

Mask and Closet,
Or,
"Under the Hood":
Metaphors and Representations of Homosexuality in American Superhero Comics After
1985

by

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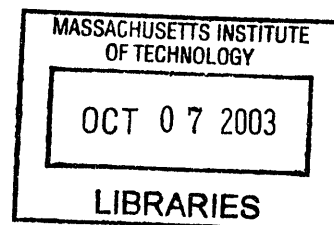
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ABSTRACT

An examination of the changing representation of male homosexuality in American superhero comics between the years 1986 and 2003. The thesis gives some theoretical attention to problems of epistemology, and the uses of connotative as opposed to denotative representation and reading. It traces the history of the discourse to the paranoia and anxiety generated by Fredric Wertham’s 1954 book *Seduction of the Innocent*, which has led to an anxiety about “the gay-Batman reading” that has affected the shape of the genre’s evolution. In Part One, the thesis examines the ways in which superhero comics have historically discussed homosexuality, using metaphors or symbolic “tropes,” which variously imagine the superhero as a costume fetishist, as flamboyant, as sadomasochistic, as suspiciously homosocial, or as a pedophile. In Part Two, close readings of contemporary instances of gay characters in superhero texts offers insights into current trends in representation. The close readings examine Northstar, of the Marvel comics *Alpha Flight* and *Uncanny X-Men*; Apollo and the Midnighter, of the comics *Stormwatch* and *The Authority*, variously published by Wildstorm and DC Comics; and the character Terry Berg in *Green Lantern*, published by DC Comics.

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I owe a debt of gratitude to many, many people who have offered their help or their tolerance to help me complete this with my sanity intact. In this respect I want to particularly thank Sara Rosenbaum, who stands at the head of a list of staunch and uncomplaining friends who never objected to being called at all hours of the night with requests for moral support or unexpected questions about gay superheroes.

A final thanks goes to the river Charles, the Boston skyline, and the greater New England area for having been so obliging about the weather these past few months.

Epigraph:

Ben Edlund and Jeff Whiting. *The Tick* #6: "Villains Inc." New England Comics: 1989.



Introduction:

What Everybody Knows About Men in Tights: Or, “You Can Write This One Yourself”

This thesis aims to map the changing patterns of representation of homosexuality in mainstream American superhero comics in the past fifteen years. Specifically, I want to understand how the discourse of homosexuality has moved from subtext to the text, from the margins to the center, of popular superhero narratives.

The change has not been straightforward, and it is by no means complete. There has been no smooth “evolution” of the representation of “the gay superhero” over the past decade and a half. Genres change slowly, and the experiments have appeared like tentative sallies from many different quarters. Progress leads to regressiveness; openness leads to reversals. Some experiments in exploring bold new directions are abandoned, and a surprising number of characters, once “outed,” vanish back into the closet, like celebrities when mainstream success hits. Even within the last three to five years, when a sense of openness and détente has appeared and the momentum for gay superhero representation seems to be building, the new openness has generated a new set of obliquities, evasions, and stereotypes. This thesis is interested in investigating the cross-currents pulling the superhero narrative in different directions.

There are many possible approaches to this kind of analysis. Some researchers might concentrate on readers’ practices of reading and discussing gay characters, or of reading gayness in(to) historically oblique superhero texts; others might look at gay fans’ own conversations about comics. Another approach would examine the tensions among producers in the complex and multiply authored production of superhero stories, or study the operations of censorship, both external and self-imposed. My background and training is in close reading and textual analysis, and so that is the approach I take in this project. My feeling is that the approach of close reading, while always containing a strong element of subjectivity, can be useful here. To me, it means asking the text *what it*

seems to be saying and privileging the statements and patterns that emerge, rather than privileging a consumer's, a producer's, or a politically or economically structured interpretation of what the text seems to be saying -- although the latter questions are also always present, and always inform interpretation.

I begin with the claim that, over the course of approximately the past fifteen years, gay presence in superhero comics has moved from being nearly entirely oblique – relegated to implication (within the text) or requiring inference (by readers) – to being increasingly visible and clearly stated. That is, where gayness was, in the past, restricted to innuendo or metaphor, the past years have seen increasing numbers of characters in superhero fictions explicitly denominated as gay, a trend which began to pick up pace particularly in the last five years, and seems at the moment to be accelerating so rapidly that it's hard to predict where we will be five years from now.

Since there are few critical structures in place for reading superhero comics queerly, either as genre or as medium, I will be borrowing freely from the work of scholars in other areas of representation and culture, such as film, television, and literature. Indeed, this project was originally inspired in part by Vito Russo's landmark exercise in reading the history of gay representation in Hollywood, *The Celluloid Closet*, and equally by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's monumental work on reading queerness in English and American literature of the nineteenth century, *Epistemology of the Closet*. I will invoke other scholars only rarely, but from them I have adapted the filters with which I view the works I study. To describe this thesis's aims using terms borrowed from an essay by D.A. Miller on reading gay meaning in film, I want to look at the shift from oblique "connotation" to open "denotation" of homosexuality in superhero comics. Or, to describe this using structures borrowed from Sedgwick: I am interested in the epistemology of homosexuality in a superhero fictional universe: that is, in the changing ways in which we know, or are given to know, that characters are gay, as well as the ways in which the increasing clarity and prevalence of this knowledge alters the traditional structures of superhero fictions.

In this Introduction, I place this study in the context of the history of superhero comics, and describe my approach to reading the "spread" of queer meaning through the

network of superhero narratives. I peg the emergence of openly gay meanings in superhero comics to a set of revolutionary comics texts that appeared about 1986, placing this in the context of other shifts in the “realism” of representation throughout the evolutionary history of the superhero comics genre. In Part One of the thesis, I then examine the epistemology of the superhero closet, tracing the emerging discourse of homosexuality via several sets of metaphors, symbols, and innuendo that have historically characterized its appearance around the “edges” of mainstream superhero stories – including its burlesques, its undergrounds, and its transmedia adaptation – while focusing on the ways these metaphors appeared in the transitional period of the late 1980s and early 1990s, and how they have been “updated” within the last few years. Part Two switches to a focus on what happens *after* the characters come out. It comprises a set of close readings of “sunlit” superhero texts of the 1990s – by which I mean texts in which homosexuality has emerged as a visible presence in the story, and which are often self-aware in their championing of this openness. In this section, the close readings will be used to examine how epistemological uncertainty functions in these texts, and how representations of the new breed of gay superheroes are experimenting with various ideas and meanings, and how the concept of the gay superhero is being used to interrogate the genre conventions which are collectively understood to define the superhero story itself.

Constraints

I have constrained this study by examining only the discourse of male homosexuality; by confining my readings to “mainstream” superhero comics; and by beginning my study in 1986.

Confining attention to male characters was a choice that seemed to make sense, both to narrow the study’s boundaries and because the superhero genre itself – as I was frequently reminded in the course of this study – is one which is profoundly gendered in even its most baseline assumptions. So notable is this pronounced hypermasculinity, and so charged and dominant is the conversation about the largely-male “target audience” for superhero stories, that *any* examination of women in these narratives is immediately complicated by a great many genre assumptions, gender stereotypes, and problems generated by the limited range of female characters. In essence, superhero stories tend to

find women a tokenized minority from the outset. In the interest of limiting variables, I felt I could learn most about the functions of *queerness* in superhero comics by limiting myself to considering queer or queered characters who are otherwise “normal” – i.e., in this context, male. Other scholars have made inroads into the vast and often frustrating project of discussing women characters in superhero comics, and to them I will leave the task of considering the evolving depiction of lesbianism and female bisexuality. (During the course of this project, though, I have come to appreciate the superhero genre’s ever-expanding diversity of genre tone, target audience, and “adult” writing. Along with a quickly widening range of lesbian characters, this issue increasingly seems to me one that could be usefully discussed in the context of gay male superheroes.)

“Mainstream” comics is a difficult term to define. I use it here to refer to superhero stories – both the actual publications, and the narratives in an abstract sense – that lie at the center of the superhero fictional world, as well as at the center – which also means the conservative heart, relatively speaking – of both fan and public discourse *around* superhero comics. For many years, “mainstream” comics could be defined as any superhero title published by one of the “Big Two” American publishing houses, DC Comics or Marvel; self-published comics, work published by independent small houses, or even any work that departed from the superhero genre could be considered “independent” or “underground.” The late 1980s and early 1990s saw this rather simplistic system begin to collapse, with the sudden appearance of myriad smaller superhero publishers and an increasingly rapid expansion of the kinds of comics that can find popularity inside or outside of “the big two,” in terms both of genre (e.g., noir, fantasy, horror) and of tone and audience (it is now possible to be an adult reader of a broad range of comics, while never having been a superhero fan).

The distinctions should be self-evident to most comics readers. But due to the pervasive confusion in the popular press that often conflates *genre* (superhero stories) with *medium* (all comics published in the United States)¹, I want to clearly re-state that I am confining myself here to superhero genre comics, not to the vast array of work that does not participate in this genre world. And by using “mainstream,” I mean that I am

¹ This pervasive confusion was most brilliantly elucidated by Scott McCloud in his landmark 1994 book *Understanding Comics*; cf. particularly p. 6.

centrally interested in how gay representation has changed in high-profile, popular, presumably unironic superhero comics – as opposed to the subversive play that has always existed in the comics “underground.” As we will see in Part One and throughout this study, one of the tensions at work here is that, by the late 1990s, what remains of “the mainstream” had become largely self-aware.

The year 1986 was chosen partly for personal, and partly for critical historical reasons. In that year a set of self-reflexive, revisionist texts led to permanent changes in general strategies of representation within the genre, and in ways of thinking about superhero comics; but, also, around that time I began to become a comics reader. I cannot claim to have comprehensive access to or understanding of the broad range and depth of the world of superhero fictions either before or after that year, because it is a vast and complicated world of stories. But my range of personal experience and sense of the gestalt of comics culture is much stronger after 1986. I make numerous references both to gay representation and to discourse around gayness in superhero comics dating from before that period, but I draw mostly on others’ writing and impressions. I think a study of gay representations in comics before 1986 would be invaluable, but this study is not it.

Schoolyard Jokes and Common Knowledge

In some sense, superhero comics have always been gay. At least, this defines one of the long-running anxieties *about* superheroes. In 1948, New York State child psychiatrist Fredric Wertham began campaigning against comic books, which had been steadily increasing in popularity during the previous decade. Wertham, a liberal-minded advocate for the poor who worked with troubled and inner-city youth, believed that the violence and eroticism of comics were having a bad effect on those children who were most susceptible. After he published his 1954 book, *The Seduction of the Innocent*, the subject became a cause célèbre, leading more or less directly to a three-day hearing presided over by the zealous senator Estes Kefauver, and to the establishment of the Comic Code Authority – an unofficial, in-house censorship code designed in part to prevent official government sanctions (like the Hays Code in film). Among other things,

the Code forbade the representation of “horror, excessive bloodshed, gory or gruesome crimes, depravity, lust, sadism, [or] masochism”²

Wertham’s criticisms of the comic focused on violence more than on sexuality, but one particular aspect of his readings has had a disproportionate effect on the subsequent evolution of discourse around the genre. In a chapter of *The Seduction of the Innocent* that has since become famous, Wertham analyzed the texts of the contemporaneous Batman comics, and the ways they had been interpreted by some young gay men with whom he had worked in a Harlem free clinic. Will Brooker aptly describes Wertham’s analysis as “four pages [that] concentr[ate] down to a single passage without fail whenever the question of a ‘gay Batman’ arises.” Wertham’s conclusion is that the comics represent something like “a wish dream of two homosexuals living together,” and could “stimulate children to homosexual fantasies” (Wertham 90, 189-191; Brooker 103, 116).

Looking at the history of gay representation in comics, and the history of the dialogue around them, it seems to me that this originary moment has created a sort of spectre of interpretation -- a ghost-reading of homosexuality, that has lived alongside superhero comics ever since. Wertham has often been interpreted or remembered as a “witch-hunt[er]” (Medhurst 150), and most historians of Batman have rejected Wertham’s suggestions (with a vehemence that suggests more passion than reason). But due, perhaps, to the very scandalous titillation value of the idea, Wertham’s “accusation” has never entirely disappeared. Even as it has been rigorously denied within the canonical body of superhero stories themselves, the idea has informed the discourse that fans, creators, and the public bring to the genre. Fans and creators have at least a vague awareness of the possibility of this reading that must somehow, simultaneously, be feared, mocked, and ignored. It is hard to know what metaphor would best describe this situation, but one could think of a shadow, an interpretive spectre, that trails many superhero readings: a reminder of a possibility that most readers have, historically, perceived as frightening, but impossible either to eliminate or to fully ignore.

² As cited in Sarah Boxer, “When Fun Isn’t Funny: The Evolution of Pop Gore.” *The New York Times*, May 1, 1999.

This pervasive but often-unnamed idea has so been constantly with us that in his book-length study of Batman in culture, Will Brooker gave it a shorthand name: the “gay-Batman” reading (Brooker 102). As cultural studies have taken an interest in the narratives of popular genres, the concrete use of such a “reading” has certainly become necessary for considering such Batman-related texts as the “campy” late-60s television series, or the late-1990s Joel Schumacher films. But it seems to me that awareness of the spectre is not localized to historians of culture, but is widely recognized -- though perhaps only half-consciously registered -- both among readers of superhero comics, where it is frequently ignored or denied, and among the public at large, where tends, instead, to become a dirty joke. I think of it as the equivalent of a dimly remembered schoolyard joke: something that you learned was funny at a very young age, and which everybody knew was funny, but only half-understood then and only half-remember now. Certainly there’s *something* funny about Batman and Robin, enough to make one giggle if they’re named. But what is it, exactly? And why?

This is important, not solely in the sense that this “Werthamite spectre” has adhered to Batman and Robin down through the decades, but also in the way that it can be expanded to describe a “gay-superhero” reading more generally. Insofar as Batman is an “archetypal” hero – that is, a representative one, and one who dwells near the center of the common understanding of the superhero world -- the “suspicion” around Batman could just as easily crop up for equally iconic characters. However mythicized its originary moment has become, the spectre is still there, and it periodically appears in dim and brighter forms against the popular consciousness. It is only half-noticed when seen (like any forgotten schoolyard joke) but its persistence can be traced in its patterns. The past half-decade alone is rich with examples: In 1998, the studio audience of *Saturday Night Live* laughed uproariously at Robert Smigel’s series of short animations, *The Ambiguously Gay Duo*, in which costumed pair Ace and Gary unselfconsciously fought crime in Spandex and the joke was embedded in the title. In 1997, a reviewer of the film “Batman Forever” sniped about “close-ups of rubber-clad butts and groins,” adding, “[I]f [Batman and Robin] regroup for a fifth caped crusade, expect the Dark Knight to confess

to a life-long passion for interior decorating.”³ In 2000, the author Michael Chabon, whose novel *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* won the Pulitzer Prize for Best Novel that year, revisited the history of the American comic book and, fictionalizing the Kefauver trial, placed a gay comic-book writer protagonist in the witness seat and asked readers to consider what desires the trope of hero and sidekick might express.

Moreover, it’s clear that the joke about “men in tights” can be invoked across the iconic spectrum. In a newspaper editorial about the openly gay characters Apollo and Midnighter in DC/Wildstorm’s *The Authority*, British novelist and critic Philip Hensher summed up the sense of this historical “common knowledge” by writing, “I don’t know why they bother [with ‘out’ gay superheroes], really... Basically, it sounds just like every other action hero that has ever been invented – I mean, is it just me, or is the job description of ‘super-hero,’ like ‘super-model,’ not in itself the teensiest bit swishy? The great joke about the BBC sitcom *My Hero* is that comic-book heroes don’t have a wife at home. *They just don’t, and never have*. This is traditionally the point at which one starts speculating lewdly about the masculinity of Superman and his ever-so-slightly suspect gentlemanly behavior towards Lois Lane... As for Batman – well, frankly, you can write this one yourself” (Hensher, *The Independent* of London, 20 August 2002; emphasis mine).

Hensher invokes language that suggests the way this joke is always already embedded in the cultural knowledge: when it comes to leading “normalized” sexual or domestic lives, superheroes *just don’t, and never have*. Batman is invoked only after the common knowledge has been deployed, since everyone knows about him, but Hensher’s elbow-nudging reminds us that it is perfectly “traditional” to “speculate” about Superman, and in fact “every action hero” ever created. Wertham may or may not have been the originary point (Hensher goes on to invoke Leslie Fiedler’s assertion that most American founding myths are homoromantic), but the “common knowledge” has become dehistoricized to the point of having always been there.

We see, then, that if the culture at large knows that Batman and Robin might be gay – and it seems the culture does -- then it continues to abide as a kind of half-conscious joke. But the most central, “canonical” texts of superhero comics themselves have traditionally refused to acknowledge the possibility, presumably for fear of precisely

³ Matthew Sweet in *The Independent On Sunday*, 1997; (quoted in Brooker 2000, 296).

the same thing. We seem to be facing an epistemological problem. Are no superheroes gay? Are all superheroes gay? Or does it depend on who you're asking? And what does this mean for a genre when, its readers growing older in an increasingly pluralistic culture, it starts to seem reasonable that the concept of homosexuality somehow ought to be appear? *Can* the genre, with its roots so deeply established and its borders of exclusion so firmly erected, assimilate this new concept without rupturing?

Denotation and Connotation

In an influential essay on Alfred Hitchcock's film *Rope*, D.A. Miller defines clear terms for the challenges that so often dog attempts to read texts in gay ways: On the one hand, there are texts that denote homosexuality – that is, texts that name it aloud. On the other, some texts merely *connote* it, suggesting gay meanings without offering empirical evidence. Writing on the 1948 film, Miller asks:

Let us begin by raising a question that is presupposed in the common judgment [of critics] that [the film's central character] Brandon and Philip are two young homosexuals... namely, how do we think we know? It bears repeating that whatever information is conveyed in a phrase like "two young homosexuals" cannot be learned by viewers empirically, on the evidence of their senses. Though.... critics seem to imply that the protagonists' homosexuality is... plain to see... homosexuality is in fact extensively prevented from enjoying any such obviousness not only... by the famously hardass Production Code in force at the times of the film's making, which strictly forbade the display and even denomination of homosexuality, but also, more diffusely, by the cultural surround of legal, social, psychic, and aesthetic practices... that tolerate homosexuality only on condition that it be kept out of sight. (Miller 123)

Miller is clarifying the questions that surround "innuendo" of this kind, asking what exactly art or a text does when it implies gayness without saying it out loud. Following Roland Barthes, Miller goes on to define terms for this discussion: *connotation* is a kind of secondary meaning "whose signifier is itself constituted by a sign or system of primary signification, which is denotation," where *denotation* means clearly saying a thing out loud (123), Miller points out that while it is possible to read gay meanings in a text

which offers the implication of homosexuality, connotation is less than fully satisfying because less than fully forthcoming:

[D]efined in contrast to the immediate self-evidence... of denotation, connotation will always manifest a certain semiotic insufficiency. The former will appear to be telling us, as Barthes says, “something simple, literal, primitive; something *true*,” while the latter can’t help appearing doubtful, debatable, possibly a mere effluvium of rumination (stereotypically, the English professor’s) fond of discovering in what must be read what need not be read into it. The dubiety, being constitutive, can never be resolved... [C]onnotation enjoys, or suffers from, an abiding deniability. (123-124)

Connotation and *denotation* offer useful terms for the problems of understanding representation in superhero universes. At the heart of the problem lies the fact that so long as homosexuality is not named aloud, it *can* be read anywhere – connotation has a tendency to spread, as Miller points out, to “raise this ghost [i.e., the spectre of homosexual meaning] all over the place” (125). The gay-Batman reading is rooted in connotative suggestions of homosexuality, and, because there exists no denotative plane along which to read Batman or other superhero narratives, Wertham’s spectres can neither be dismissed, nor addressed straight-on.

The distinction between denotation and connotation, and the kinds of gay presence which exist under each regime, is important to my study in several ways. As an overarching structure, I use it to delineate an increasing emergence of gay signifiers from the cloudy realm of connotation into the “sunlit” world of things-named-aloud. (This teleological progression, of course, is not uncomplicated, and its internal contradictions and reversals are some of the most interesting subjects for analysis.)

In the first section, I trace the ways in which homosexuality is discussed or implied *in a context in which it cannot be named aloud*. Here we operate largely in a realm of connotation. Prior to the late 1990s, I suggest, gay readings of superhero comics must be defined against what *isn’t* there: Something is missing in the text, but

commentary in parody, mainstream cultural jokes, and “the underground” help give shape to what is invisible in the mainstream. (In this regard I refer readers to the paper’s epigraph, the full-page image from a 1989 issue of Ben Edlund’s parody *The Tick*. In this image, the superhero and his sidekick frame the negative space of a conversation which, when the comic appeared in 1990, was simply impossible to conduct. The subjects of the conversation are made so entertainingly, but poignantly, nervous by it that the only way to resolve the question is to let its subject not be spoken, and to render its subjects – themselves – invisible.

So when, in Part One, I trace the contours of the ruling metaphors used to imply and suggest homosexuality in the comics before 1998, I will be drawing upon both mainstream comics and comics outside the mainstream -- specifically texts which either operate on the sanctioned fringes of the “official” world of superheroes (as, for instance, Grant Morrison and Dave McKean’s DC-published *Arkham Asylum*) and texts which burlesque or parody the superhero world at large (e.g., Rick Veitch’s *Bratpack*, Ben Edlund’s *The Tick*, or Smigel’s Saturday Night Live sketch *The Ambiguously Gay Duo*). These texts hold various positions in terms of their “insider” or “outsider” status, but are uniformly valuable in drawing out what is explicitly, and obviously, *not* visible in more central superhero texts. My feeling is that, when discussing the operations of gayness in superhero stories during a period when it operated by connotation alone, it is necessary to define the shape of the discourse in terms of *negative space*: discourses of gayness in 1980s and early-1990s texts (and those before) need almost by definition to be viewed in terms of how the empty space where they should have been was made visible *outside* the mainstream, in jokes, commentary, or burlesque -- the functional equivalent of notes scribbled in the margins.

