). The possibility of a "cure" to suppress this gene creates the plot exigency for the third movie (Ratner, 2006). I offer this link to the body at the cellular level not to construct identity through biological essentialism but rather to demonstrate the intimate connection in cultural discourse between mutation and genetics and between identity and body.

Within popular culture, mutation often finds bodily expression. In some cases, mutations are clearly reflected in outward expression—the genetic mutation is phenotypically apparent. In the *X-Men* universe, Beast is a mutant with superhuman strength, agility, endurance, and speed. These bodily powers exist within a large frame covered in blue fur. The bodies of such mutants belie their mutant status. Others can often pass as human, yet even they demonstrate their mutation through their bodies. Beast remarks in the excerpt above about how easily Storm can fit in because of her ability to pass as a human African American woman. Still, when she uses her mutant powers to control the weather, her eyes become opaque. Jean Grey and Professor X, who have mental powers of telekinesis and telepathy, often display their powers via the gestures of their physical bodies.

In *Heroes,* as Hiro Nakamura manipulates time and space, he squints. For other mutants, power is not just reflected through bodily appearance or comportment. Their power is their bodies. These mutants, including Wolverine and Lady Deathstrike[3] from the *X-Men*, and Claire Bennet, Peter Petrelli, and Takezo Kensei/Adam Monroe from *Heroes*, have the power to heal or regenerate their body. Viewers watch as Wolverine is regularly impaled, cut, and shot in the head only to have his blood recede and skin mend. Claire jumps from heights to what should be certain death and then watches as her bones mend before her eyes. For all mutants, the body is not merely the container for their powers, but also its origin and conduit.

Turning to mutational identity, this attention to embodiment allows the theory to address a significant challenge for discursive theories of identity, namely, the complex relationships among the physical, material body and identity. From a poststructuralist perspective, the body operates (and is operated on) within larger discursive frameworks as it symbolizes multiple subjectivities and is itself constructed, hailed, and disciplined through discourse into being (Butler, 1993, 1999; Foucault, 1990). Foucault's (2003) focus on questions of power, knowledge, and subjectivity lead to his assertion that "nothing in man [sic]—not even his body—is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis of self-recognition or for understanding other men" (p. 360). Butler (1993) further claims there is no material body prior to discourse, but that matter is instead "a process of materialization that stabilizes over time to produce the effect of boundary, fixity, and surface we call matter" (p. 9). Despite the consistent attention to the body in work by Foucault and Butler, they are often criticized for a lack of attention to the physicality and materiality of bodies outside of discourse (Ashe et al., 1999; Shilling, 2001). This dismissal of the material, physical body as subservient to or wholly subsumed by discourse rests on the belief that we can only understand such materiality through discourse. The only way for a body to exist as a recognizable subject or intelligible object is to exist through discourse, as discourses of power are materialized "in and through the language which constitutes [them]" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 102).

Mutational identity acknowledges that through discourse, subject positions work to construct the body as intelligible. This perspective alone is insufficient for understanding the process of identity (re)construction. Mutational identity must account for the materiality of the body as container, origin, and conduit of subjectivities. As Zipin (2004) suggests, discursive social formations, including subjectivities, must come from somewhere—from some bodies—and are carried through such bodies down through time and across space to our current conjuncture. Mutational identity must attend to the relationships between the single physical body of an individual, the multiple and evolving subjectivities that exist in relationship to that body, and the social and physical bodies that preceded it. Mutational identity forces scholars to interrogate the body that "sheds on the furniture." In other words, the concrete body cannot be removed from discourse, but at the same time the body is not fully encapsulated by discourse.

In terms of identity, the relationship between discourse and materiality is dialectical in our everyday lives and should be in our scholarship (Wood & Cox, 1993). When concrete and discursive perspectives are dialectically applied to the body specifically, it can be "neither a *tabula rasa* nor a fully constructed site of contestation" (McKerrow, 1998, p. 319). For example, as a White queer male, my identity has various and contextual relationships with my material body. Mutational identity views the individual as sexualized, gendered, sexed, and racialized in simultaneous, interconnected, and contextual ways through both discourse and embodiment. The racial and sexed subject positions I occupy, while discursively constructed, are evidenced through my body, and it is in response to my body that I am hailed by Whiteness and maleness, just as my body is made intelligible by these hailings. The comportment of my body generally reveals my relationship with masculinity, whereas my connection with queer subjectivity is less often manifested through public bodily expression. Although these subjectivities hail and sculpt my body in particular ways, the materiality of my body also works to enable these interpellations with variable implications. Of these subjectivities, to be hailed as a queer subject carries the most risk for the physical, material body within the contemporary homophobic and heterosexist discursive formations of power (Yep, 2003). At the same time, the confluence of these particular mutant subjectivities within a single physical, material body offers a particular set of pedagogical constraints and opportunities (Zingsheim, 2008).

