In this essay, I intend to apply disability studies to the X-Men movie trilogy produced by Bryan Singer and 20th Century Fox: namely, the movies X-Men, X2: X-Men United, and X-Men: The Last Stand. I will begin by defining disability as a social construct, that is, a concept developed in a context whereby human variation is not treated respectfully. I will list the ways in which impairment has been improperly treated and I will cite examples in each of the X-Men movies in order to show how the X-Men universe relates to our reality. Then, I will illustrate how movie characters serve as archetypes, making manifest the ways in which people with disabilities might react to discrimination. I will conclude by arguing how compelling and important an analysis of this movie franchise might be from the disability studies perspective.

There is a common misconception that disability ought to be understood solely through the application of the medical model. That is, disability is often regarded as a biological limitation or illness isolated in the individual. Under the medical model, disability is understood relative to a social standard for what is normal, for disability is that which deviates from what is socially accepted as normal. However, the criteria for determining who is normal and who is other are difficult both to pin down and to justify as essential or self-evident.

Disability studies can bring to bear on these concepts a new theoretical framework whereby disability is taken to be not a biological given but a social product. Rather than being located solely in the individual, disability identifies human variation that has been marginalized by people who are comfortable with perpetuating an unjust
social context. While people do have impairments regarding vision, mobility, hearing, and so forth, a society that treats these impairments as deviations and fails to accommodate persons with these impairments contributes to the development of the concept of disability. The medical model of disability only further reinforces the myth of disability insofar as this model is employed in order to excuse social institutions and their members from removing physical, legal, and attitudinal barriers that marginalize others. Therefore, in this paper when I use the term disability, I am referring to the barriers to which human variation is subject and when I employ the term impairment I am referring to the variation itself, the mutation. The purpose of this paper is to explore disability in X-Men, which means I will be exploring reactions to mutation and how those reactions correspond to the reactions to impairment we find in our own history.

I have taken interest in X-Men because the mutations portrayed in this fiction can be fairly assessed as disabilities, for they are genetic differences which the social context fails to accommodate and instead treats as deviance from what is normal. Strategies that denizens of the X-Men universe employ for dealing with mutations are largely mechanisms of control, involving surveillance, experimentation, extermination, and rehabilitation. All of these strategies surface in the history of people with disabilities, for once difference is constructed as deviant, it becomes something which ought to be managed or effaced.

Mary Douglas argues that when cultural contexts are faced with differences that challenge their notions of normalcy and order, they tend to translate “irremediable anomaly…not as neutral difference, but as pollution, taboo, contagion”. There are different ways in which a society can respond to anomaly, all inappropriate as long as
anomaly is regarded as taboo. I will illustrate several responses and cite examples from both reality and the fictional X-Men world.

One cultural practice for dealing with taboo, according to Douglas, is to reduce ambiguities to absolute categories. Michel Foucault echoes her point when he talks about the garden of species that developed throughout modern history as a result of the struggle to categorize madness. Categories of identification can be employed as a system of surveillance whereby those who are other are made known and watched carefully. The purpose of reducing differences to fixed labels is to control the threat that these differences pose. Human variation disrupts comfortable concepts like humanity and normalcy. Therefore, systems of identification cast aside all that is other to these concepts and keep these differences under control. An example of the use of classification systems to survey and to oppress would be when people labeled mad have been institutionalized, a phenomenon Foucault calls the period of “The Great Confinement”. Moreover, classification systems have developed in North America for grading intelligence levels and for identifying people with developmental or learning impairments. Stephen Jay Gould argues that intelligence is immeasurable yet testing has been used historically in order to rank intelligence and to justify the ill treatment of those who scored low when tested. In both this case and in the case of madness, these categories of persons were associated with moral deficiency and were therefore feared and controlled.