By the late 1990s, however, the discourse of homosexuality has begun to become visible inside the mainstream body of superhero comics.⁴ Thus, in Part Two, my analysis shifts to that position. At this point, we are no longer interested in connotation, but seek

⁴ The vacancy seems to remain in place longer in proportion to the “mainstream” or iconic status of the character; thus homosexuality in the context of Batman or Superman continues to be defined solely in terms of negative space, where it has appeared in more explicit terms in near proximity (i.e., within the storylines) of less “establishment” characters.

instead to consider how gay superheroes appear in a newly “sunlit” position, in comics that self-consciously claim to be open about gayness within the text. The question now becomes how *denotation* operates; how it is used to comment upon the long history of genre self-closeting; and what new secrets appear to be connoted now that gayness can be named aloud.

I also want to use connotation to define my project *against* something else. There already exists a discourse -- historically imposed from outside, and often both homophobic and phobic of superhero fictions -- which seeks to analyze the “gay meanings” of superhero stories. Fredric Wertham was one of its earliest public performers; and it has been pursued through the past fifty years, manifesting in everything from the analyses, both playful and phobic, of the operations of “camp” in the Batman TV series of the 1960s, to the purely and worryingly phobic responses to the Joel-Schumacher directed Batman films of the 1990s (*Batman and Robin* and *Batman Forever*). This is an argument, essentially, about the possible gayness of Batman, and it may be one that is never satisfactorily laid to rest.

The reason is that this is a conversation dealing entirely with connotation: It looks at the possible meanings of various aspects of the Batman stories and then argues about how to interpret them. The aspects in question are sometimes those which some readers interpret as gay and others as not-gay (e.g., Dick and Bruce’s relationship, for instance, interpreted variously by Frederic Wertham in *Seduction of the Innocent*, Sammy Clay in Michael Chabon’s *Kavalier & Clay*, and most Batman readers), and sometimes those about which there is some consensus (e.g., the rubber-suit aesthetic of the Schumacher films, which viewers and critics generally agreed was very gay, and generally agreed in blaming Schumacher for having introduced.) The argument cannot be finished, I think, because at its most futile it boils down to a question of *who is right* about Batman, and at its most useful it becomes a question of how *plausible* gay readings are. At its most exhaustive, and perhaps most interesting, it turns into a book like Will Brooker’s *Batman Unmasked*, in which Brooker turns back to, among other things, the original comics Wertham read in the 1940s and makes a plausible case for the reasonability of Wertham’s gay readings, given current cultural codes. But, of course, all Brooker is able to look at is possible sites of connotation – color choices, word choices, story structures that are

susceptible to multiple interpretations. Due to the very variety and fluctuation of Batman's meanings, and the abiding "deniability" of the approach taken by creators who will not name homosexuality aloud, Batman ends up being a very useful site for studying how readers read gayness in superhero texts, but a very poor one indeed for trying to understand how superhero texts convey gayness.

Because of the seeming futility of this approach, I am defining my close readings *against* it. This is why I have selected recent texts for my close readings in which the naming of homosexuality erupts into the story. The problematic epistemology of "the gay-Batman reading," as Brooker calls it, is subjected to analysis in Part One; in Part Two, it is absent (except so far as it informs "denotative" representations that work to draw the gay-Batman reading out into the light). My project is *not* to prove whether or not Batman is gay. All that interests me, in Part One, will be to examine the ways *in which parodies work to suggest that Batman might be gay*, and consider what assumptions or associations are being deployed to make that suggestion. In Part Two, Batman almost ceases to be relevant. After all, these days the genre has little time for closet cases.

Genre "Evolution," Linked Worlds, and Punctuated Equilibrium

During most of its history, homosexuality in superhero comics remained relegated to the realm of pure connotation. This is why it was possible in the first place for Fredric Wertham to read gay implications into Batman comics, and for the other camp – rather than commenting on the appropriateness of possible gay meanings – to simply, and necessarily, deny they existed. It is the same debate that superhero fans and the larger culture have engaged in since (in a bantering way that denies the conversation's seriousness). The reasons are similar to those Miller mentions for *Rope*: the Comics Code Authority, a self-censoring set of constraints established by the publishers after the Wertham affair, played a role similar to that of the Hays Production Code for film. But, more to the point, there has also been a set of cultural constraints in play around superhero comics -- the "cultural surround of legal, social, psychic, and aesthetic practices" as Miller names them -- that have prevented homosexuality from being denominated or displayed.

Superhero comics are unlike films, however, in that in a sense *they constitute a collective and closed fictional world*: a set of diverse narratives which nonetheless talk to, and implicitly or explicitly exist co-extensively with, each other. This is an important point, and one which deserves much fuller exploration than can be accommodated here. The basic idea is the contemporary array of superhero narratives comprises, not a set of distinct and unrelated stories that all happen to use the same genre conventions, but rather a set of stories that *talk to each other*. Along one axis, it is literally true that superhero stories interact with each other; as those familiar with the concept of “the Marvel universe” or “the DC universe” are aware, most of the literally hundreds of monthly titles produced by each publisher are premised to coexist in a fictional space, in which the events of one series can influence another. In practice, of course, inconsistencies abound. But also, in practice, characters from one series regularly visit other series, and most titles feature a “crossover” at least once a year.

This is a marketing device at heart, but it has important implications for the shared reality of this genre’s stories. Consider: if (let us say) five publishers currently produce the two hundred most popular monthly superhero comics, what we see is not simply two hundred individual, ongoing narratives. Each of these narratives is linked to numerous others by a delicate webbing composed of the crossovers, history, and “continuity” that connect the title to the other series that share in its fictional world. The titles do not maintain consistency, but they do *communicate* with each other. Beyond this, the rhythm of monthly publishing and the communal discourse of fan and industry conversation force all the publishers to be aware of each others’ stories: the state of the marketplace, and the cutting edge of the genre, is collectively defined by the highest-selling narratives and the spaces they define. Finally, superhero fandom is peculiarly aware of the vicissitudes of the genre’s history and historicity. Superhero fictions possess an extraordinarily tangled sense of history, due partly to the past 65 years’ worth of publishing buyouts and collapses, and partly to the fantastic events that so often occur in this fictional world, including periodic “reboots” and erasures of past events that generate such unique concepts as the “retcon.”⁵ Since the early to mid 1990s, many creators

⁵ “Retcon” is compressed from the phrase “retroactive continuity,” “continuity” being the currently official version of a title’s or universe’s history. Used as a verb, it describes

interested in reviving the fading superhero genre have been intensely focused on reexamining the genre's own history. This has led to a wave of revisionist comics – or, as scholar Geoff Klock calls them with a more appropriate nod to their optimistic and nostalgic outlooks, “revisionary” comics.

In terms both synchronic and diachronic, in terms both of their internal fictional worlds and of external consumer discourse, serialized superhero narratives comprise a linked web -- a large but closed set of intertwined worlds that resonate with each other. If something shakes any part of the web, the ripples will eventually reach the rest of it. Whatever is allowed to intrude into one superhero narrative, then, *has the potential to invade all others*. This is presumably one reason the naming of a gay superhero has long seemed loaded with so much alarming potential power.

Given this phenomenon, homosexuality hardly stands alone as a theme or concept that has seemed “unnamable” during much of the comics’ history. Sexuality itself, in its “normative” instantiation as heterosexuality, was kept distant from superhero comics until more “adult” storylines began to filter in during the 1970s and 1980s. Certain charged aspects of politics, as well – race relations, economic inequality, implications of American global policy – were also largely absent from superhero comics until the 1970s. (This is not to say sexuality and politics had been entirely absent from comics: in the crime and horror comics which were the primary target of Fredric Wertham’s clean-up campaign from the late 1940s on, he objected precisely to their blatant sensuality as well as to their violence, with political messages sometimes being caught up in the complicated tangle of signification and interpretation.⁶ Such elements were consciously and carefully excluded from comics in the aftermath of that backlash.)

Some historians of superhero comics point to specific watersheds in the history of superhero comics, which they credit with not only presenting creative new

the changes wrought upon a fictional universe’s history by a publisher’s periodic official revisions, usually to tie up “loose ends.” The need for such a verb suggests the complicated historicity of the genre. A typical question and answer might run: “Didn’t Zephyr Girl used to be married to Orpheo?” “She was in the ‘70s, but not any more, since they retconned him out of existence in ’96. Now she’s in high school, and she’s Videus’s little sister. Oh, and they’re both half-Martian.”)

⁶ On this, cf. Amy Kiste Nyberg, *Seal of Approval: The History of the Comics Code*. Jackson: U. Press of Mississippi, 1998.

breakthroughs, but also establishing permanent changes in the superhero field. Because of the echo-chamber aspect of American superhero comics, the sense in which they all contribute to the same broad-bordered conceptual universe, sometimes a breakthrough in representation will affect the ways in which all other superhero stories are defined -- a trickle-down (or, better, ripple-through) effect. One example might be the appearance on the scene of the revamped Marvel Comics in 1961, with superhero characters who talked in colloquial ways and had problematic personal lives. Defining themselves against the relatively staid and deific old-fashioned heroes of DC, the new Marvel characters (e.g., the Fantastic Four, Spider-Man, the X-Men) had a dramatic appeal to young readers, forcing the DC characters also to become more “hip.”⁷ Another often-cited instance is the celebrated Green Lantern-Green Arrow crossovers of the early 1970s, by Denny O’Neil and Neil Adams, which brought contemporary crises of civil rights and poverty into the theretofore more abstract and rarefied world of comic-book crime; or the 1977-1980 collaboration between Chris Claremont and John Byrne on Marvel’s X-Men for exploring “individual character... conflicts,” narrative structure, and “group dynamics, trust, individual and collective action” (Reynolds 85-92). Further examples during the 1990s might be the “photo-realistic” painted superhero artwork of Alex Ross, whose early work in *Marvels* had led to a high demand for life-size, “realistic” pin-up images of practically all the iconic superhero characters of Marvel and DC (plus a slew of imitators), or the profane candor and lifelike dialogue rhythms of writer Brian Michael Bendis, whose popular work on titles like *Alias*, *Powers*, *Ultimate Spiderman* and *Daredevil* has led to a move away from the stiff, and cleaned-up, conversations that have historically dominated superhero stories.

Each of these benchmarks seems to characterize an increased level of “realism” in superhero comics, an added layer of depth that opens up new options for representation. This, I think, is what distinguishes a trend from a breakthrough.⁸ “Breakthroughs “seem

⁷ As Richard Reynolds puts it, the Marvel model “.integrat[ed] the anti-heroic alter-ego with the all-conquering hero and thus creat[ed] the ‘hero with problems,’ which carried the superhero comic several steps beyond the Clark Kent/Superman duality in terms of literary characterization” (Reynolds, 84).

⁸ And superhero comics do have their trends, their pendulum-like ebbs and flows, just like any other form. A trend might be marked by a deluge of a particular kind of casual

to add new dimension to what *can be represented* in the superhero universe, bound about as it is with the conventions of its “social, psychic, and aesthetic practices.” I suggest the superhero world saw a breakthrough of this kind in the representation and naming of homosexuality in the late 1980s; and I would peg this largely to the publication of *Watchmen*, the celebrated 12-issue series by Alan Moore and Dave Gibbons published by DC in 1986.

That book’s operations and their meanings will be explored in more detail in Part One. However, let this suggest a framework for viewing the evolution of “visible” homosexuality in superhero texts. This model of the evolution of superhero fictions is both punctuated and gradual, both linear and lateral. The sudden irruption of a new kind of meaning, or at least its overt expression, in a specific text and a specific context, can resonate and spread broadly across the web of the fictional universe. In the pages ahead, I will start out by suggesting we consider *Watchmen* as one such irruption in a line of moments of punctuated evolution, with great importance for the naming of gayness in the comics; and, I suggest, this is it makes sense to locate a reading of a new kind of gay representation in the comics in 1986.

The Organization Of This Thesis

Because of the complications (most of them outlined above) which freight both the close reading of superheroes, and the reading of superheroes queerly, the first section of this thesis will be devoted to clarifying the historical and theoretical context against which the latter readings, comprising the second half, beg to be understood.

In Part One, I will consider the history of the discourse around gay characters within superhero comics. Prior to the emergence of open conversation about homosexuality in the 1990s, gay characters were not openly visible in most superhero comics. However, since the period of Fredric Wertham, the genre of superhero comics has maintained a certain nebulous awareness of the possibilities of gay readings – the

dialogue rhythm, a wave of naughty erotic references, or a preference for “realistic” painted (as opposed to drawn) art; a breakthrough is the fact of showing that it is *possible* for superheroes to talk like characters in a Quentin Tarantino movie, or that it is *possible* to represent the sun bouncing off the scratches in the wax of the Batmobile or the way Superman’s spandex shirt pulls awkwardly along the seams when he flexes his bicep.

winking “gay-Batman reading” introduced earlier – and have acknowledged this through various approaches. As with gay representation in other media, the concept is sometimes presented as a joke, and sometimes as a fear or frightening secret. Similarly, parodies of superhero comics sometimes openly named what they were addressing; more often, the issue showed up as a connoted reference, or an oblique and allusory metaphor. In this section, I look at superhero narratives of the late 1980s and 1990s and identify several recurring metaphors, or “tropes,” by which these texts implicitly or parodically allude to the superhero-as-homosexual: the superhero as costume fetishist; the superhero as actor in a suspiciously homosocial space; the superhero as “flamboyant” or campy; the superhero as sexually deviant sadomasochist; and the superhero as potential pedophile. After discussing the workings of superhero “identity” in regard to gay readings, I give an overview and examples of each of these tropes, and trace the gradual shift seen in the comics from the use of these metaphors as oblique allusion – in the 1980s and 1990s -- to their emergence, in an ongoing process that began late in the last decade and continues now, into the literal level of the superhero text.

Part Two, which comprises the second half of the thesis, is devoted to close readings of three case studies – most of recent vintage -- in which we examine the various ways in which homosexuality has emerged into the supertext of the story. The first example considers the character Northstar, who appeared in Marvel’s *Alpha Flight* title from 1982 to 1994, and, after a long absence broken by periodic guest appearances and a brief miniseries, has recently joined the cast of *Uncanny X-Men* (in 2002). Unique among these readings, Northstar also offers a case study of gay representation before 1986: prior to a highly-publicized “coming out” in 1992, the character presented a study in the use of oblique, connotative implications of homosexuality; after the character’s near-disappearance shortly thereafter, he now presents a kind of idealized vision of identity politics in the current title. The second reading looks at Apollo and Midnighter, a gay superhero couple in DC/Wildstorm’s *Stormwatch* and *The Authority* titles starting in 1998, who were highly publicized as “the world’s first openly gay superheroes.” I examine the way in which the characters’ “outing” was covered in the media, in comparison to the ways in which the characters’ sexualities were made known to reads of the comic itself; I further examine how the characters’ representations changed during the

years of the series' run, considering how they operated as "normalized" or "marked" superhero figures, and how their "marking" operated in relation to such issues as homophobic insult, power and weakness, domestic dynamics, and the uses of violence. The third case study considers the current version of *Green Lantern*, which since 2001 has featured a secondary storyline in which a young, non-superpowered secondary character and friend of the current Green Lantern has been openly gay. In late 2002 and 2003, the series featured a much-publicized two-part story in which Terry Berg, the hero's teenage assistant, was severely beaten in a gay-bashing incident, and Green Lantern had to respond as best he could; I examine the character's outing and attack in relation to other uses of anti-gay violence in superhero narratives, as well as in relation to the iconography and media coverage of real-world gay victims and their reflections in other forms of popular art.

In the last section, I will address my conclusions: By examining the ways in which openness and obliquity (or connotation and denotation) have been represented in the past, and considering the ways in which they operate for change in the present, we can understand the trends toward the representation of gay characters in mainstream superhero comics at the current moment. We can also assess the ways in which a new openness about gay superheroes has created new secrets and tensions, and the ways in which the recent increase in the number of gay characters has or has not affected the larger superhero universe – and, indeed, how gay characters seem at times to be constructed in opposition to, or in isolation from, a larger superhero world.

"Under the Hood"

I want to conclude this introduction by briefly explaining why I selected the title and what it means, a question I have been asked several times. "Mask and Closet" is, I hope, a self-explanatory reference to the ruling metaphor of the closet as a place of hiding, both for secret identities in the superhero world and for the often more fraught secret identities of the real one. It also encodes the idea of shadow and concealment against which "outing," the pulling of openly-named gayness into the light, is defined. But "Under the Hood" is also the title of a book within a book: what seems to me one of the superhero universe's most important such texts. It is the title Alan Moore gives to the

autobiography of Hollis Mason – a former superhero in the fictional world within a fictional world of *Watchmen*. In the pages of *Watchmen*, a mosaic of “found documents” – letters, magazines, and pages from this fictional autobiography – together assemble the documentation of a concealed American history of gay superheroes: simultaneously a de-shadowing of the formerly secret, and a proof and critique of the secret’s existence itself. It is because of both the revelatory significance of this moment in modern comics history, and the resonance of the metaphor, that I use it as a subtitle. It also reminds me of my inspiration: the clarity I would like, with this project, to bring to some of the remarkably confused and tangled discourse that has snarled around superheroes and their homosexualities.

Part One:

History of a Discourse

In the Introduction, I suggested that the modern emergence of openly gay superheroes in newly “sunlit” stories must be understood in context of the genre’s history: a history in which homosexuality was only implied, if present at all. I also suggested that superhero comics, as a collective fictional world, are marked by an awareness of the “dangerous possibilities” of homosexuality, as a sort of “spectre” that has haunted it since the period of Fredric Wertham. The threat, as I interpret it, is not so much that any one superhero might be gay, but that the possibility of gayness might be revealed to be implicitly readable in all superhero stories. The history of the genre has led to fictions linked in such a way that the intrusion of a new idea, or rupturing of a conceit, can “spread” to the universe’s outer extremes: Touched at any point, the entire web is shaken.

For many years, the presence of overtly gay superheroes has been invisible in mainstream superhero comics, due – I hypothesize -- to a concern about the possible spread of this “infection,” what we might follow D.A. Miller in calling the contamination of *connotational meaning*. This fear may have contributed to creators’ unwillingness to rupture the enforced the invisibility of gay characters in superhero fictions: the conceit can be understood as a self-protective erasure, which operates in defense against the potentially infinitely infectious spread of the *connotative reading* of homosexuality.

Inarguably, the emergence of openly gay characters into the superhero mainstream has taken much longer than it did in many other popular media, or even other comics genres. For instance, during the late 1980s and the 1990s, gay characters became much more frequent in popular films and on TV, reflecting an increasingly visible cultural discourse about the homosexuality. However, I suggest that it is not quite the case that gayness has historically been fully absent from mainstream superhero comics – or from the texts on their borders. Over the decades, comics writers and their fans have formulated what we might view as a set of symbolic ways of understanding the superhero as homosexual – what we might call *tropes*: not so much metaphors, self-consciously

deployed, *but tangles of associated meanings and implications* that simultaneously engage and deny the dangerous reading possibilities associating the superhero with the homosexual. These tropes seem rarely to be invoked in the mainstream with deliberate intent. But they appear as suggestive moments in mainstream comics, and are more clearly delineated in “fringe” or edgy mainstream projects, or in satires or burlesques of the superhero across genres.

As I argued in the Introduction, during a period in the 1980s and 1990s, these metaphors began to “rise to the surface” and to be elaborated and explored by superhero creators – a process that continues to this day, even as it parallels the open outness of some new characters. As I have also argued, during this time, the best – or *only* -- way to see the contours of the superhero discourse was by its negative space. A genre, increasingly self-aware about the feared secret it was not supposed to speak aloud (due perhaps to fear of “infection”), seemed increasingly to find the constraints ludicrous. The spectre would pop up one way or another – usually via metaphor. I suggested that this “negative space,” in which the metaphors are visible, can be seen in the conversations about gayness and superheroes that appeared one of the following places: a.) in mainstream superhero comics themselves, using the metaphors and innuendo that had long shielded the conversation; b.) in the fringes of superhero parody or burlesque, usually in comics intended for readers familiar with mainstream superheroes; or c) in mainstream or transmedia adaptations of or jokes about superhero stories, aimed at a more general audience.

In this chapter, I first discuss the operations of Miller’s “connotative” reading and its uses in gay and queer readings of texts; this must be looked at in relation to the paranoia still extant regarding Wertham’s “queer” reading of Batman, and the ways in which Batman, an archetypal comics superhero, is read queerly today. Next I offer a brief taxonomy of “the superhero as homosexual,” as the concept has been metaphorically represented in superhero comics, particularly from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s. I will elaborate on several of these metaphorical nexuses, suggesting ways their deployment can be seen to fit into the transitional period of the 1980s-1990s. Finally, I will offer some thoughts about how these “tropes of homosexuality” can be fit into a larger historical discourse of gay characters in superhero comics.

PART A: CONNOTATIVE IVY

As D.A. Miller points out in “*Anal Rope*,” his influential essay on the 1960 Alfred Hitchcock film:

...[I]f connotation, as the dominant signifying practice of homophobia, has the advantage or inconvenience of tending to raise this ghost all over the place.... needing corroboration... *connotation* [then]... tends to light everywhere, to put all signifiers to a test of their hospitality. Pushing its way through the Text, [connotation] will exploit the remotest contacts, enter into the most shameless liaisons, betray all canons of integrity – like an arriviste who hasn’t arrived, it simply can’t stop networking... If a case for the homosexuality of [*Rope*’s protagonists] were ever *actually* made, therefore, we should find homosexual meaning inevitably tending, via connotation’s limitless mobility, to recruit every signifier of the text. (125; emphasis added.)