For critics adopting the mutational identity perspective, the connection between mutation and embodiment affords two opportunities. First, as highlighted, it allows a flexible discussion of the discursive and material body. Second, in light of evolution and multiplicity, mutational embodiment allows identity the opportunity "to feel solid, stable, and fixed" (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005, p. 186) at any given moment, yet without forcing identity into a "structural container that simply wishes the messiness of identity into a formulaic grid" (Puar, 2005, p. 128). Mutation is certainly tied to material bodies, but those are never physically or discursively stable entities.

Agency

We all imagine ourselves the agents of our destiny—capable of determining our own fate, but have we truly any choice in when we rise, or when we fall? Or does a force larger than ourselves bid us our direction? Is it evolution that takes us by the hand? Does science point our way, or is it God who intervenes

keeping us safe? (Dr. Mohinder Suresh, "Don't Look Back," *Heroes*; Kring et al., 2006)

You have more power than you can imagine, Jean. The question is, will you control that power, or let it control you? (Professor Charles Xavier, *X-Men: The Last Stand*; Ratner, 2006)

Across the popular cultural mediascape, we find that when it comes to agency and mutation, individuals cannot control it, and neither can science. In *X-Men,* Magneto attempts to control mutation by creating a machine to trigger mutation in humans. He tests it on Senator Kelly, whose body rejects the imposed mutation and dies. In *X-Men: The Last Stand*, one of the first scenes introduces Angel as he works to cut off his mutant wings. A few scenes and 10 years later we find Angel and his wings have grown as he jumps out of a high rise and flies away from the cure. The entire third installment is set up around this purported cure for mutation, another attempt to control mutation. Just before the credits role, the power of this cure is undercut as we see a "cured" Magneto regaining his mutant power.

Through the lens of mutational identity, our identities exist within larger systems of identification and subjectification that individuals cannot control. We are embedded in discourse and while we may hope for—and even achieve a modicum of—influence over our location within the discursive frameworks that hail us, we cannot achieve full agency over them or ourselves within them. "The discursive condition of social recognition *precedes and conditions* the formation of the subject: recognition is not conferred on a subject, but forms that subject" (Butler, 1993, pp. 225-226). In discussing gender, though equally applicable to other subjectivities, Butler (2004) describes it as "a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint" (p. 2). Each mutant subjectivity is accompanied by its own set of boundaries. Gathered together within identity, these limitations multiply exponentially as they form a shifting matrix of overlapping, distorting, reinforcing, and contradicting constraints. Simultaneously, this matrix produces the excesses, fissures, and breaks necessary for improvisation and resistant practices, prompting Campbell's (2005) observation that "subjectivity and agency are anything but simple or self-evident" (pp. 3-4). This matrix restrains the intelligibility of improvisational discursive practices and the subjectification achieved therein. Yet it is from the same matrix resistance materializes, for it is "antecedent to those subjects who, in inhabiting that space, are the means by which resistance obtains the constitution of a practice" (Biesecker, 1992, p. 357). Subjectivities, even transgressive ones, are the effect and articulation of force relations (p. 357).

This is not to say all subjects are void of agency and their practices overdetermined. In Biesecker's terms, "the deliberate intending subject whose acts, though made possible by the social apparatus or field, cannot be reduced to the mere playing out of a code" (1992, p. 358). As individuals, we cannot control the process of mutation; however, to a certain extent, individuals possess some agency over their use of mutant powers. In the *X-Men* films mutants learn to control their powers. For example, Iceman controls when he chooses to manipulate temperature and ice. Managing one's mutant abilities is evident in *Heroes* when Nathan Petrelli chooses to fly, often as the last and only option. In applying mutational identity theory, this might direct critics to analyze how people exert agency over their gendered and racial identity online where these subject positions are not overdetermined by bodily performance. This theoretical foundation also illuminates how certain subjectivities are expressed solely by choice even in embodied contexts. For example, while one's identity may include a faith-based subjectivity, to utilize that mutant team member publicly within a classroom is often a conscious choice.