In the first X-Men movie, Senator Robert Kelly leads the charge to pass the Mutant Registration Act, legislation which would require mutants to be identified and registered so to control the threat that they might pose. Senator Kelly asks how
government is expected to stop girls who can walk through walls from robbing banks or men with telepathic abilities from jeopardizing people's free will: "Mutants are among us. We must know who they are and most of all, what they can do". Kelly simplifies the problem by comparing it to gun legislation: "All I see are weapons in our schools". Through this analogy, Senator Kelly makes clear that he regards mutants as dangerous, which is why they ought to be registered just as guns are. In response to the registration initiative, Jean Gray makes the following point: "mutants who have come forward have met resentment, hostility, or violence". Indeed, people in this fictional world do not necessarily hide their abilities because they have suspicious or criminal intentions; rather, they fear persecution and intolerance.

According to Douglas, another cultural practice employed in response to anomaly is elimination. Studied by Adrienne Asch, prenatal screening and counseling heavily influence parents’ decision-making processes when they are carrying impaired fetuses. That is, fetuses that are determined to have Down’s syndrome, for instance, are cautioned against and often terminated on the basis that a child with Down’s syndrome would suffer or parents with children who have Down’s syndrome would be burdened. Disability advocates argue that genetic screening and selective abortion are practices which imply that life with impairment is not worth living. The most extreme example noted by Marta Russell would be Nazi Germany where people with impairments comprised part of the category of undesirables, those who were considered inferior and so were subject to genocide.

Magneto, a main character in the X-Men films, compares the *Mutant Registration Act* frequently to initial practices carried out in Nazi Germany, when undesirables were
forced to register with the government and this system of identification was eventually employed for the purpose of genocide. His fears are realized in the second film, when Colonel William Striker develops a surveillance system that he intends to use to destroy all mutants in the world. He regards human variation as dangerous and believes that the only way to deal with this danger is to identify the threat and to annihilate it. In the examples I have cited in real life as well as the examples in X-Men, difference is rendered either a threat or simply not preferable and extreme methods are employed to restore order and to shut out all that is other.

Another category for responding to anomaly inappropriately is to treat impairment as an illness that requires rehabilitation or curing. Thomas Szasz argues that mental illness is a myth invented by psychiatrists and employed as justification for their profession, for psychiatrists are responsible for managing the behaviours of people who do not conform to social norms. While a biological disease is not actually locatable in the human psyche, psychiatrists nevertheless perpetuate the myth that deviance can be cured through medicine and discipline. Henri-Jacques Stiker makes a similar point when discussing people with physical impairments, arguing that the typical response is the push for rehabilitation. Such a response is a way of fixing people, of making them normal, and so is built entirely on the premise that disability is an inadequacy.

In the third X-Men installment, we see this particular response. According to Senator Warren Worthington II, “These so-called mutants are people just like us. Their affliction is nothing more than a disease, a corruption of healthy cellular activity. But I stand here today to tell you that there’s hope…I offer a cure”. For Senator Worthington, mutants can be fully human once they have been cured of their affliction. Here, as it is
in the real world, anomaly is portrayed as a personal tragedy, a burden that ought to be lifted, an illness requiring an antidote. When asked whether it is cowardice to want to escape not her mutation but the persecution she faces for being different, one character, Aurora Monroe or Storm, responds “They can’t cure us. Want to know why? Because there’s nothing to cure. There’s nothing wrong with us”.

So far I have characterized responses to anomaly. Cultural responses, however, do not adequately measure up to all that disability is. People with disabilities are capable of responding in turn, that is, of reclaiming their mantle and redefining themselves. Casting people with disabilities in the role of the victim does them a further injustice, for it does not provide the space for them to tell their own stories and so does not enable them to shed the labels that have been imposed upon them. I will therefore let the characters of X-Men speak for themselves. That is, I will focus on key characters in the story and will apply a disability studies lens in my analysis. While they may be fictional, they are complex and interesting characters, archetypes that people with disabilities might aspire to be, develop pathos for, or relate to. How they incorporate their differences into their identities and how they react to social and cultural limitations can make clear the principles and ideas that are integral to disability studies.