From Miller’s discussion of film, we can draw out two useful points about the long American discourse surrounding superheroes and homosexuality – points with a broader application to gay encodings and readings in popular culture more generally. The first is that it is easy for a reading based on connotation to start to *feel and sound ludicrous*. Miller makes this point by using an ironic anthropomorphism, characterizing connotative reading as a “shameless” and “networking” party guest; this both acknowledges the absorptive power of connotative reading, and acknowledges the ways in which that reading can feel ludicrous or extreme. The latter element, in a less self-aware way, is clearly related to the vaguely self-loathing eagerness we see in comics critics to dismiss any serious analysis of “the gay-Batman reading.” This self-castigation, and retreat from the argument, are surely in part spurred by a sense of the inferior, low-culture register on which comics culture and Batman in general are usually placed. But, surely, they are also spurred in by a sense of both the limitlessness and the potential hollowness of connotation – a sense of the difficulty, or perhaps the futility, of putting together a reading (of *anything?*) based entirely on connotation. After all, in

“betraying all canons of integrity,” connotation seems to betray the canon.

But the counterbalancing point to take from Miller is that connotation holds a special place in cultural encodings and readings of homosexuality – often to the point of being the dominant, or *only*, way of speaking or seeing it. In “*Anal Rope*,” Miller points out that, theoretically, connotation is only one of many possible kinds of representation – not localized to “homosexual meaning” – but also points out that as “one of the dominant signifying practices of homophobia,” it is certainly the dominant practice of historical American popular cultural production with respect to encoding gay meanings.⁹ In a sense, connotation, which for Miller suggests something explicitly embodied in the text, is the flip side or mirror image of *bricolage* of the sort Richard Dyer describes as a dominant practice among queer audiences for “playing around with the elements available to us in such a way as to bend their meanings to our own purposes... pilfer[ing] from straight society’s images... such that would help us build up a subculture, or... a ‘gay sensibility’” (Dyer, *Gays and Film*, 1-2). These complementary practices of coded meaning and decoding reading -- or more accurately a blurring of the lines between producer’s implied meaning and the reader’s inferring reading – form part of what Richard Doty gets at in a book like *Making Things Perfectly Queer*, in whose view, by definition, nothing is “normative” and anything can equally “legitimately” be read as queer.

Whether the heart of the “gay-Batman” question involves connotation (meaning constructed from the inside), *bricolage* (a game played by viewers), or both (in a world in which the putative dividing wall is meaningless), this business of exchanging and making meaning out of the not-quite-said is central to contemporary ways of trying to understand how gay meanings -- or “marginalized desires” -- can be reconciled with mainstream discourses of any kind. Let us look at how this question of connotation applies in another thread of gay discourse, in order to make visible how this way of thinking about superheroes is intimately linked to the larger pro-gay discourse about reading meaning in history and popular culture.

⁹ A project like Vito Russo’s *The Celluloid Closet* makes this fact highly visible. Particularly pertinent is the point that connotation was the dominant way of signifying homosexuality under the Hays Code which Miller mentioned, up and until the gradual breakdown of the Code’s strength in the late 1960s and 1970s.)

To contextualize the importance of this decoding practice, let's consider a brief passage from Terrence McNally's Tony Award-winning 1994 play *Love! Valour! Compassion!* -- a "mainstream" work of American gay writing of the early-to-mid-1990s, if such a thing can be said to exist. The play, widely praised for both its specificity about the emotional and cultural paradoxes facing gay men at that time and its tender humaneness,¹⁰ is about six men who meet periodically at a friend's country home in their various configurations as friends, partners and lovers. The character Buzz is an extroverted talker who covers his fears about loneliness and his HIV infection with loud jokes and campy cracks. A professional costume designer, Buzz is a stereotypical, if self-aware, musical-theatre queen (that is, a musical theatre *fun*). He talks almost incessantly about Broadway trivia, about which he is a repository of knowledge, and contextualizes his life and those of his friends with frequent references to characters, musical numbers, and behind-the-scenes trivia from Broadway history. He also characterizes nearly all the figures he mentions as gay: "That's from *Annie Get Your Gun*. 'Can you bake a pie?' 'No.' 'Neither can I.' Ethel Merman was gay, you know. So was Irving Berlin." (McNally, 37).

In one scene, the conversation takes an interesting run as Buzz discusses theatre with James, an English visitor who formerly performed Shakespeare in England, and the talk turns to theatre of a different register:

JAMES: It's from a Shakespearean play we did at the National... [W]henever I don't like what's coming down, I toss my head, put my hand on my hip, and say "We defy augury."

BUZZ: Shakespeare was gay, you know.

JAMES: You're going too far now.

BUZZ: Do you think a straight man would write a line like "We defy augury"? Get real, James. My three-year-old gay niece knows Shakespeare was gay. So was Anne Hathaway. So was her cottage. So was Julius Caesar.

¹⁰ Of course, simultaneous faithfulness to genre and "universality" are often the criteria used to judge and praise works about "minorities," like gay men. They are also the ones used to determine the "real-world" value of (interestingly enough) ghettoized or fantastic genres, like the superhero story.

So was Romeo and Juliet. So was Hamlet. So was King Lear. Every character Shakespeare wrote was gay. Except for Titus Andronicus. Titus was straight. Go figure.

(McNally, 114-115)

As is clear from the dialogue, the scene is played for humor – “high camp,” as we might call it – but it also has a certain edge of seriousness and even of intensity. On the one hand, Buzz plays for laughs his litany of also-gay attributes of Shakespeare and the things associated with him: “Anne Hathaway’s cottage” is surely nothing if not “the remotest conta[ct]” of Miller’s connotative formulation, Anne Hathaway herself -- Shakespeare’s wife -- “the most shameless liaison.” Buzz makes a comic performance out of his impulse to “recruit every signifier of the text” (Miller 125), and the certainty with which he claims to know, as well as the putative evidence he summons, is obviously ridiculous. But as we watch, the image of “homosexual meaning” does indeed grow all over the text, as Miller says it will, like ivy over Anne Hathaway’s cottage. In this conversation, the irruption of homosexual presence thus spreads throughout the linked meanings of Shakespearean texts – a vision of how, on a different level and register, such meaning can spread throughout superhero worlds of genre superhero stories.

Buzz’s playfulness also belies the seriousness of his game. The discourse surrounding Shakespeare’s “real” sexuality in the community of scholars and readers is far from a joke. And the asking of *that* question validates questions about the characters and works the author created: the scholarship also does not lack for writing on queer readings of Hamlet, Romeo or Rosalind. Of course, this seriousness also underlies Buzz’s readings of Broadway and popular culture. With the goofy and overwhelming “networking” of his generalizations – “They’re all gay. The entire Olympics” (101) -- Buzz is, nonetheless, using closet humor to make some fairly serious claims about history and visibility, which seem quite reasonable in light of the closeted history of American popular entertainment. Moments before the quoted exchange, James has been describing the characteristic performative tics of an actor he used to know at the National – to which Buzz demands, “Would that be Lady Derek Jacobi, or Dame Ian McKellen?” James laughs him off (“I believe I have the floor, here!”). But if it seems almost as

“blasphemous” to target the favorite classical actors of the Shakespearean stage as it does to target Shakespeare himself, the fact is, of course, that of the two famous men Buzz names, McKellen at least did indeed come out as gay in 1988. In short, McNally, through Buzz, both sends up the inherent ridiculousness of connotative readings like this one – pointing out, like Miller, their “shameless” mobility, and their “tendency to recruit every signifier of the text” – and, simultaneously, emphasizes their importance for queer audiences (and others interested in the possible truths of art and history). Furthermore, with the juxtaposition of Broadway and Shakespeare, Buzz’s infinitely “networking” jokes here elide the distinction between such readings of deadly “serious” matters -- like history, literature, or the sexuality of Shakespeare -- and their uses in more popular culture.

From the McNally passage, we return to the world of superhero connotation – but, again, via contemporary gay theatre. *Mr. Charles, Currently of Palm Beach* is a 1998 one-act comedy by playwright and screenwriter Paul Rudnick, whose work includes the stage and screen versions of *Jeffrey*, the films *In and Out* and *Addams Family Values*, and the gay revisionist-Biblical stage comedy *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told*. The play is formatted as the late-night cable-TV local access show hosted by one Mr. Charles, an “ageless” and “glorious” “Palm Beach decorator or antiques dealer.” Shane, his “dim, affable, low-rent young hunk,” assists on the show as gofer and cameraman (Rudnick, 147-148). Shane – whom Mr. Charles dryly introduces as “my ward” -- appears on the show dressed up in an assortment of outfits designed by Mr. Charles. The costumes evoke various playful but clichéd gay fantasy scenarios: military fatigues, for instance, or a Tarzan outfit. Near the show’s midpoint Shane enters in what is described as “a homemade Robin costume, which includes tight green trunks, a yellow satin cape worn over a tight red tank top, and a black mask”:

[SHANE] is not happy about the outfit... [H]e poses, with his hands on his hips, as a superhero.

SHANE: Man, I don’t know about this outfit.

MR. CHARLES: It doesn’t bother Robin.

SHANE: I ain’t Robin... I mean, what is the deal with Robin anyway?... Do you

think that Batman and Robin, like, do it?

MR. CHARLES: Do you?

SHANE: Yeah. I bet that like, after they nail some robbers and save Gotham City, they're, like, all fired up, so they, like, do some K and stay out all night and then they pick up like, Spiderman – he's hot – and the Incredible Hulk, and they all go back to the Batcave and jump in the like, Bat-jacuzzi, and then Superman flies in and some of the Power Rangers, like the blue one, and the X-Men, and then they all have an orgy and then they see the Bat signal in the sky, only Batman says, fuck, I can't fight no more crime, I'm too wasted. And then they all crack up, and, like, pass out, wouldn't that be too cool?

MR. CHARLES: Indeed.

(Rudnick, 149-150)

The resemblance to the McNally passage is obvious. As with Buzz's readings of Broadway stars or Shakespeare and his surrounds, Shane's fantasy immediately displays the shameless connotative ivy of gay reading sprouting all over the place –again, to comic effect. Shane's fantasy amuses in its hyperbolic inclusiveness: in this scenario, not only is Batman gay (and Robin too), but also an apparently limitless number of other "hot" superheroes. As any true superhero fan will notice, Shane is in fact committing a textual transgression well above and beyond appropriating all his favorite characters for gay fantasy: he is indiscriminately drawing on characters from different publishing houses, which for superhero texts constitute different universes – connotation run wild indeed! What is most worth noticing is the way in which Shane's fantasy seems to illustrate Miller's description of connotation's "limitless" reach, once it's been unleashed inside a fictional space. Here, the place is the superhero world, as begun in the Batcave, and Shane's fantasy world blurs into the larger imaginary space of superhero-dom: his erotic fantasy is "light[ing] everywhere" and showing that it characteristically "can't stop networking." In the imagined scenario of Rudnick's fictional gay superhero fan, Batman,

once started, just can't stop thinking of superheroes to invite to the orgy.¹¹

There is one critical difference between Shane's fantasy about superhero worlds, and Miller's reading of *Rope*: Hitchcock, like Laurents, knew perfectly well that in his film he was talking about implicitly gay characters. Batman's creators and delineators won't be caught saying the same, and in fact strenuously deny it. Here, perhaps, is where we start to find ourselves troubled by the blurry line between producer's implication and reader's inference, the work's connotation and the reader's *bricolage*.

And yet, this seems almost immaterial. There is vast importance in the fact, as Miller points out, that connotation has long been the *dominant practice* for encoding gay meaning in popular texts. When we shift the conversation to superhero comics, it comes very close to being the *sole* dominant practice, until the reevaluations of the past few years. To push this further, what's at issue here is that, since in the post-Wertham space of the superhero world, *no* superheroes "actually *are*" allowed to be gay, there's no one against whom to contextualize a possibly-gay superhero. Unlike a discussion about -- say -- which superheroes can fly, or which are blond, this conversation has no ability to point to counter-examples. We have no grounds on which to say "Oh, if X was gay, we'd know about it; we've been told Y is gay, so we can assume if X were they would also have said so." Looking at, for instance, Batman, a reader who is merely open to the possibilities of gay interpretation finds that, since no one is *ever* said to be gay, silence cannot be interpreted as negation -- as opposed to, say, a superhero's hair color, ability to fly, marital status, or whether he is an alien from another planet, all of which are the kind of facts likely to be literally tagged, formalized and listed in the superhero "dossiers" issued regularly by the major publishers.¹² To use Miller's terms, connotation "recruits every signifier" because, when there is nothing clear and denotative to hang homosexual readings on, there is also nothing for heterosexuality to define itself against. To return to

¹¹ Interestingly, the imagery Shane evokes also exists in the spectrum of merchandised gay male erotica. I have been unsuccessful in producing an actual example of this ephemera, but memory provides a description of a Ten Percent Productions calendar for the year 2000 featuring Photoshopped images of nude men who appeared to be wearing superheroic Spandex -- including one image, entitled "After the Bust," that depicts a group unwinding in a hot tub and mirrors Shane's imagery very closely.

¹² The baseline dossier publications would be DC's *Who's Who* series and Marvel's *Handbook of the Marvel Universe*, both first published in the mid-1980s.

Sedgwick's claim – that, in modern times, heterosexuality has needed to define itself against homosexuality -- we run into the problem (if it is a problem) that without clear markers of heterosexuality, any and all superheroes *can* be “recruited,” and Rudnick's/Shane's fantasy of a superhero universe in which everyone invited is happy to pile into the “Bat-jacuzzi” may have free rein.

I should address a possible inference from what I have been saying: that this sounds as if a world of pure connotation might be preferable, in some way, for the needs or desires of sympathetic gay fantasy, to a world in which heterosexuality does have something to define itself against – in which context, presumably, homosexual readings *could* be defined away. This is a complicated question beyond the scope of this thesis, if only because of its deeply subjective nature (what is ‘preferable’ for specific kinds of reader). Gay readers, like non-gay readers, of course have different kinds of preferences, and might rather see visible, literal-level acknowledgement than dwell in a realm of extra-textual extrapolative fantasy. The absence of visible signs of gayness has enervating and alienating aspects for which this theoretical “world of free play” doesn't necessarily compensate.¹³ In the case of superhero fans, many feel a desire to see themselves represented within the superhero world, in a way that suggests that – even if that world is complex – homosexuality is not universally vilified, invisible, or, worst, totally incommensurate with the “framework” – ethical, honorable, narrative, or otherwise – of the superhero world.

The “connotative creep” of gay reading -- which Miller describes as being possible, and even invited, in a text which does not name homosexuality aloud – is not only broadly important in contemporary gay understandings of how to read history and popular culture, but is also *particularly* pertinent and, from some perspectives, threatening to the world of superheroes. For reasons both contemporary (the metafictional and pragmatic interlinking of worlds, as discussed in the Introduction) and

¹³ For a concise and interesting reading of how gay fans may respond to a fictional world which refuses to acknowledge gay presence, see Jenkins, “‘Out of the Closet and Into the Universe’: Queers and *Star Trek*.” On that subject, Jenkins writes that “[t]he [gay] fans wanted to be visible participants within [a future [i.e., the world of *Star Trek*] which had long since resolved the problem of homophobia” (Jenkins:1995/2000, 388).

historical (the grave many-leveled threat of Wertham, which even sympathetic Batman defenders like Will Brooker can only counter by a reading that adopts similar strategies in looking for “valid” connotational readings through symbols of gayness in the text), the emergence of any gay superhero may have been perceived – explicitly or implicitly, consciously or not – as a threat which might infect and destroy the entire genre, on levels both internal to the fiction and politically and economically real.

The result has been a genre that was, until recently, literally and universally empty of gay characters. Some effects of this silence have included the potential for cutting-edge writers to “rupture” the genre conventions (as Alan Moore did in *Watchmen*; see later in the chapter), for gay fans to read entire gay universes into the one empty of queerness, and for burlesque, satire, and other work at the fringes of the “mainstream” to make visible the shape of what was invisible and unspoken within. At the edges of the mainstream, in the subcultural readings of fans, and in satire we find the shape of what isn’t visible at the center. As we will see, from *The Tick* to *The Ambiguously Gay Duo*, satire in particular – to adapt the metaphor of the element, and borrow an image from a recent Alan Moore comic addressing secrets – blows the smoke, or throws the paint, that lets us see the outlines of the invisible man in the room.

To restate the claims of previous sections: during the period between 1986 and 1997, superhero genre comics have seen a shift from merely connoted to denoted homosexuality. Before the start of that period, the genre rigorously maintained the invisibility of gayness. In the contemporary period, a new set of deliberately open, modern comics show a carefully “sunlit” view of gay characters. Of course, the shifts in cultural flow and history are far from regular, and the current scene is hardly uniform. Still, we can detect a critical conceptual mass for the acknowledgement of new ideas or dimensions that -- once it has spread far enough through the superhero worlds’ linked webs -- reflexively and recursively transforms expectations and norms for the genre, and I believe awareness of the possibility of gayness in the superhero world is rapidly approaching that threshold point.

However, if gay presence was almost globally invisible pre-1986, and if it is increasingly self-aware and deliberately visible post-1997, then how are we to understand

the varieties of gay presence in the years between? In some instances, it was spoken aloud – after 1986 there were rare moments in which a character acknowledged literal homosexuality, events that gradually increased in number, and that gradually increased the numbers of ongoing gay characters, though at a slow and ragged pace. There were also characters who were often *read* by fans as gay but provided no denotational proof. However, we can also identify a third, more abstract but pervasive aspect of the discourse. I think we find in superhero comics a long-standing and much elaborated set of ways of *invoking homosexuality without naming it aloud*, of talking about it without talking about it. This set of tropes -- complicated uses of homosexuality as a metaphor for superherodom or vice versa -- have cropped up in burlesque, schoolyard jokes, and homophobic outside readings for many years. Particularly during the time period under discussion, they also began to appear more regularly within superhero comics themselves -- perhaps as a sort of internal self-commentary on the shape of what wasn't being said aloud. The tropes recur in fairly regular patterns, but they aren't often talked about in formal terms. They both invoke and constitute a joke – like the venerable nudge-and-wink about Batman and Robin seen in a work like *The Ambiguously Gay Duo* – that everyone seems to always already “get.”

These tropes hold an interesting place in the history of superhero comics, and a vexed one in terms of their seldom-stated formal relationship to the genre. However, I believe they are critically important to understanding the evolving representation of gay characters in superhero comics. In this section, I codify themes and recurring images that have seldom (if ever) been formulated aloud. I will separate, elaborate, and give names to these commonly understood tropes for superherodom-as-homosexuality. I know I run the risk of making too-broad assumptions as I give my own interpretations to these patterns. But as the history of the study of homosexuality – or, in fact, of popular genres like superhero comics – has shown, that which is “understood but unspoken” needs to undergo this process of taxonomy and examination, if we want to be able to consider “the understood” in a contextualized and historical sense, and to shine light into its often rather baroque and interesting corners.

I divide this set of patterns into two groups, best looked at separately. First, there is a group of what we will hereafter call tropes – they could perhaps more completely be described as something like “tangled conceptual nexuses.” These consist of *interlinked threads of innuendo and symbolism* -- persistent knots of meaning that have regularly cropped up in superhero comics, as well as the genre’s reflections in parody, satire, fan discourse, and mainstream media visions of superheroes, to imagine and describe the superhero life in a way that echoes the hidden theme of unspoken homosexuality. In parody, take-offs, or daring “cutting-edge” avant-garde superhero work, when these tropes are invoked, their associations with a gay reading of superherodom are often far more broadly hinted at if not explicitly acknowledged.

There are many possible ways to describe and sort out these tropes; certainly all are interlinked, echoing one or another conventional aspect of superhero genre. Some imply gayness specifically, while others suggest shades of hidden “deviance” or secrecy which can easily be read in a gay light. I sort them loosely into the following groups:

- a.) The superhero is a costume fetishist
- b.) The superhero is campy, flamboyant, or too much invested in an alternate “lifestyle”
- c.) The superhero is suspiciously homosocial
- d.) The superhero is a sadomasochist
- e.) The superhero is a potential pedophile

My sense about these tropes is that they emerge from a slightly self-critical, extra-genre reading in which the interpreter, acknowledging that adult superhero characters conventionally assume and do things in the semi-fantastic superhero world that deviate from the social norms of “real life,” ask what could possibly motivate “real” people to behave as superheroes do – and comes up with the jokey or sinister answer of a secret gay life.

Before turning to those tropes, let us look at two versions of a simpler but more profound metaphorical aspect of superhero comics. We can call these two overarching and complementary *visions of superheroes and identity*. They are, roughly, as follows:

- i.) The superhero is an ordinary person who chooses, for any of a number of reasons, to lead a fantastic, secret double life that he must keep concealed from others.
- ii.) The superhero is marked out by birth or accident from other people, and is excluded from living among them due to something in his nature or behavior he cannot conceal. His only option for a fulfilling life is to join the social world of superhumans as either a villain or a hero.