The appearance of agency can be slippery. At times, mutants can unconsciously use their powers, such as when an agitated Storm causes overcast skies. On a grander scale, in *X-Men: The Last Stand,* when rage overtakes Phoenix, leading to destruction, assigning agency over her actions becomes questionable. Accordingly, a mutational identity perspective is attuned to the limited agency one has over the effects and implications of his or her subject positions. Gingrich-Philbrook laments that despite his reluctance to reproduce masculinity, he must participate in such a process "for much remains at stake: survival, desire, communicative intelligibility" (1998, p. 206). Agency and subjectivities are "constituted and constrained by the material and symbolic elements of context and culture" (Campbell, 2005, p. 3).

For most mutants, exerting agency over their own powers is a learning process. When we first meet Ted Sprague in *Heroes*, his mutation kills his wife because he cannot control emitting radiation. Over time, he learns to remain calm; when agitated, his radiation often flares. Others never achieve that level of control. In *X-Men* (Singer, 2000), Rogue is described as "incapable of physical human contact, probably for the rest of her life." Whenever her skin touches another person, she absorbs their life force. Her inability to control this power poses significant challenges for her romantic relationships—her kiss could kill. This parallels the way mutational identity views specific subjectivities as wholly out of the individual's grasp. For example, in embodied contexts, those who signify as White cannot control their interpellation by Whiteness or the powers and privileges socially afforded based on skin color (Warren, 2001).

Mutants may not have control over the process of mutation, but they have variable agency, through contextual improvisation, in using their mutant abilities. As these examples show, the control is not complete, but neither is it fully absent. Agency is, as Campbell argues, "perverse, that is, inherently, protean, ambiguous, open to reversal" (2005, p. 2). Mutational

theory applies this nuanced position to identity work. In some contexts, we have a considerable amount of control over the expression of our identities, but we can rarely control how those expressions are interpreted. We cannot control the effects of our subjectivities and their mutant powers, only how we deploy them. In terms of subjectivity and agency, this deployment is learned (p. 6), and we sometimes exert force uncontrollably. This mutational perspective suggests that in any study of identity, scholars must attend to the contextual matrix of constraints on subjectivities as well as the tactical and strategic improvisational performances of subjectivity.

Mutational identity draws upon these four characteristics of agency, embodiment, multiplicity, and evolution as grounding touchstones in any analysis of identity. As demonstrated in the metaphoric examples in popular culture and in the academic illustrations, how these themes are constituted is radically contextual. As a result, the theory offers a flexible approach to the extraordinarily kinetic and mutable subject of study. The adaptability afforded by this theoretical approach is not its only power. Accordingly, I conclude this article with a discussion of benefits that accompany this theory.

The Power of Mutational Identity

To reiterate, the power of mutational identity is not its ability to vanquish the theories that came before it. Mutational identity does not negate or discount the identity theories delineated earlier. Instead, it builds on the insights offered by theories of intersectionality, crystalline, and assemblage identities, integrating their complementary strengths through a unified framework and contributing a flexible, pragmatic vocabulary to identity scholarship.

If there are villains in this story of the self, they exist in the three challenges to discursive models of identity. Poststructuralist theories of identity must account for the material bodies of subjects, applicability in everyday life, and the constraints imposed by existing linguistic systems. Mutational identity is well equipped to respond to these challenges. As discussed earlier, mutation is inherently linked to the embodiment of identity. To discuss mutation is to acknowledge its effects and connection to the material body of subjects. It is also through the body that mutational identity is witnessed, as we are hailed by multiple and particular subject positions based on the signification of material bodies. At the same time, our physical bodies come to matter through their interpellation by intelligible subjectivities. Approaching identity from this dialectical perspective, the critic addresses the complex relationships between embodiment and identity.

Mutational identity is also positioned to address the need of identity theory to be practical and applicable to everyday life. Although it builds on previous theories of identity, mutational identity is grounded and theorized through popular cultural formations. Mutants proliferate within today's cultural imagination. According to Google, the term "Mutant"

currently appears in 52.8 million websites as of October 9, 2009. Mutants take shape in the form scientific anomalies, old television shows, self-identified bloggers, and pizza-loving, crime-fighting ninja turtles, among countless other positively valenced forms. Furthermore, the ubiquity of mutants in the media landscape offers possibility and potentiality. The powers offered by mutation do not depend on radioactive accidents or alien births. It takes only a random flip of a genetic switch. In pop culture, anyone can become a mutant, but what they choose (and are able) to do with that mutation remains to be seen. Mutational identity theory offers the flexibility and mutability to address the broad spectrum of identity work accomplished by historical individuals on a daily basis. Drawn from cultural discourse, mutational identity possesses more cultural currency than existing poststructuralist theories and vocabularies of identity and is uniquely positioned to apply to everyday experiences with the potential to be taken up in vernacular discourse.