Rogue (named Marie in the film) has the power to drain people’s lives when she touches them. As a result, she is incapable of physical human contact. Her impairment profoundly affects her romantic life as later movies depict the development of her relationship with Bobby Drake, or Iceman. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine what life is like for a teenage girl who is incapable of kissing her boyfriend. Her difficulties with relationships and the alienation she feels in relation to those who are afraid to touch her
are clear in the first X-Men film, when she typically responds to these situations by running away. The treatment to which she is subject affects her identity, for someone who constantly encounters fear or worries about human contact could certainly come to be withdrawn or insecure. In the first film, Rogue and Wolverine have a conversation about their original names, Marie and Logan, names that they have left behind while fleeing from their respective pasts. Both characters recreated their identities with names that connoted solitary existences. This scene makes clear that these characters have redefined themselves according to the intolerance they have encountered in their lifetimes.

Wolverine or Logan has the ability to regenerate, and so he can heal from wounds and the effects of old age. He has a metal grafted to his skeleton, including retractable claws, thanks to surgical procedures that were performed against his will. This character experienced a long-standing history of being subject to exploitation and abuse because people took advantage of his mutation. In X2: X-Men United, Colonel Striker justifies the human experimentation that took place by claiming that Logan was always an animal, that is, inferior to human beings and therefore deserving of the kind of treatment he endured. Logan incorporates this treatment into his identity, living a solitary, untrusting life, acting feral and vicious when threatened. He seems to redefine himself, however, when living in community with others. When he is taken in by others like himself, people who are also disadvantaged in their social context and so can relate to him, he develops the capacity for relationships, such as his paternal bond with Rogue or his romantic feelings towards Jean Gray. He is not the only character in the X-Men movies to be exploited: Jason Striker is subject to his father's aspersions, while Warren
Worthington III is able to resist his father’s intentions to have him cured. These characters, especially Logan, demonstrate the choice that people in similar situations have: when faced with gross mistreatment, made to feel inferior and regarded not as human but as lab rats, individuals can either get lost and let the injustice become part of their identities or they might eventually find themselves empowered enough to resist.

While Mystique, a shape-shifting villainess, reveals little in the films about her identity and back-story, what she does reveal indicates that she is a strong and complex character. She proves in all three movies that she is clever, always singlehandedly responsible for furthering her consort Magneto’s plans, and she proves to be formidable in battle. When referred to by her name, Raven Darkholme, she retorts that she does not respond to her slave name. She therefore regards the world as a place that has tried to restrain and control her because of her uniqueness. It is for this reason perhaps that she unabashedly displays her mutation, showing off her blue skin unclothed, retaining her strikingly red hair and serpentine yellow eyes. Her reptilian appearance and her role as a villain might render her ill-equipped to be an inspiration to disability studies, for often in film people with disabilities are portrayed as inhuman, unlike ‘us’ because of their differences. Mystique, however, has a firm purpose for being startlingly different. She is proud of her mutation. She does not need to be seen as typically human to be understood as human. Instead, she disrupts our common conceptions and definitions. She compels us to open up the boundaries we place around humanity and also to question how diverse humanity might be. Indeed, in X2: X-Men United, when asked why she maintains her appearance when she can look like anybody she wishes, she responds “Because we shouldn’t have to”. When we are forced to reconsider what
humanity might include, we might find that disability is not necessarily an aberration or an ugliness, but can also inspire awe. Confirming this, Magneto laments when Mystique is forced to be ‘cured’ of her mutation in *X-Men: The Last Stand*: “It’s a shame. She was so beautiful”.