These twin understandings of superheroes – especially the relationship between the superhero, identity, and secrecy -- are important in that they provide a conceptual framework for reading the superhero story as a metaphor for homosexuality. I do not consider these tropes, because they are not so complicated or specific. The tropes offer complex, connotative ways of suggesting that the reader “decode” certain aspects of superhero genre as “really” implying activities or cultural habits associated with homosexuality. They are a set of jokey decoding games that seem to have evolved as superheroes and their audiences matured over the last several decades – usually, it seems, informed by often unsympathetic interpretations from outsiders who don’t accept the genre’s conventions and note the ways in which a superhero is different from a “normal guy.” The complementary visions of superhero identity, on the other hand, are basic to the interpretation of any conventional superhero story, and many people consider them central to its appeal. They are widely discussed as being the key that allows readers to “identify” with the fantastic superhero characters, and they are also widely interpreted as the element that makes superheroes metaphorically understandable to any of a number of minority groups, including adolescents. They have an obvious importance for any gay reading of the genre is obvious.

Of course, this binarism is very roughly drawn: many if not most superhero characters draw, conceptually and literally, on aspects of both these visions, and the visions are not necessarily mutually incompatible, even within the same superhero universe. However, dividing them in this way helps us see the complementarity at play. For our purposes, it will be important to examine the ways they have also been read as both implicit and explicit connections to the particular question of gay or “queer” readings of the genre: Either vision of superhero identity provides rich ground for constructing a metaphorical reading of the superhero as homosexual. These metaphors

undergird the tropes described above, and so it is this set of metaphors we will examine first.

PART B: TWO VISIONS OF SUPERHERO IDENTITY

It is interesting that the question of superheroic identity – which comes in roughly two flavors – has been taken by many critics and fans to define a central discourse about the “meaning” of superheroes, in a way strikingly parallel to a similar critical discussion about contemporary gay identity.

The relationship superheroes have with their “secret identities” can be grossly divided into two sorts, as described above. The first envisions superherodom as something chosen: An otherwise ordinary person, blessed with a gift of powers or weaponry, takes to the streets and creates a new identity as a helpful hero. The motivating factor may be a desire for salvation: to be a savior, by altruistically helping or saving other people, or to be saved, exculpating past crimes with present good deeds. Or the character may be motivated by vengeance: working out anger at an old loss, or frustration with the world’s injustice, by persecuting the wicked. (We might call this the Batman or Superman model: Batman is a revenger, Superman a savior.) These were the usual rationalizations assigned to earlier superheroes, who either started out superhuman or became endowed with great powers, started saving people, and were given greater emotional depth later on. (Batman’s well-known “vengeance motivation” – his desire to get back at the criminal element represented by the mugger who had killed his parents in his boyhood -- wasn’t fully worked out and presented until 1948, nearly ten years after the crime-fighting character first appeared.) Superheroes of this kind usually led “normal” human lives in one persona, and deployed their powers behind the mask of another.

One feature of this vision of superherodom-by-choice, so deeply embedded in the genre now that it is sometimes overlooked, is the implicit necessity of maintaining a secret identity. The “logical” reasons given for this have to a degree been lost to time, to the point that the secret identity can now sometimes seem like an arbitrary genre

convention. On the structural centrality of the secret identity to superhero stories, Richard Reynolds -- who considers this one of the genre's seven central "motifs" -- comments:

Why doesn't Clark let Lois know that he's Superman? The discourse of the story, the soap-opera continuity which investigates the Clark/Lois/Superman triangle, would be shattered... The explicit reasons... 'They could use my friends to get me,' reasons which have become common throughout the genre, and do not need to be spelt out when establishing a new character... are only secondary to the structural need for characters to have secret identities. The first-ever Superman story establishes the convention by using it as if it already existed. The reader is called upon to adduce adequate reasons for the disguise... What has been established is in the nature of a taboo. Refraining from a certain act (in this case, revealing oneself to be Superman) wards off a potential disaster... He pays for his great powers by the observance of this taboo of secrecy -- in a manner which is analogous to the process in which warriors in many traditional societies "pay" for their strength in battle by abstaining from sex... and other taboos designed to isolate and protect the "masculine" in their characters. Such concern with what amounts to the rites of passage... is clearly of interest and concern to a teenage audience. (Reynolds, *Superheroes*, 14-15)

The second vision of identity less obviously involves choice, instead seeing the superhero as genetically and inescapably chosen to his calling. Marked as "different" by his origin or abilities, the individual is alienated from society and has little choice but to seek a fulfilling lifestyle, with other sympathetic individuals, as a superhero -- due sometimes to ostracization and sometimes to direct threat from the "human" world. This was a vision explicitly developed, if not created, by Marvel in the 1960s, particularly in its X-Men series, and with the prominence of the X-Men since the 1980s has become an important alternate vision of superherodom.¹⁴ It was with the X-Men that the concept of a *class of persons* with superpowers, subject to control or threat from others, was fleshed out.

¹⁴ Of course, other superheroes occupy a range of other spaces; e.g. Green Lantern, drafted into a sort of superpowered military service, or the even less common case of African-American ex-convict Luke Cage, who, emerging in the "politically aware" 1970s, became a "Hero for Hire" in order to pay his bills. (Mercenary super-people usually appear as villains. The economic issues of being a superhero remains an apparently nervous, and seldom discussed, subject. (For a sardonic take on the subject, see e.g. Garth Ennis's one shot *The Pro* (2002), about a prostitute turned superhero.)

Of course, many superhero characters draw, conceptually and literally, on aspects of both these visions; and the visions are not necessarily mutually incompatible, even within the same superhero universe. The archetypal altruist Superman provides a good example: “Naturally” an alien, he is nonetheless apparently able to pass as human, and clearly chooses to perform his superheroic role out of some sense of duty or desire. Meanwhile, one could argue that Batman was selected by fate to assume his identity, through his psychological scarring in the childhood loss of his parents to crime. Nonetheless, he is clearly human – he began life as a human like all others -- and while his own motivations have become perhaps the central theme in *all* Batman writing since Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns*, as Bruce Wayne he is in no danger of personal persecution, as the X-Men have been shown to be by virtue of being mutants.¹⁵

Perhaps unsurprisingly, both these visions of superhero identity have been used to draw analogies with homosexuality -- first by fans and critics, and later, more recently, in explicit ways within the story texts themselves. In practice, these exercises have been revealing, in part because of what they point out about the competing ways in which our culture views the roots and meanings of gayness. In the first case – using the model of superhero identity as a “lifestyle choice” – perhaps the clearest recent exploitation of the metaphor is found in writer Brian Michael Bendis’s recent work on Marvel’s *Daredevil* superhero series, particularly in the story arc called, simply, “Out.” In this arc (*Daredevil* Vol. 2, #32-40), moodily illustrated by Alex Maleev and others, the identity of Daredevil’s alter ego – blind, high-profile lawyer Matt Murdock – is leaked to the press by a down-and-out FBI agent, who had in turn acquired it from one of the former enforcers of the mobster called the Kingpin. Murdock wakes the next morning to find his name and face splashed across the front page of a city newspaper, a mob of reporters camped outside his house, and a crucial decision to make: will he acknowledge the facts and try to live openly, or deny everything?

¹⁵ Some discussion has surrounded the curious state of the Marvel Universe, in which the Fantastic Four are applauded as public benefactors even as the X-Men are persecuted. The difference, it seems to have been concluded, has to do with personal attractiveness, savvy P.R., and the important distinction of humanity vs. mutanthood; cf., e.g., Kurt Busiek and Alex Ross, *Marvels* (1994).

Murdock is inclined to “bite the bullet and just come clean,” but as his law partner, confidante and closest friend, Foggy Nelson, tells him in a tense early-morning tête-a-tête, “Matt – you can’t. You can’t come clean. You can’t come out” (#33). Murdock eventually agrees and the two try to stonewall the press; but the same language returns throughout the story, often to startling effect. An argument in the offices of the *Daily Bugle* about how to cover the story sees a journalist telling aggressive editor J. Jonah Jameson: “This isn’t news... Outing someone?... It’s not news. It’s an assassination. This is the life of a good, decent person...” (#34). A district attorney opposing Murdock on a case a few issues later, who is prosecuting a minor local superhero accused of killing a policeman, says cattily to Murdock: “If I was Daredevil and I was outted – this – this is *exactly* the kind of case I would take” (#38, emphasis in the original).

It seems almost as if Bendis is interested in conjugating the word “out” in every possible form, placing it in the mouths of as many characters and contexts as possible. The net effect is to show us a word usage that seems thoroughly normalized in the New York City of Bendis’s *Daredevil*. Possibly we are meant to take from this that the New Yorkers of the Marvel universe, living as they do in a city full of superheroes as well as of high-profile gay discourse, long ago saw this word cross over into theoretical debates about superhero identities and no longer find it surprising. Certainly, the effect is that the characters use the vocabulary of “outing” without any pause for discussion or debate over its appropriateness, or even any explicit mention of its original meaning. But readers -- who are decidedly not used to seeing the vocabulary used, without further context, to mean anything but the revelation of gay identity -- are jolted anew each time a character refers to Daredevil’s “outing.” Tying the story’s revelation to the kinds of ethical questions and emotional turbulence associated with traditional gay outings, and titling the entire arc “Out,” Bendis is clearly interested in emphasizing the impact of the analogy.¹⁶

¹⁶ As it happens, Bendis has constructed a convincing reason, beyond the “explicit reasons” which Reynolds finds so unconvincing, why Matt cannot “come out”: in his work as a lawyer, he has committed fraud and deception to protect his secret identity, which – combined with the illegality of his vigilantism – would be enough to see him not only disbarred, but sent to jail. In a complex play of ideas, though, by pointing out that this set of circumstances could only arise in very rare circumstances, Bendis seems to ask

The outing of a gay person is metaphorically deployed alongside the vision of superherodom as a chosen, secret second life: the secrecy of the hidden identity of homosexuality is a metaphor for the secrecy of the hidden life of the superhero.

The second “vision of identity,” that of the mutant as genetically predetermined to difference, has long been the dominant image of Marvel’s *X-Men*. Fan readings have long perceived a link between the “persecution” suffered by the X-Men – “feared and hated by a world they never made” – and the trials suffered by real-world cultural and ethnic minority groups, including gays. Some of the specifics of “mutation” as defined in the Marvel universe – particularly the long-standing conceit that mutation often reveals itself during adolescence, potentially traumatizing the lives and families of otherwise “normal” youngsters – are particularly apt for adapting to a queer-reading analogy.

This biological model evokes numerous historical referents, fears, anxieties, and fantasies, and has proved to be polymorphously provocative. Indicative of this are the varying ways in which Marvel has played up facets of the storytelling model over the years. The Marvel universe of the late 1980s saw its superheroes and mutants threatened by a federal “Mutant Registration Act,” which spawned threatening promotional posters in which Marvel characters urged the mutants among their readers to sign on to the government registry. A related advertising campaign focused starkly on the scary side of mutant persecution. Posters and back-cover ads, styled like government information posters, bore images of the smiling faces of children, across some of which had been scrawled the crimson word “MUTIE.” The ominous legend read, “It’s 1987. Do you know what your children are?” (For extra realism, a tagline added, “Paid for by citizens in support of the Mutant Registration Act.”)

These ads themselves might prove interesting subjects of analysis: Requiring a certain depth of knowledge on the part of the viewer in order to be sensibly interpreted, they act as artifacts from a fictional alternate universe. Instead of presenting some appealing aspect of the fiction as an argument that the viewer ought to try it, the images offer a disturbing and potentially frightening vision of a grimmer aspect of that universe –

us to notice the oddness of the fact that the “need” for concealment is so often assumed without explication – the very point Richard Reynolds makes.

grimmer and more disturbing precisely because of the more “realistic” political and cultural issues they evoke.

Over the years, Marvel’s “in-continuity” stories, media spin-offs and advertising campaigns have “unpacked” different metaphorical possibilities of the mutant concept. Stories of mob persecution and mutant “lynching,” for instance, tie anti-mutant hatred to anti-black hatred in earlier twentieth-century America¹⁷, while story elements like the “Mutant Registration Act” evoke the government-sanctioned separation and clinical numbering of entire populations that preceded Nazi Germany’s attempted extermination of the Jews – a phenomenon that has acquired chilling new power in light of the recent movement toward tracking and interning “suspicious” Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. In *God Loves, Man Kills*, an important *X-Men* graphic novel from long-time series writer Chris Claremont and artist Brent Eric Anderson, the X-Men are threatened by a charismatic right-wing Christian preacher. Convinced that mutants are less than human, he believes they are “creations, not of God, but of the Devil,” and they must be exterminated by the righteous, since their very “existence is an affront to the Lord” (Claremont: 1985, 31-32 (unnumbered)). Anti-mutant hatred in this book is explicitly compared to anti-black racism, but the rhetoric of religious opprobrium and persecution also evokes real-world conservative Christian condemnation of the “lifestyles” of gays and lesbians.

Furthermore, *X-Men* supervillain Magneto -- the most high-profile actual and ideological opponent of the X-Men since the comic’s origin, and a significant defining force -- is also positioned explicitly in relation to Nazi ideology, as a Jewish¹⁸ survivor of

¹⁷ As in, e.g., *God Loves, Man Kills* (Claremont/Anderson, 1985). Prevented by African-American teacher Stevie Hunter from fighting with a boy who has called her a “mutie-lover,” young mutant Kitty Pryde cries – in unusually strong terms for the time -- “Suppose he’d called me a *nigger*-lover, Stevie? Would you be so damn’ tolerant then?!!” (Unnumbered.)

¹⁸ The ethnic and religious background of Magneto (the Germanically-named Erik Lehnsherr) is by no means clear, and suffers from numerous consistency problems. *X-Men* comics continuity has established that Magneto’s family was killed by Nazis in World War II, and that he was in Auschwitz as a young man. Problems of historical soundness and comics continuity make it unclear whether he should be thought of as a Gypsy, a Jew, or perhaps something entirely different. The first *X-Men* film placed the

a Second World War death camp. Magneto's agenda has varied over time, but usually involves insisting that mutants, as a superior but small minority group, will always be in danger from spooked and jealous humans, and that they would thus be justified in exterminating or enslaving all non-mutants to secure first-strike victory in an inevitable mutant-human war. The great irony of Magneto's position, of course, is that he is clearly right about humanity's dangerous tendency to villainize and victimize minority groups – but simultaneously, in adopting a pro-mutant and anti-human stance, he has absorbed the same eugenic ideology and dehumanizing philosophy that contributed to Hitler's genocidal regime.

In the past few years, the uses of the “mutant-as-gay” reading have been mobilized to a much greater extent within “official” Marvel texts than they had in years past. Grant Morrison, the writer currently responsible for Marvel's high-profile *New X-Men* title, has shown what seems to be a consistent interest in bringing up the contact points of the metaphors of mutanthood and homosexuality. Instead of fixing on a single word or symbol and drilling into it, as Bendis does with “Out” (using it as word, as story-arc title, and as concept), Morrison picks on one or two of different points of contact, using them as casual references but letting the patterns build. For instance, in the story arc “E is for Extinction,” published in 2001, Morrison breaks with thirty-eight years of *X-Men* tradition by having Professor Xavier publicly acknowledge that he is a mutant – on national television, no less. As the watching X-Men gasp “Oh my God... What's he doing?” and “He can't do this,” Xavier announces: “I feel that it's finally time to put an end to *masks*... to hiding our gifts behind 'secret identities'... Ladies and gentlemen. My name is Charles Xavier... and I am a mutant” (*NXM* #116).

While the event's outlines are nearly identical to those of other superhero “outings,” like that of Daredevil, this one occurs almost in passing -- as opposed to being the cornerstone of a multi-month arc -- and, for the same reasons, has consequences different in kind and scale. *New X-Men* is a team comic book, not one focused on an individual hero, and most of the members of the X-Men are already “out” as mutants.

character in Auschwitz wearing a yellow star on his chest. Fan debate about Magneto's background is lively and ongoing:

<http://www.crankycritic.com/archive00/xmen/xmagneto.html>

<http://www.alara.net/people/xbooks/magjew.html>

Unlike the personal story of Bendis's *Daredevil* arc, Professor X's revelation serves to place the ideological movement the X-Men represent – and the position of the Xavier “school,” vis-à-vis Magneto's movement – on a different footing in the eyes of the world. But Morrison uses the opportunity to nudge the reader at several points with references to the possible parallels between gayness and mutanthood. He invokes media debates, having pundits comment on “changing stereotyped portrayals of mutants in movies and on T.V.” (*NXM* #116). And he also invokes the language of HIV/AIDS. When the X-Men later deliver a manifesto of openness to the world's press, X-Man Jean Grey addresses a crowded press conference by saying: “Charles Xavier discovered he was X-gene positive one day at the end of August... thirty years ago... He was only eleven years old when he saw through all the lies we tell ourselves” (*NXM* #123).

This phrasing evokes the gay/mutant parallel without naming it aloud, and also conjures the tangle of ideas and emotions associated with the discourse of AIDS. It suggests the discourse of disease, morbidity and infectiousness, as it has been conflated in the past decade and a half with the discourse of homosexuality – and also invokes the complicated rhetoric that surrounds the task of defining homosexuality as non-morbid, and non-spreadable. The AIDS/gayness nexus also invokes the serious question that is so often revisited by writers of the X-Men: how crucial is mutanthood and superpowers to defining an individual? It hardly need be specified out how central, and vexed, this question has been in the discourses of both homosexuality and AIDS. Once again, we return to matters of identity.

Morrison also invokes the “mutant-as-gay” parallel in other ways, including – unusually – one that names the metaphor aloud. In the second half of 2002, a rupture with a former girlfriend, and the farcical chain of events thus triggered, led the long-established character Hank McCoy, called Beast, to “come out” as gay to the world's press. But Beast is *not* gay, according to his friends in the X-Men, and Morrison has maintained the character in a state of functional ambiguity for the past year – when other characters ask him about his sexual orientation, Beast refuses to confirm or deny anything. A typical exchange occurs between Cyclops – a.k.a. Scott Summers – and Beast in *New X-Men* #134. “Hank, what is this nonsense?... [Y]ou're not gay... I know you're not gay,” says Cyclops. Beast replies: “I might as well be! I've been tormented

all my life for my individualistic looks and style of dress... I'm as gay as the next mutant." For all its ambiguity, Morrison's treatment is nonetheless unusual here in naming aloud the metaphorical link. It suggests directly, through the philosophical analysis of the Beast, that *all* superheroes (or, here, "mutants") *can on some level be read as gay*. The ambiguity of the treatment, in Beast's case, suggests an acknowledgement of the vast difficulties associated with exploring this suggestion within the framework of a superhero story; but Morrison puts the implications to work on a number of levels, including the political, as we can see in comments like the one Jean Grey makes to her husband Scott when she says, "We have more important things to do than worry about whether our glowing eyes frighten the Republicans" (#122).¹⁹

Other references to the mutant-as-gay analogy, sometimes simultaneously cloyer and more blatant, have also appeared in other Marvel texts in recent years. Notable is the scene in the second X-Men movie, *X-2: X-Men United* (2003), in which the young Iceman Bobby Drake – "coming out" to his parents about his superpowers – suffers through an uncomfortable scene in the bourgeois family living room, complete with tea service, at the climax of which his mother asks, "Have you tried just... not being a mutant?" The reference is clear, and, although the words "coming out" are never used, the viewing audience by and large seems to get the joke. (In this particular case, possible concern about the suggestion of actual gayness for Iceman is deflected by the presence of his girlfriend, the character Rogue. The implications are clear, however, and played for humor on a number of levels more and less subtle; the scene opens, for instance, on a slightly charged and threatening note when the family comes home unexpectedly to behold the vision of Hugh Jackman, in his hirsute glory as Wolverine, clad only in white tank top and jeans; he is caught in the act of familiarly pulling a beer from their refrigerator, and wears the guilty expression of someone found where he shouldn't be. When Bobby's mother, turning to find her son facing her on the stairs, asks weakly,

¹⁹ We might note that Grant Morrison has a reputation as a consistent deconstructionist of the genre, and narrative, boundaries of superhero stories. Like Moore, Morrison has, in his less "mainstream" work, taken this deconstruction to startling extremes in series ranging from *Flex Mentallo* to *Animal Man* to *The Filth*. In this respect, Morrison's willingness to articulate the generally taboo link between mutation and possible gay reading can be seen as consistent with his longstanding interest in poking holes in the genre until the seams start to show through.

“Who are... these people?” there are a number of possible questions embedded in the inquiry. If not for the mitigating feminine presence of Rogue, one can imagine the scene reading rather differently.

Other aspects of the *X-Men* films’ recent success have opened other pathways into mainstream and fan gay readings of the X-Men. Openly bisexual Broadway actor Alan Cumming, well-known for his performance as the decadent, polysexual M.C. in *Cabaret*, joins the cast in the second film as Nightcrawler, importing with little change the former character’s theatrical gestures and German accent. Magneto is played in both films by high-profile, openly gay actor Ian McKellen, which certainly adds a metatextual frisson to gay-oriented readings of the film -- particularly in respect to Magneto’s persecution at the hands of the Nazis. It may also offer a more explicitly gay-interpretable take on Magneto’s often charged interactions with Professor Xavier (played by Patrick Stewart). Shortly after the debut of the second film, McKellen was asked about romantic possibilities between Magneto and his shape-shifting, blue-skinned female lackey, Mystique (played by model Rebecca Romijn-Stamos). In the interview, McKellen was quoted as saying: “Well, if you have Mystique as your girlfriend, the possibilities are endless. And I imagine that perhaps the third film might open with me in bed with Patrick Stewart, who then morphs into Rebecca, so that everyone might be clear that it’s just a little peccadillo on my part” (*View London*, online interview).

McKellen’s reply is clearly tongue-in-cheek. Still, Patrick Stewart – a favorite among science-fiction media fans for his work as Captain Picard on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, and, like McKellen, a respected product of the British Shakespearean theatre – is known for a remarkably non-homophobic attitude when discussing gay issues. Stewart even played a flamboyantly campy interior designer in the film version of Paul Rudnick’s gay comedy *Jeffrey* -- in 1995, slightly before this became common for heterosexual headline actors. There is, then, little reason to think that Stewart would be profoundly averse to such a gag in the next film’s opening scene. If nonetheless we *feel* it’s overwhelmingly likely *not to happen*, then, we might ask ourselves whether it’s the boundaries of Marvel’s conventions, or the presumed marketability to a presumed mainstream audience, that renders the possibility so improbable.