Perhaps the most formidable challenge to any identity theory is the limiting power of language systems. Any symbolic system is ill-equipped to fully represent lived experience, yet dominant discourse also functions to delimit the bounds of intelligibility. Using mutation opens up new avenues for understanding the discursive and embodied components and potentialities of identity as experienced by individuals. Mutational identity, deploying the language of science fiction, genetics, comic books, and fantasy, reconfigures and diversifies linguistic options when it comes to symbolizing and imagining the process of identity (re)construction. As a terministic screen, there are limitations and obfuscations as the nature of the terms directs our attention away from certain areas (Burke, 1966, pp. 44-47). Still, the terministic screen of mutation directs our attention to areas of identity work that are not sufficiently addressed by existing theories. Although this case can be made for any identity theory suggesting the adoption of new vocabulary, I contend that mutation has a unique advantage. Burke claims that our "observations about 'reality' may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms" (p. 46). The choice of mutation and the attendant terms of evolution, multiplicity, embodiment, agency, mutant, mutating, powers, and so on, offer boundless possibilities of imagining ourselves otherwise. This terministic screen suggests conceptual flexibility; it assumes the potential to morph and spin out into that which has only to be imagined.

The power and benefits of mutational identity are particularly useful given the contemporary historical moment. Mutants now exist within the realm of the always already possible. In this day and age, living in a media-saturated culture, imagining ourselves as mutants requires little effort. The political homologies between mutants and marginalized individuals persist as both groups continue fighting for civil rights. On the big screen, Jean Grey testifies before Congress for mutant rights. In life, affirmative action policies are struck

down by the U.S. Supreme Court. LGBTQ rights groups continue lobbying Congress to pass the Employment Non-Discrimination Act and to repeal the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy. This cultural resonance is not limited to marginalized groups (Wein, 2005). The mutant superheroes of popular culture are all outcasts, struggling to reconcile their differences, construct a family of their own, and come to terms with deep feelings of alienation (DeFalco, 2006). In today's world, we are all mutants.

While we may not be able to foresee with certainty the shapes of our mutations, we can count on the embodied experiences of multiple evolutions wrought with potentiality to be other than we currently are, other than we have yet to imagine. This is the politics of hope and politics of difference on which mutational identity is premised—politics that demand grounding in practice (Freire, 1992/2006, pp. 2-3). As an approach, mutational identity is committed to a "critical democratic imagination," which provides "a language and a set of pedagogical practices that turn oppression into freedom, despair into hope, hatred into love, doubt into trust" (Denzin, 2006, p. 332). The struggle then is not to find ourselves, as so many have sought to do, but rather to mutate with awareness into embodied practices that (re) create ourselves (and by extension our communities) in ways ever more just and ever more variable. Mutational identity offers a theory adept at plumbing the multiple, kinetic, and material levels of subjectivity and identity, representation and reality, and power and resistance. This is admittedly a hopeful position. It is precisely this hope that gives mutational identity its critical edge, its refusal to settle for what is already visible, and its commitment to continually marshal a protean agency to reflexively reshape the discursive conditions of our being.

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Notes

1. I have chosen to limit the scope to natural born (human) mutants in order to facilitate the uptake of the theory by individuals and maintain theoretical precision. These two texts center on the experiences of human mutants. This scope does not include texts depicting animal mutants (*Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles),* cyborgs such as *Batman* or *The Bionic Woman,* aliens (*Superman* and *V*) or alien abductees (*The 4400*). This also excludes superheroes who achieve their powers by accident, such as celestial or arachnid radioactivity (*Fantastic Four* and *Spiderman,* respectively).

2. Evolution is not bound by what exists in the realm of the possible, of what is existent in the present and "linked to presence" (Muñoz, 2006, p. 11). Instead evolution is more accurately understood as grounded in potentiality. Muñoz explains that potentialities, "while they are present they do not exist in present things" (p. 11). Potentiality is concerned with the horizon, what is yet to be, and futurity. Evolution directs our attention to potentialities—to what may come.

3. In the interest of theoretical precision I am limiting the focus of this current discussion to mutation. Admittedly, this choice excludes much work in cyborg and posthumanist theory (see Haraway, 1992a, 1992b, 1999). Wolverine and Lady Deathstrike both have the mutant ability of rapid healing and regeneration, a fully embodied mutation. Subjected to government experiments, metal was grafted onto their skeletons creating cyborg bodies. The possibilities of mutation to uniquely enable cyborg subjectivity are intriguing, yet they are fodder for a separate and subsequent study.

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Bio

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