Charles Xavier, often referred to as Professor X, a man with powerful telepathic abilities, is the moral compass of all three films. He represents what might be the best option for mutants by offering a school for gifted children. He provides a sanctuary for people shunned by the world, where they can belong to a community of others like themselves. Students participate in regular schooling and take additional classes in order to focus on their mutations. The kind of life he offers may be ideal for people with disabilities: participating in community with others who share their difficulties, feeling included while at the same time not having to deal with all the accessibility barriers, both physical and attitudinal, that a society might still cling to. This place is not an institution but is instead a school, accessible housing, a community, and a range of career opportunities.

Spearheading the project is the professor, a tempered, erudite man who merits respect from his students, teachers, and even enemies like Magneto. The following is said of him: “We live in an age of darkness, a world full of fear, hate, and intolerance. But in every age there are those who fight against it”. Unlike his old friend Magneto, Professor X fights by creating a space for people with disabilities to thrive, and he fights by demanding that the world around him becomes accepting and inclusive. When he encounters the professor in *X2: X-Men United* kidnapped and exploited, Erik asks “Still fighting the good fight, Charles? From here it doesn’t look like they’re playing by your
rules”. Erik’s words properly characterize this character, a man who maintains his integrity and continues to react to oppression in a peaceful, organized protest, no matter what is thrown in his direction.

It is interesting to note that this character uses a wheelchair. While his physical impairment is never paid heed to in the movies, the chair is somewhat emblematic, almost an extension or symbol of the character, such as when Magneto touches his chair in *X2: X-Men United* to say good bye or when all that remains of the professor in *X-Men: The Last Stand* is his chair. In other words, the chair has been taken up as part of Professor X’s identity, not something to which he is bound.

Professor X has formidable mutant powers and he is a moral authority for all the X-Men characters. Granted, he has poignant absences from each movie: he is rendered unconscious when enemies tamper with a machine he uses, then he is kidnapped so that his powers can be exploited, and he is finally killed in a dramatic faceoff with Jean Gray, who cannot control her powers. These absences, I hold, do not diminish his central role in the mutant community, for any time he is taken out of the game his companions must decide how they will act without having him as a safety net. It is therefore the case that whenever he is absent, other characters must decide how to fill the vacuum he leaves behind. Charles Xavier is a powerful character not despite his disability but because of it, that is, because he developed an ethically sound and strong reaction to the oppression that he faced in his life due to his mutation.

The task of analyzing popular, exciting movies might seem trivial. Indeed, it would be dishonest of me not to admit that the X-Men films are favourites of mine and that I took joy in writing this essay. Nevertheless, I would submit that my analysis was a
sincere academic exercise and not simply a way for a comic book fan to indulge herself. I intended to take advantage of the popularity of the film franchise in order to bring disability studies to a general public.

Disability is usually on the fringes of popular culture. If it is ever in film, it is not typically portrayed with dignity. Characters tend to be villainous whose impairments are considered deformities, symbolizing a lacking in or an aberration against humanity; or they are victims caught in tragic circumstances whose impairments keep them from living fulfilled, happy lives. This is not so in the X-Men universe. Indeed, disability is a central focus in this world, for these movies have been demonstrated here to offer up much for disability studies to grapple with. While impairment continues to be discriminated against in our society, disability studies proponents can perhaps reach a wide-scale audience by making their arguments through a popular film. X-Men has been proven to be replete with characters who can be respected, admired, understood. They are human, complex with flaws and strengths, agents acting on their own volition, complete and interesting and compelling. These characters call attention to what people with disabilities face and who they are despite what society has come to expect of them. They might make us aware of the ways in which we ill-treat human variation and also the ways in which we might come to understand and embrace these variations. Perhaps when we truly consider the nuances to films such as these, when we really listen to what the characters in this world can say to us, we can more fully appreciate the errors in judgment we have made along the way with respect to people with disabilities and also the ways in which we can effect social justice. To conclude with
words from Professor X: “This is a moment to relive the mistakes of the past or to work towards a better future. We’re here to stay”.