This “X-Men reading,” then, stands in contrast to the “Batman reading” of the possibilities and constraints of secret identity in the life of the superhero; in turn, they also provide alternate ways in which the superhero premise can be read as an analogy for a narrative of homosexuality. Both have long served as fertile sources for fans and critics to read metaphors of gayness; and in recent years, both have increasingly been subjected to more and less explicit examinations in terms of that analogy. These examinations are taking place within “mainstream” and iconic texts (*Daredevil*, *New X-Men*), but at the same time have occurred only under the aegis of convention-challenging and edgy writers (like Brian Michael Bendis or Grant Morrison). To a great extent, they seem to remain isolated phenomena within the world of superhero stories. On the other hand, the analogy is increasingly filtering into even more mainstream narrative incarnations – notably, the *X-Men United* movie – but in that context, it remained coy: both the tension and the humor in Bobby’s uncomfortable drawing-room scene were entirely contingent on the audience recognizing the conversational and emotional structures that are understood to accompany adolescent revelations about sexuality.

The visions of “superherodom by choice” or “superherodom by birth” offer surprisingly close parallels to the doubled discourse in America surrounding the sources of homosexuality, and the nature of its relationship to an individual’s identity – particularly as it operates around the critical nexus of the moment of coming out, which is in turn often, though not always, associated with adolescence. Of course, as we have seen, this is not a sharp division, either in the technical sense in which superhero origins are described, or in the suite of concepts associated with superhero stories. In the case of Batman or *Daredevil*, for instance – both clearly superheroes by choice – there is nonetheless a certain narrative ambivalence about predestination (Batman was traumatized by the defining moment of his violent orphaning; *Daredevil* was blinded in a similar violent trauma, but also organically changed to have super-dexterity and –senses). As if picking up on this uncertainty, contemporary mainstream stories about the characters spend a considerable amount of time debating the question of whether they actually *can* choose to stop being superheroes -- and, if they can’t, whether that should be considered a psychosis.

In these two visions of the relationship between the superhero, secrecy, and identity, we have seen two complementary possibilities for exploring the play of identity and secrets in “real” human life – and, thus, two paradigms which have increasingly been analyzed by comics writers in terms of their value as metaphor, including metaphors of sexuality or sexual identity. In fact, some have argued that this essential question of the secret identity lies at the heart of what makes the superhero interesting. They might also argue that it is at the heart of what has historically made the superhero so interesting to gay fans and readers – and so attractive, and vulnerable, to critics interested in gay readings for other reasons: once again, we nod to the spectre of Wertham’s reading and his memorialization in the shapes, and absences, of subsequent comics history. Now let us examine the group of more specialized metaphorical events: those joking or threatening Gordian “knots of meaning” that crop up as connotative, because oblique, ways of speaking-aloud the threat or possibility of gayness in superheroes.

PART C: FIVE TROPES OF HOMOSEXUALITY

In this section I discuss a few of the ways in which tropes of homosexuality have appeared in superhero comics in recent years. These tropes offer ways to talk about homosexuality within the conventional structures of superhero genre, without naming it aloud -- that is, without denoting it. These metaphors can usefully be fitted into a “history of the discourse,” insofar as they seem clearly rooted in an awareness on the part of creators and readers of a “threat” or possibility of gay meaning inherent in the genre’s own structures – an awareness that has existed at least since Wertham’s time. While I don’t claim to be able to pinpoint when or how these first arose, most of the examples I’m aware of derive from the period between about 1986 and 1997: the former year marks a moment when the possibilities of gay interpretation were first articulated clearly inside the mainstream; 1997 loosely marks a moment at which the taboo has sufficiently faded that a wave of new work addresses it explicitly. Still, although most of the “connotative” comics and related superhero fictions I cite come from this period, some of examples were published as recently as the past year – suggesting the complexity that marks the evolution of this discourse.

To me, the persistence of these concealing tropes suggests less that denotative homosexuality is still taboo in some superhero milieux -- which is, however, undoubtedly the case -- than that the contemporary genre trend of revisiting superhero comics history has led many creators to excavate and analyze these hoary clichés. (Scholar Geoff Klock has called these historically self-aware works “revisionary,” an apropos term.) There is a sense these days that the old wink-and-nudge innuendo about gayness is no longer really viable as metaphor within the texts -- any potentially gay overtones in a superhero story can be assumed to be perceptible to a mainstream audience -- but the tropes continue to be employed for humor value, and as part of the process of the contemporary, postmodern reanalysis of superherodom.

We can locate these tropes at work both obliquely, within mainstream texts themselves, and often offering more blatant innuendo in parodies or satires of superhero genre stories. Burlesque and comedy defines, as it often does, the negative space of a discourse. Finally, other examples, including many of the most contemporary examples I will cite, come from “mainstream” superhero comics which fall firmly into the category of the edgy or avant-garde: ironic and self-reflexive, they are often written by creators with a sharp awareness of, and interest in, exposing the historical conventions and ideological assumptions of the genre.

One interesting aspect these tropes share is that many of them read like patterns imposed “from outside”: that is, as if someone unfamiliar with superhero genre conventions had tried to understand why such fictions behave as they do. My sense about the tropes is that they tend to emerge from a slightly self-critical, extra-genre reading, in which the interpreter -- acknowledging that adult superhero characters regularly assume and do things in the semi-fantastic superhero world that deviate from the social norms of “real life” -- asks an apparently reasonable question: what could possibly motivate “real” people to behave this way? One formal answer is that superheroes do this *because they’re in a genre superhero story*, with no further explanation needed. However, the self-reflexive, probing or burlesquing interrogator is unsatisfied with this reply. This hypothetical reader goes probing for a “psychological” explanation that, on the one hand, he will never find stated aloud in the superhero comic itself (because the comic understands its own genre boundaries), but also which, through its very failure to appear,

seems to suggest that the superhero or his story must be concealing something. Seeking an explanation, this abstract interrogator has regularly come up with one of the few “real-world,” adult-type secrets which were conventionally understood to be so systematically repressed, in both life and fiction: concealed homosexuality. In a sense, this extra-genre questioning of superhero behavior has figured both in genre readings which seem homophobic, hostile or confused – like those of Fredric Wertham – and in the readings deployed by contemporary, psychological-“realist” superhero writers who try to re-frame the genre’s history and conventions to satisfy more adult, or “mature,” psychological rationales. As gayness becomes less of a secret in the real world and in popular fictions, these “invert readings” have gradually ceased to be so obvious and easy an answer. Perhaps this is why representations of superhero “realistic” psychology are changing these days, too.

Before I move on, two brief notes on word usage. In conversations like this, about discourses that have often been unexamined, we sometimes find ourselves forced to define our own vocabulary. To describe the state that exists inside a superhero world, or the condition of a character who leads the life of a superhero, I am using the somewhat clunky word “superherodom”; it seems necessary to distinguish it in concept from “superheroism,” which suggests swooping action, as well as the virtues of bravery and altruism underlying traditional “heroism.” “Superherodom” simply means, for better or worse, the state of being a superhero. Also, seeking ways to discuss gay presence, connotation, or readings in genre texts can be difficult; many writers on the subject use the word “homoeroticism,” even when that is not quite what they mean. One can, for instance, detect “something gay” about the Joker in many moments and mannerisms that have little or nothing to do with eroticism – the Joker exhibit mannerisms or speech stereotypically associated with gay representation or self-identification, even when alone in a scene. Again, the word “gayness” is, again, regrettably inelegant, but it more clearly describes what is going on in the text.

As I described them, the tropes are as follows:

- a.) the superhero as costume fetishist
- b.) the superhero as flamboyant or campy

- c.) the superhero as suspiciously homosocial
- d.) the superhero as sadomasochist
- e.) the superhero as potential pedophile

When read in conjunction with the two “visions of superhero identity” discussed above – which provide an array of ways to read the characteristic identity issues of superhero genre as creating a metaphorical link between the superhero and the homosexual – they offer an array of ways for thinking about the complicated historical discourse that links superherodom with gayness. One important distinction is that the visions of identity are structural elements that don’t come pre-loaded with any particular cultural value, whether used by pro-gay fans or by outsiders to read superhero comics as talking about homosexuality. On the other hand, these tropes – some of which seem to have evolved inside the genre, others of which seem to be interpretations imposed on it from outside – specifically use stereotypes to implicitly link gayness with various aspects of superhero life or behavior. The understandings they offer of the link often seem homophobic, and sometimes defensive: as if by concretizing the “threat” to mock or vilify it, the narrative can purge itself of any danger.

I have noticed, as I delineate these links, that they keep returning to certain characters, titles or writers. One writer whose name keeps recurring is Alan Moore, who has for the past two and a half decades pushed forward what can be talked about in the superhero “mainstream.” One recurring character – who is central to this discourse, for reasons both historical and symbolic – is Batman, and his many reflections and avatars.

Both will show up nearly immediately. We begin examining the first trope by making reference to one of Moore’s seminal works, 1986’s *Watchmen*.

a.) “Did the costumes make it good?”:

***Watchmen* and the superhero as costume fetishist**

This trope takes pride of place, although it is, perhaps, not the most common or the most obviously queer of those we’ll be discussing. It is positioned first due to its historical importance. This trope’s significance – and its important for the discourse about gayness and superheroes -- first became visible in the paradigm-rupturing book

Watchmen, which was written by Alan Moore, illustrated by Dave Gibbons, and published by DC Comics in 1986.

Prior to this time, superhero comics had seldom spoken homosexuality aloud. Indeed, sex itself was usually kept discreetly between the panels (which did not prevent the torrid, melodramatic heterosexual romances of superhero comics like the *X-Men* titles and *The Avengers*). Certainly, storylines exploring the erotic and psychological links between superherodom and “deviant” sex – especially stories that suggested *all* superheroes might be kinky -- were not common.

Watchmen shook things up. A self-contained, year-long 12-issue superhero story set in an “alternate” superhero universe much like our Earth, it was been viewed by many later readers as effectively deconstructing the superhero paradigm from the outside in. Among the story’s operations was an attempt to question what the *effects* and *meanings* of some of the superhero genre’s conventions might be, if they existed in a world that was more like our “real” world – more real in areas like politics, economics, human psychology and sexuality. In the Reagan-era, cold-war-dominated mid-1980s, it is not surprising that the perceptive British writer Moore came to some of his conclusions about what superheroes might have really been and meant in twentieth-century America.

The gay-related operations of *Watchmen* work on two levels, one literal and one meta-historical. The narrative operates in two branches of time, one set in the past and one in the present, and it involves two groups of “costumed vigilantes” or “masked adventurers.” The first is an invented superhero group called the Minutemen that operated from 1939 to 1949; the second is a more loosely affiliated group of their descendants and successors, that operated from the mid-1960s until being ruled illegal by a 1977 law. The present-day story is set in late 1985, and much of what the reader learns about the characters’ backstory is conveyed through dialogue, flashbacks, and also “endpaper” material found at the end of each of the 12 issues. These are fictional “excerpts” from books about the characters, articles written about them, newspaper coverage or comic books from their world, they fill in some of the gaps in the history of this superhero world.

Moore uses the earlier group of Minutemen to “out” the origins of superhero comics. He writes off the sexless, childishly innocent mythology surrounding

superheroes of the 1940s and 1950s, and proposes an alternate history in which a more complex, and hardly “moral,” group of characters are positioned in the political and cultural atmosphere of the U.S. of that period. Of the eight original Minutemen – the Silhouette, the Silk Spectre (the sole female members), the Comedian, the first Nite Owl, Mothman, Hooded Justice, Captain Metropolis and Dollar Bill – it is gradually revealed that Hooded Justice, Captain Metropolis, and the Silhouette were all gay. The Silhouette, it seems, was outed by newspapers in 1946 as having a live-in female lover; the Minutemen voted her out in disgrace, and a former adversary killed both her and her lover six weeks later (2.e10). As for Hooded Justice and Captain Metropolis, there was never any public scandal about them. Indeed, the celebrity press of the time, as found in the “endpaper” material, shows that Sally Jupiter and Hooded Justice were known to be “something of an item” (9e), until the latter disappeared mysteriously in 1955. Captain Metropolis, for his part, went in and out of retirement until he was killed in an accident in 1974 (1.19).

But the personal letters and hand-written notes in the endpapers tell a different story. The characters’ teammates and manager knew that Hooded Justice, the hulking, cowed muscleman coded as “H.J.,” and Captain Metropolis – a.k.a. Nelson Gardner, a former Marine lieutenant, called “Nelly” by those who knew him – were a couple. Furthermore, he knew that Hooded Justice was into rough trade. “Nelly called last night, upset over yet another tiff with H.J.... The more they row and act like an old married couple in public, the harder they are to cover for,” reads an endpaper letter to Sally from the team manager, dated 1948. “Nelly says [Hooded Justice] is always out when Nelly calls, out with boys, and apparently there’s a lot of rough stuff going on. One of these punks only has to go to the cops with a convincing story and some convincing bruises and it would be the Silhouette fiasco all over again” (9e).

By inventing, or re-inventing, a superhero past in which some costumed heroes were known to be gay, Moore is rewriting the squeaky-clean golden age of comics to reflect other aspects of reality. But by furthermore including the details about heroes being outed and destroyed – as in the case of the Silhouette -- and about other heroes who were provided with cover stories by their P.R. managers, he also implies that, if superheroes *had* been real people in 1940s and 1950s America, any who might have been

gay would have had little choice but to conceal their “deviant” preferences. If there had been gay superheroes, he seems to suggest, *we would have had no way of knowing*.²⁰ The relevance for queer-historical understandings of real-life celebrities in the 1950s, and today, is self-evident.

The second of the book’s queer-relevant operations involves the contemporary group of characters, who operate in a slightly alternative America of 1985. Ironically, the most critical moment here involves a heterosexual erotic encounter, but its significance for gay readings quickly becomes obvious. Two retired superheroes have recently reunited: Laurie Juspecky, who for a brief time took her mother’s former identity as the Silk Spectre, and Dan Dreiberg, who became the second Nite Owl in the 1960s. Both retired after superheroes were made illegal in 1977; Dan appears to now be in his forties, while Laurie has just turned 35. Laurie and Dan have become close after a complicated sequence of events. An earlier attempt at love-making in Dan’s home in front of the TV is cut short by Dan’s inability to perform, which leaves him embarrassed and saddened by his impotence (7.13-15). But a spontaneous late-night wild impulse leads the two to don their old uniforms and take Dan’s Owlship out for a spin over the nighttime city, and after they happen across a burning building and evacuate its residents, the pent-up excitement in both of them leads to a passionate coupling on the ship’s floor – one that this time goes off without a hitch. As they relax in the afterglow, Laurie and Dan have the following conversation:

Laurie: “Dan, was tonight good? Did you like it?”

Dan: “Uh-huh.”

Laurie: “Did the costumes make it good? ... Dan...?”

Dan: “Yeah. Yeah, I guess the costumes had something to do with it. It just feels *strange*, you know? To come out and *admit* that to somebody. To come out of the closet.”

Laurie “Does it feel *good*?”

²⁰ *Hidden from History* and *The Celluloid Closet* are obvious comparisons.

Dan: "Oh, yes. Jesus, yes... I feel so confident it's like I'm on fire. And all the mask killers, all the wars in the world, they're just cases – just problems to solve."

(*Watchmen* 7.28; Moore's emphasis, selectively included)

There's a lot going on here, but perhaps most important is the way Moore emphasizes the erotic potential of a superhero costume. For Dan, as well as, perhaps, for Laurie, the costume "makes it good," fueling his sense of self-confidence, power, and direction, as well as his libido. In a sense, Laurie's question draws out an obvious flip side to the titillation aspect of many women's superhero costumes: the Silk Spectre outfit, a version of which Laurie's mother originally wore to draw attention to herself as a potential model and actress in 1939, is little more than a translucent slip worn over a skimpy leotard, complete with high heels and a choker, and Dan is visibly turned on by the sight of her body in its crimefighting outfit when Laurie steps out of her overcoat²¹. But does the sexiness of women's costumes lie entirely in their scantiness – and if not, what does the "costume" aspect add? In pressing the question about her costume's sexiness (does Dan's own costume also turn him on?), Laurie's question asks us to interrogate the implicit voyeurism of gendered superhero erotics, inviting a more egalitarian playing ground for both genders.

Possibly most interesting, though, is Moore's choice of metaphor: Dan feels as if his confession to Laurie is like "coming out of the closet." Unquestionably, Moore chose his metaphor very carefully; but what work does it do? This rhetorical choice has two interesting consequences. First, it suggests that, if we considered how superheroes might exist in a more round and human world, *all* superheroes could turn out to have erotic reasons for donning their uniforms. The Dan Dreiberg character is about as close to a solid, regular guy as *Watchmen* has, and his heterosexuality is unimpeachable throughout the text. Second, the word choice suggests that there is, or could be, something deviant and secretive about this pleasure. And if that were to be the case – if all superheroes had

²¹ *Watchmen* 7.24. But Dan's slightly self-conscious arousal at the sight or thought of Laurie's costume is established as early as the first chapter (1.25) – placed in juxtaposition with Laurie's semi-feminist scorn in retrospect for the exploitativeness of the costume she had worn in the 1960s and 1970s.

a sexual secret, one directly related to their reasons for pursuing their lifestyle, and if they all felt they needed to keep it hidden from the judging gaze of the mainstream world – then, in a very profound sense, *all superheroes would be in the closet all the time*. All superheroes would be part of a community of sexual “deviants.” And the longstanding, polite convention that understands the superhero world as one without sexuality, one in which the abiding and infinitely varied game of secret identities is utterly divorced from ‘adult’ concerns of erotics and of difference, would become suddenly untenable.

In practice, this is probably one of the reasons *Watchmen* had the dramatic impact it did. Many accounts of comics readers who were fans in 1986 is that *Watchmen* made the practice of superhero comics, writing or reading, nearly impossible for several years thereafter. A strong interpretation would be that *Watchmen* made it impossible for readers to immediately “go back” to consuming stories written about superheroes without any account taken of sexuality, politics, or history, so convincingly had Moore apparently made his case for the great unspokens lurking in the genre. Of course, in practice, *Watchmen* does not actually assert unitary or closed reasons for any of the things superheroes do. Motivation is one of the book’s great investigative interests – if real people in the real world had ever decided to dress up as superheroes, why would they have done it? – but, although it is well-remembered for offering the possibility that eroticism seems like a very probable factor, the book actually stops short of suggesting that no one would ever credibly perform super-heroing for any other reason. Some of the endpaper material bears on this question, including comments from present and former superheroes speculating on why masked adventurers do what they do. Hollis Mason, the first Nite Owl, writes in his 1962 “autobiography,” *Under the Hood*:

“We were sometimes respected, sometimes analyzed, and most often laughed at, and... I don’t think that those of us still surviving today are any closer to understanding just why we *really* did it all. Some of us did it because we were hired to and some of us did it to gain publicity. Some of us did it out of a sense of childish excitement and some of us, I think, did it for an excitement that was altogether more adult if perhaps less healthy. They’ve called us fascists and they’ve called us perverts and while there’s an element of truth in both those accusations, neither of them are big enough to take in the whole picture” (2.e8).

And in a magazine interview dated 1976, Sally Jupiter – the 1940s-era, “Varga girl” Silk Spectre -- is asked: “Sally, how much would you say that it’s a sex thing, putting on a costume?” With her typical unpolished honesty, she replies: “Well, let me say this, for me, it was never a sex thing. It was a money thing. And I think for some people it was a fame thing, and for a tiny few, God bless ’em, it was a goodness thing.” (9e).

Moore thus *ruptured the unspoken conventions of the generic superhero world* by bringing in realistic psychological explanations for why masked adventurers might do what they do. Readers were shocked by the suggestion that a strong motivating factor might be a sexual one: not because it was coyly implied, but because it was stated aloud; not because it had never occurred to anyone, but precisely because, once it was let out of the bag, it became so hard *not* to think about. At the same time, including gay superheroes in a revisionist genre history seemed to follow along from the first premise. If “for some people, dressing up in a costume did have its more libidinous elements,” as Hollis Mason concludes in respect to the scandal that destroyed the 1940s-era Silhouette - - in a phrase that might as easily describe Dan and Laurie’s heterosexual encounter -- then clearly it would hardly be surprising if some of those “people” were even farther outside the erotic mainstream. Those “outsiders” could include characters like, say, Hooded Justice, who translated his vigilante work into erotic rough play with “boys.”²²

²² At the same time, though, a distinction may be made, one that Moore does not explicitly explore but that seems to be evident from the premises. Presumably, not *every* gay superhero gets into superheroing for the sexual thrills – that is, if we assume that not every heterosexual superhero does. The ultimately ineffectual Captain Metropolis, veering toward gay stereotype as he seems to at times, doesn’t seem to have associated sex play with his superherodom. Although we have barely any information to go on about the character’s personal life, aside from his nickname and tumultuous relationship with “H.J.,” he seems to have been one of those who went superheroing to further a political agenda, or even one of the tiny few for whom it was “a goodness thing.” It’s not clear, reading the mechanisms and personal/sexual dynamics of *Watchmen*, whether, in Moore’s vision of the world, there is such a thing as a gay superhero who doesn’t put on the costume as “a sex thing.” But rather than assuming that gay superheroes are “libidinous” as a class, it might be more sensible to build on Moore’s point that superheroes are not necessarily “libidinous” as a class. Pulling no punches, Sally says: “I mean, I’m not saying it wasn’t a sex thing for some people, but no, no, I wouldn’t say that’s what motivated the majority.” It might make sense to assume the same should be true for gay superheroes in this equation – although, indeed, we have no way of being

What seems so important about this aspect of *Watchmen* is how, in an allegorical way, Moore first makes the costume fetish stand in for any “deviant” sexuality, and then suggests that *all superheroes might share it*. By putting all superheroes into the camp of the potentially deviant, *Watchmen* thus seems to remove the isolating potential of classification into gay or straight; as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests, it offers an alternative to a minoritizing discourse of homosexuality. Moore also has Sally Jupiter, in the 1976 magazine interview, mention that the Silhouette “wasn’t the only one” in the Minutemen who had been gay, and hesitantly says: “Some professions, I don’t know, they attract a certain type...” As we have learned, not everyone in the Minutemen was gay, nor – Sally claims – was dressing up for everyone a “sex thing.” And yet to some degree, everyone in the group was of a “certain type.” If superheroism – like, say the proverbial real-world professional areas of service, design or performing arts – can be described in this way, then every superhero is implicated as potentially if not probably one of that “type.” And suddenly, the presumptive underlying assumption of the normative sexual majority is swept away from the foundations of the superhero world. In this profession -- in this genre – there are only deviants. And we who like to watch them.

b) “With a haircut like that, it’s no surprise”:

The flamboyant superhero -- camp, hobbyism, and “men in tights”

From what the historical and cultural record indicates, the superhero seems to partake of aspects of the dandy-hero of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While not entirely clear, the connection is suggested by such points of intersection as the “gentlemen swordsman” link. We can see its traces in things like the oft-cited Batman-Zorro connection, the model of the rescue through flashy violence, the 1950s and ‘60s popularity of “historical” crossovers with Robin Hood and D’Artagnan, and – it has been suggested – the proliferation as a basic of the superhero wardrobe of that pre-twentieth-century item of upscale menswear, the cape.

As the social history of clothing tells us, clothes mean different things to different periods. For the dandy hero of that period, an attention to clothing was not incompatible

sure that they are not considered universally part of the group that lies outside the “majority.”

with an aggressive heterosexuality – whether in the person of the seductive hero, or the vain, rapacious villain. But clothing’s signifiers change with culture, and their nuances can be very hard to preserve. If we imagine for a moment that the superhero’s costume does owe something to that of the gentleman dandy, then we quickly see that contemporary readers are hardly schooled in knowing how to interpret some of the signifiers and attitudes of centuries past; in fact, in the context of modern American masculinity, many of them have taken on meanings not congruent with their original shape. This may help shed light on the almost violent contradiction that troubles so many critics of comics, and in fact so many fans who are ashamed of the heroes they love. The superhero is understood to encode a thoroughgoing, supranormal masculinity, visible in his conduct as well as in his powerful body. But at the same time the superhero is encumbered with the costume – form-fitting tights, cape, mask and all – that we understand to be goofy, childish, or suspiciously unmasculine.²³

The problems seem to reside in connotations of either immaturity or effeminacy. Contemporary America generally considers, for instance, that “men in tights” are of profoundly suspect masculinity. That might have been all right for Renaissance courtiers, but it is not all right for contemporary masculine men. The disturbing gender transgressiveness of seeing a contemporary man wearing tights is a source of inexhaustible jokes in the culture. (Both the joke and the seriousness of the tension are chronicled in a film like *Billy Elliot* (2000), in which a solidly heterosexual boy with a love of ballet overcomes the vast masculine prejudices of his working-class coal-mining community to make to the stage.) But even when we are consciously aware of cultural and historical difference, it is difficult not to read costume signifiers as marking

²³ Interesting explorations of how the dandy of an earlier period might work with, or comment on, the superhero paradigm have been tried several times – the works lie almost necessarily in works outside the mainstream and, maybe unsurprisingly, often seem to be by British creators. Notable to my mind are the previously mentioned *V for Vendetta*, whose revolutionary hero sports a seventeenth-century cape and fencing stick; and *Sebastian O.*, a 1993 Vertigo miniseries by Grant Morrison and Steve Yeowell, which is set in a Victorian steampunk alternate England, and whose eponymous protagonist – anarchic, amoral and appreciably asexual -- is a well-dressed blend of Oscar Wilde, James Bond and anybody’s favorite fencing assassin. The protagonist has been well-described as an exponent of one of Morrison’s recurring idées fixes, “the violent dandy.”

http://www.comixminx.net/Seb_O.htm

transgression, in ways both threatening and funny. The title of Mel Brooks' spoof film *Robin Hood: Men in Tights* succinctly evokes the joke, which hardly needs more elaboration.

Tights are only the most visible of several congenital, but problematic, markers for the would-be masculine superhero. Another is seeming to have too many costumes or gadgets – gadgets often being referred to as “toys,” both inside of superhero stories and in discussions about them. It's clearly all right for Batman to have a great car, but when superheroic accoutrements proliferate too much or become too ornate (the Bat-gyro? The boxing-glove arrow?), they raise suspicion as being inappropriate for adult men. That is, it's all right to have costumes or toys as long as they're utilitarian; but when a character seems to take them too seriously (or, conversely, to have too much fun with them), suspicion may arise. Andy Medhurst has made a provocative connection between the “camp” of the 1966-7 incarnation of Batman, and the proliferation of bat-gadgets of that character in that period; he sees the series as beautifully concretizing Susan Sontag's characterization of camp as being “serious about the frivolous” (Medhurst 156).

The association of toy-obsession with something “off” – flamboyance, immaturity, villainy? -- is most visible in villains, many of whom are associated with Batman, such as the Toymaker (with his exploding dolls), the Joker (with his murderous laughing gas), and the Penguin (who appears in Tim Burton's second Batman film riding a giant rubber duck). But it's hard not to read in them an implicit critique of Batman's own array of gadgets. The problems are similar for clothing: Masculine (white) American men are not “supposed” to dress flashily, are indeed constrained to a very specific and relatively limited color palette, and are conventionally supposed to indulge in a passion only for specific kinds of toys. In another era, perhaps D'Artagnan could be masculine in a ruff and hat, and James Bond manages – just barely – to be masculine even within the camp of his over-the-top weapons and toys. But the history is no defense against American suspicion about the potential effeminacy always lurking in clothing, as even Robin Hood (not, in his time, a fashion plate) discovered at Mel Brooks' hands. An interest in clothes that goes too far is thus likely to be coded as effete or as villainous, while a too-enthusiastic interest in gadgets – while safer – is liable to be perceived as childish -- almost as suggestive of immaturity as an interest in comic books.

Perhaps due to the gradually increasing awareness of camp in the popular culture, and of the reality of gay culture and gay people living beside and inside the mainstream, the flamboyance of superheroes seems to have become more vexed since the 1960s. Different companies and movements have taken different approaches regarding the “problem” of the camp/flamboyance factor; some have ignored it completely, while others try to make superhero costumes more “believable,” and others have taken different approaches to de-“camping” costume or playing down its flamboyance. (Andy Medhurst describes the toning-down of Batman’s costume and image in the 1970s and 1980s as “the painstaking re-heterosexualization of Batman” (159).) And in 2000, the release of the first *X-Men* movie coincided with the decision of *New X-Men* writer Grant Morrison to take the characters out of costume for the first time since their inception, dressing them instead in stylish black leather pants, jackets and boots. Before that, in the early 1990s Image Comics set the tone for a movement that turned men’s costumes into ripped shirts and armored exoskeletons, in a move evocative of the mid-80s Rambo and Predator aesthetics (while at the same time female costume became ever skimpier and more explicitly like lingerie, even as the bodies became more exaggerated and eroticized). Superhero costume for men remained ornate, but became simultaneously more “functional” and highly gendered – the men weren’t wearing tights, but instead bristled with guns.

The effete associations of flamboyance are more specifically discussed elsewhere in this chapter, notably in the discussion of the Joker in the section on homosociality, heroes and “their” villains. But it is important to emphasize that these associations can be seen as a “threat” to the masculinity of superheroes as well as of villains -- which is why I am sketching their outlines under the heading of a trope. Of course, that suspicious “flamboyance” is not limited to clothing. In the real world, we carefully read the choices an individual makes about a number of lifestyle elements, especially those relating to leisure activity and aesthetic preferences – certainly we see flamboyance in choices about interior decoration, or in certain mannerisms of speech, movement or gesture. One key term here is “lifestyle.” As most Americans are aware, this profoundly euphemistic word literally refers to a whole bundle of personal and aesthetic choices, but it is often invoked to implicitly (connotatively?) suggest that somebody’s choices involve being gay. It’s

also sometimes seen, used in a reflexive and self-aware way, to describe what superheroes do in their spare time. The point is that this trope appears with some regularity as an in-joke about superhero campiness; but the reason for that seems fairly clear. When you look at it from an extra-genre perspective, a number of the signifiers of the superhero “lifestyle” – obsessive interest in a personal hobby, pleasure in costume-making and dressing up, enjoyment of performative, flashy displays of physical prowess for (apparently) its own sake – can indeed be aligned with aspects of personal “lifestyle” that have, during the past century or past couple of decades, come to be considered campy, un-masculine, or otherwise suggestive that their subject is gay.

I am not suggesting that there is any particular logic to these associations. Nor do I want to suggest that the flamboyant aspects of superhero genre should not be read as pro-gay or as pleasurable by gay fans. But it does seem evident that the cultural logic that associates obsessive hobbyism or aesthetic interests in a male with ineluctable homosexuality is shaky, and is currently in the process of being dismantled. After all, there does seem to be a certain bizarreness in the fact that one of Fredric Wertham’s most oft-cited claims of evidence for Batman and Robin’s homosexuality was the particular ostentatiousness of the vases in Wayne Manor, and the unusual beauty of their flowers (Wertham 190, as cited in Medhurst 151). The effects of this rather abstruse association will be discussed later as they manifest in related tropes. Still, its far-flung threads are resonant with other tropes of masculinity and gayness both within and outside of superhero comics. In representations of villainy throughout our popular culture, especially in genre stories (from superhero comics to Disney), it’s hard not to stumble across a knot made from these intertwined threads associating the qualities of flamboyance, effeteness, homosexuality, untrustworthiness, weakness, seductiveness, and villainy.

Possibly because it carries such a broad threat to the reading of superheroes, the metaphorical tangle of dandyism-flamboyance-superherodom-gayness seems to make itself visible in passing and generally playful references, even when it does appear in comics or their burlesques. Only by considering these references as a pattern does it become evident that they constitute a trope. One less-than-playful example in the pages of the often-referred-to *Watchmen* introduces most of the stereotypes in play. In an

establishing scene from the miniseries' first issue, the vigilante character Rorschach, who is one of the last "superheroes" still operating, pays a series of visits to his former colleagues about a suspected serial killer preying on former "masked adventurers." His last visit takes him to Adrian Veidt, a former acrobatic superhero known as Ozymandias, "the world's smartest man." Veidt was an ascetic in food and exercise, with a philosophy based on the life of Alexander the Great, and propounded a Charles Atlas-like health regime (which he sold through mail order). Yet during his superhero career, Ozymandias was perhaps the most incongruously flamboyant dresser of the generally sober-toned crew that made up the Minuteman superhero team. "Flashback" period images show him wearing a deep purple tunic, gold plating on his arms and legs, and a broad gold belt, torque, and headband, for a gilded-action-figure effect that suggested a florid take on classical ideals of physical perfection.

When Rorschach visits Veidt in his marble-floored penthouse office, we see the older, more professional Veidt – now a successful businessman -- in a deep purple business suit, with a head of well-kept curly blond hair. His clothes and offices clearly reveal in expensive luxury, subtly expounding the "classical" theme with marble pillars and velvet curtain. Veidt's speech and behavior are calm, level and thoughtful – as far as it's possible to get from being excitable. Still, as he leaves Veidt's marble-lined office, Rorschach jots a note in his journal: "Meeting with Veidt left bad taste in mouth. He is pampered and decadent, betraying even his own shallow, liberal affectations. Possibly homosexual? Must remember to investigate further." (Moore:1986, I.17-I.19).

Given the generally offensive and retrograde right-wing worldview of the Rorschach character, the reader is likely to scoff at his assumption, which is clearly rooted in stereotype. But Rorschach's comment brings those stereotypes into the book's conversations with the reader, demanding that we take note of them: Rorschach, based on this brief conversation, has become "suspicious" that Veidt may be homosexual – why? Presumably, the presumption is based on Veidt's "flamboyance" of clothing and attire... or perhaps on his fondness for the classical Greeks, or on his unashamed display of wealth, or on his un-military rejection of Rorschach's theory of a conspiracy and serial killer, or on his less than tasteful sense of interior design! Rorschach invokes old-fashioned and rather hostile euphemisms for homosexuality: "decadent," "affectations,"

even – in this more than usually politically-charged book – the association of the “liberal” with the weak and unmanly. For Rorschach, this also seems to imply something untrustworthy and unreliable: it is not clear exactly what use he would plan to make of the information if he discovered that Veidt was “homosexual.”²⁴ What is interesting is that, although we can dismiss Rorschach’s comment as the homophobic stereotyping of a paranoid loser, the aspects of Veidt’s presence that stimulate Rorschach’s suspicion are, in fact, simply highly magnified aspects of the “suspiciously flamboyant” signifiers that mark many superhero characters: shiny costume, physical grace, a taste for the performative and the flamboyant.

For a more playful appearance of the dandy-superhero-gayness trope, we can look to in Issue #5 of *Astro City*, a revisionary superhero series by writer Kurt Busiek that began publication in the mid-1990s. In a boarding house in the outskirts of the city, we find the superhero Crackerjack – known as an acrobat and an egotist -- in the persona of his alter ego: one Eugene Wallace, described by the elderly man with whom he shares the rooming house as “a genial failure.” Eugene is a professional theatre dancer, we learn, but one who never seems to successfully land a gig. We first see Eugene blowing into the lobby, clad in jeans, a university jacket, and a black tank top, with long curly red hair flowing back from his face. As he cheerfully reports his latest unsuccessful audition and bounds up the stairs to his room, the dowager ladies of the building murmur behind him, *sotto voce*: “*Another rejection!*” One says under her breath, “You’d think the boy would *learn!*” Her companions respond:

“Why can’t he get a normal, *respectable* job like any other -- ”

“Well, you know what *I* heard -- ?”

²⁴ Rorschach’s offhand statement has a curious coda: Ozymandias does in the end turn out to be untrustworthy – at the very least, duplicitous -- though it is characteristic of the book’s moral ambiguity that it is not possible to call him a villain. There is no further reference to Rorschach’s suspicions about Veidt’s sexuality during the course of the book, but in fact there is also no further reference to Ozymandias’ sexuality at all; we have no reason to think he really is gay, but there is also no evidence to the contrary. Ironically, this is itself a little conspicuous in a book that pays such interested attention to the sexualities of its superheroes, and gives us often graphic insight into the physical and psychological erotics of all its other major characters. Alan Moore may well have been trying to leave the question deliberately open.

“What? *What?*”

“Well, you know those *theater* types – a bunch of *sissy-boys*, my Herman used to call them -- ”

“With a haircut like *that*, it’s no *surprise* --”

(Busiek, *Life in the Big City*, 125)

The ladies are hardly presented here as sympathetic characters – their “twittering ignorance” is an irritant for the grumpy old man who is the viewpoint character of this issue. But the form their gossip takes, once again, neatly compresses a number of stereotypes into a few brief lines. Eugene, the superhero alter ego who seems not to have a real life or a job, is perceived as immature and irresponsible. In this case, the alter ego’s profession is explicitly that of the theater. (This is not at as arbitrary a choice as it might seem, since Crackerjack’s superheroic acrobatics suggest that his training is in dance and that it is a cover profession he could convincingly pull off. One is spurred to wonder why more superheroes don’t select “chorus-line dancer” as their placeholder profession of choice; perhaps some reluctance about an unspoken but unwelcome connotation?) The watching ladies interpret Eugene’s theater career, his distractingly long hair, and maybe even a certain “flamboyance” in his friendly attitude as pointing to only one conclusion: he is probably a “sissy-boy.” That would explain not only his association with “theater types,” but also apparently would also explain his failure to be like “other” people in getting a job that would be either “respectable” or “normal.” After all, the “common knowledge” tells us that certain signifiers always signify: “with a haircut like that, it’s no surprise.”

The joke is that the ladies have picked up on a number of the (often negative) lifestyle elements associated with superheroes – immaturity, an inability or unwillingness to get a real job, theatricality, a performative and physical streak – and read it, quite reasonably in cultural context, as implying a conclusion about his sexuality. The joke is complicated by the fact that a number of these elements veer toward homophobic stereotype, if not deriving from it entirely (“the theatrical gay man” is merely a stereotype; “the immature gay man” can be a painful or dangerous one). As it turns out, the joke is on them – or maybe on Eugene: the “real” Crackerjack is petty, an egotist, and

a dandy, but the latter in the old-fashioned, oversexed heterosexual sense: he's a tactless would-be seducer of women. In picking up on all the signals, the ladies get it wrong at the same time they get it right. Interpreting certain signs of Eugene's "lifestyle" to suggest that he is a "sissy-boy" – by implication, that he is gay -- they confuse a "lifestyle" of homosexuality with the "lifestyle" of a heterosexual superhero. The overt joke is that the ladies get it wrong; what's even funnier, if maybe less deliberate, is the way the passage points out how ridiculously similar the two "lifestyles" look from the outside, at least to those willing to trade in stereotype.

As a final example, let's look at a recent "transmedia" superhero story. Consider the 1999 film *Mystery Men* -- a movie I would place into the category of the "superhero burlesque": a film simultaneously knowledgeable of superhero norms, clearly affectionate toward the genre, and happy to mock those norms. This film follows a group of eccentric wanna-be superheroes, most of whom have powers that are only vaguely super (farting, rage) and neuroses that prevent them from using them. One such character is the Blue Rajah – a turbaned, British-accented fork-thrower, played by comic actor Hank Azaria. Shortly before the film's climactic group battle scene, we find the Rajah caught by his mother, with whom he still lives, rifling her silverware drawer in full costume in the dead of night. The Rajah at first tries to explain away his behavior -- lapsing into the very non-British, speech that characterizes way the "real" Blue Rajah talks. But then the character reclaims his courage, steadies his accent, and announces:

Rajah: I'm a superhero, Mother.

Mother: A superhero?

Rajah: An effete British superhero, to be precise. I am pilfering your tableware because I hurl it. I hurl it with a deadly accuracy. The Blue Rajah is my name. And – Yes, I know I don't wear very much blue, and I speak in a British accent. But if you know your history, it really does make perfect sense. The point is: Your boy's a Limey fork-flinger, Mother. Hard cheese to swallow, I know, but there it is. What will the bridge club think?

After a few moments' silence, the mother displays her remarkable tolerance by offering her son the use of more forks. They head up into the attic, where she produces an ancient box filled with fancy silver tableware.

Rajah: Oh!

Mother: These belonged to your great-great grandmother. I was saving these for your wedding day, but, from the looks of it, that day... it's probably a long way off.

Rajah: Oh, Mom, you're -- You're taking this incredibly well.

Mother: You know, I've always known you were special, Jeffrey, but I... I just never realized *how* special.

Rajah: [taking the box] Well, I'd better get going. I've got a city to save.²⁵

This small moment -- strikingly reminiscent in several ways of the Iceman scene in the second *X-Men* movie -- again conjures the conceptual link of “lifestyle” and flamboyance to suggest that superherodom is metaphorically analogous to homosexuality. We see the classic moment of discovery: the mother coming upon her son doing something suspicious in the home, as Iceman’s mother did when stumbling across teenage mutants on the staircase and a man in a tank top in the kitchen. Here, the Blue Rajah has a very specific moment of “coming out” to his mother – including explicit revelations that he’s “effete” and “British,” concepts that seem to be implicitly linked. The metaphorical referent of the joke is obvious. The framing of his mother’s acceptance of his lifestyle seems to cement the metaphor. And Jeffrey’s mother swiftly concludes that she won’t be needing to save Grandmother’s silver, because her son won’t be getting married “anytime soon.”

The available readings here seem to be that either superheroes don’t get married, or that – for reasons the audience should find obvious -- “effete, British” people don’t get married. Since the Rajah is the only one of *Mystery Men*’s superheroes for which this

²⁵ Courtesy of the *Mystery Men* online full-script transcription by C. “Sparky” Read; my edits for punctuation.
<http://members.madasafish.com/~gentsandplayers/gp3/Fiction/Fiction2e.html>

issue arises – several others have heterosexual spouses, or start romantic involvements during the course of the film -- it's hard not to read it that way, given the obvious signification of those markers in American cultural media as signs of homosexuality. Is the thing that makes Jeff "special" his superheroism, or his effeminity and what it implies? It hardly matters which reading the viewer chooses, and indeed the two readings are not really separable: Together, they form an intertwined joke about the self-evident metaphorical readings of the superhero's lifestyle – in this case, aspects of lifestyle that we might well call flamboyant, campy, or even, at certain logical extremes, "effete." They are what this trope collectively mobilizes to point us toward reading superheroes – maybe certain superheroes, or maybe all superheroes -- as gay.

c.) "The inferno of desire": The superhero as sadomasochist

Clearly linked to the trope of the superhero as costume fetishist, this one nonetheless deserves a separate mention. Like the trope of flamboyance, this is also linked to the identity metaphor of the superhero as chosen and "alternate" lifestyle; and it, too, can operate as a metaphor for the superhero as homosexual. S&M erotics in superhero comics have only seen real denotative exploration, as usual in avant-garde places. Nonetheless, in these subterranean genre reflections it has been cropping up for some time (no pun intended).

Like so many of these tropes, this one often circles around Batman. Certainly, S&M interpretations of the Caped Crusader have been around for quite some time. They were not born with the snickering reactions to the two Joel Schumacher-directed late-nineties Batman films (*Batman Forever*, 1995, and *Batman & Robin*, 1997), which drew comment for "camp" and fetish details like the moulded rubber nipples on Batman and Robin's costumes. One example from the comics shadow-mainstream earlier in the 1990s might be a six-page back-up feature in the semi-underground *Gay Comics* 1993 "Super-Hero theme issue," which featured "Major Power and Spunky," a pair of "costumed vigilantes" -- one of them "the product of a lifetime's discipline... a daily regime of harsh exercises" -- who "race with the night" in "body-hugging kinky costumes with bulges in all the right places" (the strips intersperse adventure-hunting with its inevitable results, which include lots of ropes, handcuffs, floggers, and dildoes, as in the

escapade of “the Rubber Lovers and their mysterious master”)²⁶ (*Gay Comics* #20, 13-18). Another instance might be *L'enfer des desirs*, a French graphic novel – translatable as *The Inferno of Desire* – published in 1991 by Les Humanoides Associés. Created by artist Igort, this book is set among “the first Russian superheroes” and features a rubber-clad personage looking much like Batman, who does battle among a miasma of eroticized male bodies, “ultra-violence,” and bound and gagged pre-teenage boys.

But this trope, like so many other elements of superhero erotics, saw one of the earliest attempts at a clear-eyed exploration in *Watchmen*. As mentioned in the section above, in *Watchmen*’s alternate superhero history, Hooded Justice is one of the characters who formed the 1940s superhero team called the Minutemen. In fact, H.J. turns out to have been “the first masked adventurer outside comic books” (*Watchmen* 1e.6). H.J. is reminiscent of Batman in many ways. His debut act of vigilantism – stopping an attack upon a couple “walking home after a night at the theater... set upon by a gang of three men armed with guns” – distinctly suggests Batman’s “origin story” event (the nighttime mugging and murder of young Bruce Wayne’s parents after a night at the cinema). He is openly compared to Superman as the first of his kind, but in milieu, tactics, costume and attitude, is much more evocative of Batman.

Hooded Justice is the character Alan Moore uses to comment on the links among eroticism, violence, and costumed super-heroing. To some degree, this starts with his costume. In his first appearance, the newspapers describe Hooded Justice as wearing “ ‘a black hood and cape and also... a noose around his neck.’ ” By the time the character joined the Minutemen, the costume had evolved into body-fitting red pants, a red cape

²⁶ Interestingly, the first special superhero of *Gay Comics*, dated Summer 1986, features a story about “Leatherthing” – a sort of living-dead golem made from leather clothing, hood, jacket, boots and all, left abandoned as the ‘70s leatherman culture dried up in San Francisco: “... the dark cloud of AIDS settled over the scene leaving our leather bound lad trapped inside a tomb of leather, a deflated spectre of a time and lifestyle now removed.” Like a number of the reflexive and parodic pieces in the issues, “Leatherthing” can only be called a superhero story through a certain generous artistic dispensation, but nonetheless – aside from its intriguing use of the golem image to comment on the vanishing lifestyles of the Castro – the story draws parallels pointing out the evident resemblances among superhero costume, the demonstrative and quasi-military costume of this gay subculture, and the fetishistic aspect of costuming which both leather and the superhero uniform can evoke. (*Gay Comics* #8)

with a high flared collar, and rope wrapped noose-like around the neck and gauntlet-like around belt, wrists and ankles; midnight-black (or blue-purple) gloves, boots, and a form-fitting shirt complete the outfit, along with a cowl like that of an executioner that entirely covers the face, leaving only slits for the eyes. (This is his costume the first and only time we see the character “in the flesh,” in a scene set in 1940 (*Watchmen* 3.5-8, 3.e10).)

In terms of in-story explanation, Hooded Justice’s curious costume has a *logical* purpose – presumably, by looking like an executioner, his intention is to symbolically represent his idea of justice, as well as to threaten and frighten wrongdoers. In superhero genre terms, this is a well-established explanation for frightening vigilante costume – it is the “origin story” reason for Batman’s decision to dress as a bat, another point of resonance between Hooded Justice and Batman²⁷. Furthermore, Hooded Justice is believed to have been a professional circus strongman in his civilian life, which suggests the historical theories tying superheroes’ skin-tight costumes and flashy colors to the clothes worn by professional wrestlers and circusmen of the time.

However, Hooded Justice’s attire also strikes a deeper, more oblique note, one not necessarily visible to all readers. The rope at wrists and ankles hazily evokes scenarios of bondage -- which are the more complex for suggesting a vision of the superhero not as binder but as bound subject. The image invokes the pleasures of voluntary submission by the masculine and powerful superhero to dominance by parties unnamed. In that context, certainly the noose also suggests the play of autoerotic asphyxiation, the cowl the face-covering masks of S&M play.

What I find so interesting about the use of this costume is that, despite its obvious theatricality, readers of superhero comics are so used to extreme costume elements that

²⁷ The essential Batman “origin story” first appeared in *Batman* #47 (Bob Kane and Lou Schwartz), published in 1948, and reprinted in *The Greatest Batman Stories Ever Told* (New York: D.C. Comics, 1988). The costume inspiration comes in a three-panel passage that has been so often quoted it has attained a semi-legendary status:

“Then, one day he was ready for his new role. ‘Criminals are a superstitious, cowardly lot’ [Bruce Wayne muses] ‘so I must wear a disguise that will strike terror into their hearts! I must be a creature of the night, like a... a...’ And, as if in answer, a winged creature flew in through the open window. ‘A bat! That’s it! It’s like an omen! I shall become a bat!’ Thus was born this weird figure of the shadows... This avenger of evil – *The Batman!* ‘Some day, I’ll find the killer of my parents...’ [says Batman, crouched upon a rooftop on a full-moon night.] ‘Some day...’” (*Greatest*, 70).

when we first see the character we accept Hooded Justice's relatively simple costume without ever registering its sexually suggestive aspects, although we may note with appreciation the way – even, the “primitive” way -- it evokes the Batman costume. But after Moore has gradually revealed to us his historical secret -- that the character was homosexual; that he concealed this from the world with a female “beard” even as he lived in a relationship with another male costumed hero; and that he was deeply involved in S&M activities with young male “punks” – the reader, reconsidering the character, may find him- or herself utterly unable to overlook the suddenly blatantly suggestive evidence of the costume.

In a flashback to 1940, after a meeting of the Minutemen superhero group, we see the Comedian – an attractive, young, but aggressively violent character – sexually assault Sally Jupiter, the Silk Spectre, in a back room of the headquarters. She is rescued when Hooded Justice comes looking for her. As events unfold, the characters interact in a remarkable page-length tableau. Hooded Justice sees the two in their damning position – the Comedian has Sally prostrate on her stomach, bleeding from the nose, while he straddles her back and takes off his belt. He looms over the Comedian, his eye-slits seeming to glow red. “You vicious little son of a bitch...” he says, a moment before grabbing the Comedian by the collar and proceeding to beat him up. But the Comedian, nose broken and breathing hard, glares up at his attacker from where he hangs limp in his arms. “This is what you *like*, huh?” he manages to get out. “This is what gets you *hot*...” Hooded Justice simply stares down at him for a silent panel, eyes wide and visible under the cowl, and the Comedian – like the reader – can see that the truth has hit home. “Get out,” he orders the Comedian, setting him down and turning away. But the Comedian, grinning as he goes – wiping off blood and hauling up his pants -- says, “Oh, sure. But I’ve got your number, see? And one of these days, the joke’s gonna be on you...” After he goes, Hooded Justice speaks to Sally, as she drags herself up from the floor, bleeding from nose and mouth. “Get up,” he says. “And for God’s sake, cover yourself.”

(*Watchmen* 2.4-8)

In my reading, Moore makes more of this than a single fascinating conceptual coup. As he did when concealing and then revealing the position of gay superheroes “hidden” from history, Moore manages to cause an attentive reader to suddenly

interrogate the potential eroticism in a good many “costumed hero” uniforms – including Batman’s. Batman, as an evident point of inspiration for Hooded Justice, provides the central case. Hooded Justice’s hood unquestionably looks like that of an executioner, but it visibly conjures Batman’s cowl as well, whose face concealment, bat-like “ears” and slitted eyes are iconographically associated with the character. (A “cowl” is not a common article of 20th-c. clothing by any means, and I have a hypothesis that some large percentage of American readers know it only through Batman – few people, real or fictional, wear them.) When Hooded Justice’s cowl reminds us both of Batman’s cowl and of the violent eroticism of S&M, the correlative effect is that it causes us to perceive the link between Batman’s costume and the same erotic imagery.²⁸

As previously mentioned, gay and S&M readings of Batman’s costume are hardly unprecedented. However, Moore’s game with Hooded Justice, subtle and brief though it is, is, I think, the first significant attempt in the superhero mainstream -- or something as near it as *Watchmen* was -- to point out the possible S&M readings of Batman’s costume and “lifestyle.” By evoking the iconicity of Batman, this game further seemed to demand a reconsideration of superhero costumes and practice in general.

²⁸ Of course, the traditional costumes of *female* superheroes reveal a parallel history in which BDSM themes, implied or inferred, are hardly new. Almost as well-remembered as Wertham’s readings of Batman is his take on Wonder Woman, and the current surge in curious interest about her creator, William Moulton Marston, is largely due to Wertham’s memorable critiques. Even if they disagree with Wertham’s alarmist conclusions, few later readers dispute Wertham’s observation that, historically, there has been an awful lot of bondage in *Wonder Woman*. The “Amazing Amazon”’s trademark bracelets, lasso, and high-heeled boots seem to suggest images of bondage and domination by the superheroine, while her frequent capture and binding by opponents is reminiscent of pin-up and bondage fetish imagery of the time. What, then, is so troubling about the innuendo Moore constructs around Hooded Justice, who is imagined as a chronological contemporary of Wonder Woman? Perhaps it is because Hooded Justice is male, and powerful, and comments upon Batman; and because mapping BDSM desire onto the powerful male superhero body is unsettling in a way that mapping desire onto the body of the female superhero -- a long-established voyeuristic tradition in the genre -- is not. (Notably, much innuendo about Robin – from Wertham to later reinterpreters like Grant Morrison in *Arkham Asylum* – has focused on the way the boy’s body is exposed, in short shorts, and often seen in bondage. As the joke about “Robin, the Boy Hostage” makes clear, there are respects in which Robin often filled the plot roles -- and the visual positions – that genre adventure stories usually assign to women.)

Moore's reading, however, was hardly the last. As we will explore later, among the more intriguing aspects of the characters Apollo and the Midnighter – created by Warren Ellis for the *Stormwatch* title in 1998, and later brought into *The Authority* – is that this revolutionary gay male superhero couple was in some ways not new at all. The characters partake none too subtly of the iconography of, respectively, Superman and Batman. The resemblance of Apollo to Superman is limited to fairly obvious terms – sun-powered strength, flight, heat vision, and classically chiseled good looks, as well as a certain goofy “niceness.” As a reinterpretation of Batman, however, the Midnighter takes the character's iconography in rather more interesting directions. Midnighter's costume evokes Batman's, with close-fitting black leather costume and long capelike cloak, and he wears Batman-like boots, gloves, and an eye-slit-equipped black cowl. His superpowers involve physical strength and resilience and an ability to plan and calculate fighting tactics, which seems to take Batman's street-fighting origins and amp them up.

But Midnighter is also a sadist, one who openly enjoys inflicting pain, and that fact – combined with his open homosexuality and his Batman-like attributes – evokes a much more complicated nexus of associations. In the context of *The Authority*, the pleasure taken by superheroes in state- or public-sanctioned violence against others can to some extent be read as a questionable issue raised for the reader, a nudge to re-examine the psychological and political meanings of the super-power and hyper-violence embedded in the genre. In the matter of the Midnighter, however, his thoroughgoing pleasure in bloodying and destroying enemies demands that the reader perceive resonances that go well beyond simple superhero fighting. Openly gay, grinning with unbounded pleasure as he fights, and dressed in a shiny black leather mask, gloves, costume and trenchcoat, Midnighter's open exercise of pleasurable power and violence inevitably invokes the themes of gay male “leatherman” culture and erotics, as well as the world of S&M games of dominance, submission, and the infliction of erotic pain. Those linkages of violence and sex are suggested, both in terms of the consensual role-playing scenarios the costume evokes, and in the larger scene of superhero violence which -- *always* readable as wish-fulfillment fantasy -- is suddenly opened up to explicit reading as erotic fantasy as well. Although Ellis never specified what sort of things Apollo and Midnighter like to do in the bedroom, certainly it would take a great effort of will not to

read *Midnighter*'s explicit, smiling pleasure in superhero violence, his choice of masked leather costume, and his gay sexual identity as implicitly linked in the nexus of erotic identity.

If we draw a through-line between these three figures – Hooded Justice, Barman, and the *Midnighter* – we find an evolving commentary, in which Moore and Ellis both bend the assumptions of the genre by demanding a cultural and historical acknowledgement of the potential S&M overtones of superhero costume and activity. Moore's Hooded Justice is a Batman-inspired figure, written in 1985/ 86 and set in the 1940s and 1950s; that character forces readers to acknowledge the possibility of a hidden gay history for superhero characters and comics, as well as the motivational possibilities of erotic pleasure in violence and/or costume. Ellis's *Midnighter*, created in 1998 and participating in a determinedly modern superhero world on Earth, is also a Batman avatar -- explicitly acknowledged as such outside the comic if not within it -- whose openly gay identity and open, sanctioned pleasure in both leather and violence suggests a modern-day version of Hooded Justice, while continuing the same commentary on the interpretive potential of Batman's costume and pursuits. Indeed, if we contrast the hidden nature of Hooded Justice – who concealed both his sexual identity and his erotic preferences, and who disappeared mysteriously from the world in 1955 – to the hyperbolic openness of the highly visible *Midnighter*, and his open pleasure in both his gay identity and his violence, we may see *Midnighter* as Warren Ellis' attempt to bring S&M superheroes all the way out of the closet.

Of course, both characters seem implicitly to comment on Batman and on the metaphorical – and, therefore, perhaps universal – possibilities in that character. Although this has been slow to evolve, a gradually increasing number of images in contemporary superhero comics do present explicit S&M imagery, though the theme still remain relegated to the fringe and specific to a limited number of creators.²⁹ But Batman

²⁹ These creators would include Alan Moore himself, who offers more than one take on this in *Watchmen*, in which the mask adopted after the Vietnam War by the so-called Comedian – a violent, quasi-fascist supersoldier who combines elements of Captain America and the Peacemaker – resembles nothing so much as a rubber fetish mask. These images seem to appear with somewhat more regularity around 1994, possibly pursuant to the release of Quentin Tarantino's wave-making film *Pulp Fiction*. Peter Milligan,

himself, the ur-figure, is as unlikely as ever to acknowledge or discuss his sexual pleasure in violence. In that regard, perhaps we will continue to see Batman “outed” for years to come, in a series of reflector-figures, while Batman himself remains as far as possible from the possibilities, or threat, of acknowledging any links between “deviant” erotics and his own curious lifestyle.³⁰

d.) “Comic-book heroes don’t have a wife at home”:

The superhero as suspiciously homosocial

This is one of the earliest -- in fact, maybe the first -- aspect of the superhero universe to have been seen as ripe for a gay reading. One of the genre’s most characteristic aspects, of course, is its gendered nature: Most characters in any given superhero universe are male. This was even more the case in early superhero comics than

another avant-garde English writer and creator of the revolutionary miniseries *Enigma*, gave us the 1993 Vertigo miniseries *The Extremist*, which is about a zippered and buckled leather fetish costume that allows its wearer to be sexually and ethically liberated (as an assassin for a sort of secret society). And Grant Morrison, creator of the violent dandy Sebastian O., also deployed various configurations of leather and rubber masks and exotica in his late-1990s series *The Invisibles*, which involves warring secret societies of magical, human, and alien secret agents.

³⁰ It should be pointed out that, at least in *Watchmen*, there is a clear and implicit link between gay sexuality and “deviant” sexuality. This raises vexed questions, especially given that, even as

the discourse of and around gayness has largely shifted away from characterizing it as “deviant,” the conversation is far from settled about the most useful and reasonable way to characterize erotic cultures of, say, leather or BDSM. *Watchmen*’s presentation of homosexuality being understood as “deviant” and stigmatized is understandable, given its cultural situating in the American 1940s, and its commentary on tolerance would indeed be thwarted without acknowledging that reality. Slightly more complicated is the way that the gay superheroes of the Minutemen ultimately seem to be lumped in with other “fetishists” – for instance, we may assume that *Watchmen*’s apparently vanilla “Nelly,” for instance, a.k.a. Captain Metropolis, got the same “libidinous” kick out of superheroing as his sometime lover, Hooded Justice, although the evidence indicates that Captain Metropolis was far from comfortable with S&M games. Even as the revelation of Dan Dreibern’s heterosexual costume “fetish” points out that erotic play with superherodom is not confined to homosexuals, gay superheroes still seem to be identified as a group with an erotic identity, not a personal one. At the same time, the Midnighter and Apollo are the only characters about whose sex life we learn anything (which isn’t much, beyond that they are gay and sleep together) in *The Authority*; although the Midnighter is not the only one to take possible erotic pleasure in violence, his “deviance” and his homosexuality are readable as implicitly linked.

it is today. An entirely male universe, and the necessarily homosocial dynamics it creates, offers immediate possibilities for gay readings. That pervasive homosociality seems to have played into Wertham's formulation of the Batman problem. Its flip side can be seen in Wertham's inferences, and innuendo, about the real nature of Wonder Woman's mostly-female retinue – the implication being that, since they were all female, they must be gay.³¹

Of course, the superhero world has always had female characters. Superman's life was in part defined by Lois from the start, just as the Flash had Iris, Hawkman came with Hawkgirl, and the earliest Batman comics had a succession of sultry, shapely and underdressed girlfriends and fiancées wandering in and out, usually trailed by kidnappings and murder. One difference was that nearly always the women were not superheroes; and that meant that even if the male hero had a steady girlfriend, he was constantly leaving her alone to dress up in costume, run off and have adventures, usually in an all-male space of crime and combat. Once the "team" superhero titles began to become popular, along with the team-up books, the homosocial space of the superhero became much more clearly defined. Now there were headquarters, meetings, and rules -- a really all-male clubhouse, for these men in costume to go meet, play and sometimes live in.

What is its metaphorical significance for a gay reading? For certain male superheroes, it meant that -- though they had female romantic interests -- their action stories saw them departing the "real world" to spend time in an all-male space. To compound the issue, this space often had to be *kept secret* from non-superhero acquaintances and most particularly from the women in the hero's life. What makes this facet of the superhero story so provocative is the combination of *the all-male space*, and the *secret* or *unsanctioned* nature of the protagonist's participation in it. Unlike the other traditionally male spaces of masculine, heroic myth – soldiers, sailors, cowboys, or even civic-defense contexts like the police force or the fire brigade – the superhero team has frequently been defined by a sense of secrecy, clearly echoing the individual superhero

³¹Andy Medhurst quotes Wertham on the subject: "Wonder Woman has her own female following... Her followers are the 'Holiday girls,' i.e. the holiday girls, the gay party girls, the gay girls" (Wertham 192-3). As Medhurst rhetorically asks, "Just how much elision can be covered with one 'i.e.'?" (Medhurst 153)

“secret identity.” As a space that is at the same time masculine, heroic, *and* hidden from “everybody else” – often including girlfriends and wives -- it seems clear why the narrative convention and dynamic of superhero team life is rich in potential for a gay reading, as Rudnick’s Shane, in *Mr. Charles*, evoked so directly in his pleasurable fantasy.³²

It is not only the super-hero team which constitutes an all-male environment for superheroes. Superheroes who operate solo, often in the larger or more open space of a city, are also usually bound up in tense (and/or intense) relations with allies, sidekicks, or supervillains.. The comics themselves, and their satires, have for some time been commenting on the gay possibilities in at least three different kinds of male homosocial superhero relationships: those shared by the hero with his ally; his sidekick; or his villains. The satirical readings of the relationship between hero and sidekick will here be postponed a little, to be discussed in more detail below, on the archetype of “the hero as pedophile.” First we will turn to two other tropes that can occur in the superhero’s suspiciously homosocial world: the relationship between hero and hero, and the relationship between hero and villain.

d.) i) “Suspiciously homosocial:” The hero and his “buddy” -- Batman and Superman

By “the hero and his buddy,” I refer not to the superhero and his sidekick, but to the superhero and his *partner* – a partnership of equals. While relatively few such paired teams exist now -- a situation more than likely due, in part, to new awareness of the possible gay readings of such a situation -- there are important historical examples. It is true that “partnered” male teams have never been common. More frequent have been the pairings of an adult male superhero and his boy sidekick -- Batman and Robin, Green Arrow and Speedy, Captain America and Bucky, and so on *ad infinitum* –or, more rarely, the pairing of a romantically involved male and female superhero, such as Hawkman and Hawkgirl or Green Arrow and Black Canary.

³² The “space” of superhero group life can be queerly read in its spatial as well as its metaphorical sense: Rudnick is not the first to see potential in the Batcave. We will return to this in the discussion of Batman and the pedophilic reading.

For a time, though, a relatively common phenomenon was the temporary but regular team-up of a couple of high-profile superheroes, who – at least in the system DC developed – were shown to develop a friendship and rapport that made them closer than even the average fellow members of a super-team. One of the most famous of these pairs was found in “World’s Finest,” which after 1954 frequently starred Batman and Superman “together in one adventure.” Once again, we find that Batman becomes the focal point for a certain kind of gay reading of the superhero story: this time, in terms of his “partnership” with Superman.

Although I know of no academic analysis around it, recent fan readings have seen the Batman/Superman team-ups in the *World’s Finest* issues, particularly those of the 1960s, as rich for potentially gay readings. The Batman of this period is far less of a loner than he later became, and his interactions with Superman at that period are often close and openly emotional. These paired heroes, relying on each other emotionally, operating in a largely homosocial space from which women, as non-superheroes, are excluded, and sharing a mutual understanding of their curiously secretive “lifestyle,” opens the door for a reading that simply takes the “partnership” one stage further. This suggestion appears as a marginal joke in a number of playful, hostile, campy, or burlesquing references. For instance, a Batman parody called the Midnight Mink brings the Superman-like Maximortal “out of the closet” in Rick Veitch’s *Bratpack* (1994); and a passing joke about domestic partner superheroes “Kent” and “Wayne” appears in the May 2003 issue of *The Crossovers*, a self-reflexive, genre-mixing humor series by gay novelist and comics writer Robert Rodi. Fans also make gay-reading jokes, based not on a vested interest in gay readings but on the way that the homosociality of early comics now seems to require other explanations; as one online wit described the situation:

Meanwhile, Superman and Batman held forth in *World’s Finest Comics*, spending way too much time dressing up in each other’s clothes, ostensibly to fool their respective lady loves into not figuring out anyone’s real identity. Forget about all of the Batman and Robin rumors; when two heroes keep coming out of the closet

wearing each other's spandex, all you gossip-mongers out there have bigger fish to fry.³³

Heroes who operate in a world nearly without women – an acceptable genre convention, but one not common in reality -- can lead to configurations that seem profoundly suggestive from the perspective of a later cultural period. One such sport is the 1970s-era backup feature “Sons of Batman and Superman,” which featured junior versions of Bruce Wayne and Clark Kent suffering adolescent crises, fighting crime, road-tripping around America. A most provocative feature of this ambiguously ‘alternate’ universe was that the framing narrative around the adventures tended to depict the wives of the elder Bruce and Clark in vague and faceless terms, leaving the heroes themselves to do most of the caretaking and problem-solving themselves: two dads rearing their super-kids?

Perhaps the most telling (if postmodern) testimony the Batman/Superman reading is the partnered superhero pair Apollo and the Midnighter, created by Warren Ellis in 1998 for Wildstorm’s *Stormwatch* (and later transferred to his *The Authority*). These partners, who are explicitly gay and are a romantic couple as well as a fighting team, are unsobtly based on Superman and Batman. The debt, evident in their character designs and personalities, has been admitted and openly discussed by Ellis and others. Ellis also made waves among comics readers when he showed the characters’ close relationship to be explicitly romantic. And he had his characters present themselves as openly gay within their fictional universe, as well: in one notable instance, a montage scene showing magazine covers around the world that feature celebrity members of The Authority, Apollo and Midnighter are shown standing heroically back-to-back on the cover of a magazine bearing the legend, “The World’s Finest Couple.” The tribute to -- or burlesque on -- the old “World’s Finest” Batman/Superman team-ups is a telling in-joke, and one not likely to be lost on the well-informed superhero fan.

³³ Neal Polowin, “Gravedigger,” *The Hembeck Files*.
<http://www.proudrobot.com/hembeck/gravedigger.html>

Batman and Superman, of course, don't have to be comrades to be intimate; even their rivalry has a certain serious intensity. Perhaps most famously, in 1986's *The Dark Knight Returns*, Frank Miller made Superman and Batman mortally opposed enemies locked in a battle to the death. If, as Sedgwick suggests, the physical ferocity enemies can be read as displaced physical passion, then certainly it's not a stretch to imagine the Superman-Batman relationship that way: Although the Joker is the most visible villain in the first part of that book, once he's been disposed of it is Superman who becomes Batman's enemy in a grappling battle of truly world-shaking proportions. The conflict-and-resolution pattern of this Batman-Superman "rivalry" reappears in a different form in *Kingdom Come* (1996/97), an influential *Elseworlds* epic written by Mark Waid and illustrated by Alex Ross, but this time the apocalyptic antagonism has a rather curious coda. Batman and Superman spend much of that book in intense tactical and ideological opposition. At the end, wounds healing and peace restored, they reunite in a diner, along with Wonder Woman, the other central character in the book. Wonder Woman (Diana) and Superman (Clark) have become a couple in the peaceful time following the main story's epic battles, and we learn that Diana is pregnant with Clark's baby; Diana asks Bruce to be the child's godfather.

This leads to a touching moment of reconciliation between Clark and Bruce, as Clark tells Bruce that he knows he can trust him: "Despite our differences over the years... I always have." After a beat of silence, in which Bruce, startled and moved, stares at the smiling Clark, the two awkwardly but intimately embrace, while fellow diners turn to stare. Later as they head out the door, Bruce asks, "You realize you've just handed me influence over the most powerful child in the world?... The child of Superman and Wonder Woman... And Batman. Imagine what kind of a kid he'll —" ("She'll," interrupts Diana.) "—be." Clark answers, "Battler for truth, justice, and a new American way. I can hardly wait to see it for myself. Let's go home... and dream about the future." As the three walk out the diner door, we see them forming a connected unit, with Bruce's hand on Clark's back and Diana between them; their forms merge together as they move forward into the light. (*Kingdom Come*, (TPB edition), 209-212).

Here we find a classic example of what Sedgwick seems to have in mind when she talks about the way homosocial relationships can be triangulated across a woman.

Certainly, Wonder Woman is herself a major player in *Kingdom Come*; even compared to her historical role as the most powerful and self-reliant female character in mainstream superhero comics, writer Mark Waid accords her an unprecedented degree of agency and influence in this book, as she operates as a hawkish co-leader of superheroes (in contrast with Superman's dove) – taking, indeed, a role often ascribed in the past to Batman. The diner scene, which is the book's finale, may not be *entirely* about the reconciliation of Batman and Superman. But it unquestionably closes a circuit of alliance and emotion that brings closure after the book's great conflicts. Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman are united again, this time not merely as friends or as teammates but, in some literal way, as a triangular family. They move off not toward Clark and Diana's home, Clark's ranch, or Bruce's mansion, but to an unspecified "home" that, it seems, in some way belongs to all of them, as they go to dream about the future and the "child of Superman and Wonder Woman... and Batman." (A slightly subversive, and historically informed, pro-gay reading might see this as a concretizing literalization of those nearly-motherless "sons" apparently being co-reared by Batman and Superman in the 1960s.)

d.) ii) "Suspiciously homosocial": The hero and his villains - Batman and the Joker

The homosociality of the male superhero world also opens the door to a reading of the relationship between hero and villain. The connection between representations of villainy and effeteness is a larger question, one that resonates in various areas of the popular culture. But I look at it here in relationship to the way it functions in a specific icon of superhero villainy, namely the Joker. Of interest here are the ways in which: the figure of the Joker himself knots together effeteness, psychosis, and evil; his relationship with Batman is represented as seductive, corrupting, and threateningly erotic; and that relationship functions as an apparent attempt to displace and resolve the gay "threat" surrounding Batman onto the figure of evil in the Joker.³⁴

³⁴ In this case, the specific reading of the tension between Batman and Joker has to stand in for the more universal question of the potential gayness of the homosocial relationship between hero and villain, or between rivals. To a degree, interrogation of this question in the *Batman* comics has stood in for interrogation of it elsewhere; dubious motives for supervillains in other titles or milieux are often referred, dismissively or jokingly, to the way these questions play out in *Batman*. The "unhealthy" fixations supervillains may

In-genre, an interest in reexamining the tension between Batman and the Joker dates to the fertile and deconstructive period of the mid-to-late 1980s – marked by Alan Moore’s Batman/Joker story *The Killing Joke* (as well as by his influential non-Batman book *Watchmen*) (1988 and 1986); Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986); and Grant Morrison’s *Arkham Asylum* (1989). In these books,, several newly aspects of the Joker are newly highlighted. The character has always been a villainous, colorful bad guy in a clown-like suit, but for the first time, the Joker’s foppishness starts to look more like effeminacy -- readable not just as goofy, but as un-masculine, or as gender-transgressive or (one obvious end-point) gay. Obviously, the line is blurry here: even with historical context as an aid, it is difficult for many a social historian to say clearly where the signs of dandyism end and those of gayness begin. It was precisely this ever-shifting equation Oscar Wilde played with so boldly in crafting his image as “aesthetic,” and the twentieth century has hardly shaken itself clear -- Vito Russo was unable to be

have on superheroes, or vice versa, sometimes crop up in fringe or joking contexts. For an effect of humorous co-dependence, for instance, underground cartoonist Peter Bagge’s (*HATE*) Marvel-sanctioned goof on *The Megalomaniacal Spider-Man* has Peter Parker noticing his unhealthy dependence on his supervillains and deciding to quit his job, leaving a shattered Doctor Octopus wailing, “But what about *us*?” (2002).

The villain’s potential pleasure in being “caught” by the hero was also explored, in 1986, by the inevitable *Watchmen*. In one scene, among the memorabilia of Dan Dreiberg’s former superhero career as Nite Owl, Laurie Juspezyk finds an autographed photo of a costumed villainess in a dominatrix-like costume, holding a whip. It’s signed “From one ‘Night Bird’ to another. Love from The Twilight Lady.” When Laurie inquires about it, Dan uncomfortably says, “I guess she had sort of a fixation. She was a very sick woman” (*Watchmen* 7.5). More unusual is an earlier conversation between Dan and Laurie:

Laurie: “Hey, you remember that guy? The one who pretended to be a supervillain so he could get beaten up?”

Dan: “Oh, you mean Captain Carnage. Ha ha ha! He was one for the books.”

Laurie: “You’re telling me! I remember, I caught him coming out of this jewelers. I didn’t know what his racket was. I start hitting him and I think ‘Jeez! He’s breathin’ funny! Does he have asthma?’”

Dan: “Ha ha ha... He tried that with me, only I’d heard about him, so I just walked away. He follows me down the street... broad daylight, right? He’s saying, ‘Punish me!’ I’m saying, ‘No! Get lost!’”

Laurie: “Ha ha ha... Whatever happened to him?”

Dan: “Uh, well, he pulled it on Rorschach and Rorschach dropped him down an elevator shaft.” (*Watchmen* 1.26).

any more clear about the distinction in his monumental study of gay images in Hollywood film, *The Celluloid Closet*. If Frank Miller pushes the theme in *The Dark Knight Returns*, showing us the Joker carefully applying his poisonous lipstick and being called “sweet guy” by TV makeup men, then Grant Morrison certainly seemed to be pushing the issue to a point of uncomfortable visibility in *Arkham Asylum*, when he has the Joker give Batman the grand tour of the gothic madhouse while wearing red high-heeled shoes.

The Joker’s physical figure, in some sense, the easiest aspect to decode: as his clothing, makeup and mannerisms grow more effete, we can see the stereotypes they evoke. But a second shift shows that the Joker’s psychosis – which has historically been portrayed as, even if humorous, dangerous and profoundly mad -- is increasingly linked, symbolically and literally, to his obsession with Batman. We receive a new picture of the Joker’s real motives – or, maybe better, of where his real *pleasure* lies. Representation of the Joker has varied to some degree in the past: he has been seen through the decades as a mad criminal bent on revenge on those who injured him; as an urban crimelord interested in “pulling jobs” for the pleasure of spiting authority and of profiting financially; as a mostly harmless clown who rejoices in bizarre, goofy jokes at the expense of the city or of Batman; and as a murderous psychopath whose greatest pleasure is to kill as many people as possible, and for whom financial goals are really secondary. In none of these incarnations has the Joker been unique; there are dozens of villains – in the Batman universe and others – that fit the first two descriptions, a fair number who operated in the third mold (particularly during the “strange years” of the mid-to-late 1950s and early 1960s), and even a few who resemble the more disturbing class in which the Joker wound up by the late 1980s.

In this new vision of the Joker, though, the motivations, while suggestively psychosexual, seem to knot together with the Joker’s unhealthy obsession with Batman. The Joker is psychotic, effete, murderous, *and* far too interested in getting Batman’s attention. It does not seem possible to dissociate the themes: the Joker’s obsession with Batman is part of his madness, while his madness is part of his murderousness, and his murderousness part of his evil. This version of the Joker participates very strongly in a tradition of representation which links together gender transgressiveness, effeteness,

psychosis and evil: a long-standing shorthand for villainy that has been well chronicled in the anatomies of cultural homophobia, from action films to Disney hits. One might suggest that the portrayal is not of a villainous homosexuality, but rather of an effete villainy; but this evasion tactic does not seem useful except as a set of polite blinkers. Grant Morrison may indeed be interrogating stereotype in *Arkham Asylum* when he has the Joker greet Batman by pinching him in the bum and demanding, “Loosen up, tight ass!” But the stereotype he is responding to was set in stone no more than three years before, in which, in the first few pages of *The Dark Knight Returns*, Frank Miller showed us the Joker being pulled out of a catatonic trance by the vision of Batman on TV and, in a close-up on his mouth, seen smiling from ear to ear in a kind of ecstatic transport and murmuring, “Batman... *Darling*.”

The ever-increasing effeteness of the Joker, then, is seen evolving in conjunction with his ever more emphasized, psychotic, and implicitly sexual interest in Batman. A fair amount has been written on the Batman-Joker relationship in these works, including detailed arguments for reading most of the portrayals as implicitly or explicitly homophobic, and other, opposing responses. One of the arguments deployed by the anti-homophobia camp is the claim of “displacement.” Geoff Klock, for instance, writes of the obsessive and effete Joker in *The Dark Knight Returns* that creator Frank Miller is fully aware of the Werthamite spectre, and, though seeking to “evade Wertham’s claims for Batman and Robin,” is nonetheless “not so naïve as to insist that homoeroticism is entirely absent from the Batman narrative” (Klock 34). Klock points out aspects of the Joker’s effeteness and gender transgressiveness -- an “intriguing combination of feminine and masculine signifiers... the delicate application of makeup, a ‘tough guy’ build, speech affectations, aggressive physical violence” (37) – and then praises Miller’s ability to “avoid homoeroticism in the Batman-Robin relationship while... transferring it to the antagonistic relationship between Batman and the Joker” (34). On the erotics of this relationship, he quotes Batman’s interior monologue during one of the book’s climaxes, a struggle to the death between Batman and the Joker in a fairground Tunnel of Love:

Can you see it, Joker? Feels to me... like it’s written all over my face. I’ve lain awake nights... planning it.... picturing it ... endless nights.. considering every

possible method... treasuring each imaginary moment... from the beginning, I knew.. that there's nothing wrong with you... that I can't fix... with my hands... (Miller 142; ellipses original)

All of which, as Klock perceptively notes, is “ostensibly about killing the Joker but suggestive of something else” (Klock 37).

Klock concludes that Miller's representation of the Joker in *The Dark Knight Returns* is not homophobic, suggesting that instead Miller is progressive in acknowledging some vein of free-floating homoeroticism in the superhero story, and simply shifts it to the Joker while “cater[ing] to instincts that Batman and Robin's relationship is not a thinly disguised homoerotic fantasy.” Obviously, of course, the situation is not quite so simple. In TDKR, as in other stories, the Joker does seem to demand that Batman examine the nature of their relationship. But this usually ends up with the Joker being figured as a *threatening*, *corrupting*, or even *seductive* figure: In tempting Batman to identify with him, he seduces the hero not only toward a tilt into madness (an explicit premise in *Arkham Asylum*), but also into the implicit, threatening intimacy that this effete and fixated villain so clearly offers. If the superhero narrative does embed some free-floating homoeroticism, as Klock suggests, then an approach like that of Miller in *The Dark Knight Returns* does acknowledge it, but also localizes and embeds it firmly in a single villainous figure. The gayness in the text not only becomes explicitly evil and corrupting, but can also be literally killed – as Batman does to the Joker in *The Dark Knight Returns* – and thus excised from the text.

This is the essential, critical difference between a “homoerotic” dynamic between hero and buddy, and one between hero and villain. One can imagine a non-homophobic working-out of the former premise – in fact, gay fan readings and burlesques constantly do! -- in which the characters acknowledge that affection, romance or erotics between men does not run contrary to some essential principles or moral structure of the superhero universe. If the villain is figured as the source or conduit of homoerotic tension, on the other hand, then the situation suggests that homosexuality – if it *does* exist, free-floating, in the genre – is, definitionally, a problem. It must run counter to the rule of good, just as much as a villain definitionally does. Looking at things from this angle, it is no wonder

that Andy Medhurst, in reading Miller's treatment of the Joker in *The Dark Knight Returns*, comes to the opposite conclusion from Klock's, and describes the "sly displacement" of the homoerotic threat from Batman onto the Joker in comics of the late 1980s as "the cleverest method yet devised of preserving [Batman's] heterosexuality" (Medhurst 160).

We can see, then, why the elisions in Miller's version of the Joker between effeteness and villainy -- implicitly linking the Joker's wickedness with his foppishness, Batman fixation, and "feminine signifiers" -- are troubling at best. Still, Miller's book did generate interesting responses. One intriguing coda that appeared four years later constituted one of the earliest moments in which mainstream comics discussed the sexuality of the Joker -- or anyone else. The scene occurs in a 1991 issue of *The Flash*, written by William Messner-Loebs. The genial, easy-going super-fast hero Flash (a.k.a. Wally West) is in conversation with a character named Piper. Formerly known as the supervillain Pied Piper -- a second-tier villain and a charter member of Flash's notably flamboyant "Rogues Gallery" -- Piper has since reformed, and acts as a friend and sometime informer to Wally, often feeding him pieces of his knowledge about the supervillain underworld. In this scene, as the two chat on the roof of a skyscraper, Wally has abruptly asked him whether he thinks the Joker might be gay. Piper looks more surprised by the question than we might expect.

Piper: Joker... gay? We didn't exchange secrets, but I've never seen any reason to believe...

Wally: Sure, but guys like that, you can always tell. There are signals...

Piper: He *kills* people, Wally. He's a sadist and a psychopath. I doubt he has real human feelings of any kind... He's not gay, Wally. In fact, I can't think of any super-villain who is.

Wally: Not one...?

Piper: Well, except me, of course... But you knew that, right?

(*The Flash* #53, 3 (August 1991); emphasis selectively included)

Messner-Loebs has pulled off something clever here. Probing the murky ways in which the Joker's effete qualities have been associated with his villainy and murderous madness, Messner-Loebs has a character – here, Wally – formulate the link very specifically, in terms of connotative reading and implicit knowledge. (“There are signals...”) It is a simple and elegant method of undermining stereotypes: when articulated, the presumed connections suddenly revealed just how shaky they are. Messner-Loebs then goes on to pull off the hat trick, yanking aside the curtain to bring a sympathetic supporting character out of the closet. In the process, the scene demonstrates that, first, the so-called “signals” Wally was reading could well be meaningless; and, second, the one gay supervillain the reader *does* know is a much nicer guy than the Joker. Furthermore, he's as likely as anyone to be in a position to be correct in what he says about the Joker: he's a sadist and a psychopath, but we've never “seen any reason to believe” he's homosexual. After all, as Messner-Loebs asks readers to realize, gay people have “real human feelings.”

The impact of the character's self-outing upon Wally has tended to overshadow readings of the first half of that conversation – though the scene has quite rightly been regarded as an unusually early, and sympathetic, handling of a character outing in a high-profile mainstream title. (Its staging, in a peaceful conversation between friends, stands in tutelary contrast to the outing of Northstar in Marvel's *Alpha Flight* the following year). Still, the implicit (and explicit) commentary on the Joker, and on the unquestioned homophobia that is at play in both representations and readings that implicitly link the character's effete qualities to his evil and madness, is succinct, provocative, and worth revisiting. Throughout the long history of DC superhero comics, why haven't more characters ask each other these questions out loud about the Joker? (It's presumably because the practice of clearing the air, by talking aloud about sexual orientation, hardly ever occurs among superheroes. But what salutary things heroes, and readers, might learn if it did.)

e.) “What is the deal with Robin anyway?”:

The superhero as potential pedophile

This has been, by far, one of the most vexed of the metaphors used to flag queerness in superhero stories. As a type of gay-superhero positioning, it is confusing largely because it is incoherent. At times, the spectre of pedophilia has been used as an equivalent to, or a stand-in for, the threat of male homosexuality itself; at other times, these threats have been read as two different configurations immanent in the superhero narrative. As so often happens, much of this confusion can be attributed to an incoherence in the superhero story that stands at the point of origin: Batman and Robin.

It might be worth prefacing this issue by addressing the historical incoherences that undergird it. The association of pedophilia and (male) homosexuality in the American cultural mindset is of long duration. Many contemporary gay-rights activists are well aware of the issue. As academic and activist Greg Herek puts it in a Web essay,

Members of disliked minority groups are often stereotyped as representing a danger to the majority society's most vulnerable members. Historically, Black men in the United States were often falsely accused of raping White women, and commonly lynched as a result.... In a similar fashion, gay people have often been portrayed as a threat to children. When Anita Bryant campaigned successfully in 1977 to repeal a Dade County (FL) ordinance prohibiting anti-gay discrimination, she named her organization "Save Our Children," and warned that "a particularly deviant-minded [gay] teacher could sexually molest children" (Bryant, 1977, p. 114).³⁵

Herek further points out more recent manifestations of this argument around such issues as whether gay men should be allowed to lead Boy Scout troops and whether the root cause of child molestation among Catholic priests is the ordination of gay men. Studies indicate that pedophilic offenders are no more likely to identify as homosexual than as heterosexual, and indeed the vast majority of cases of child molestation are heterosexual. Public perceptions have changed with the times, as well; Herek cites a 1970 national survey in which more than 70% of Americans agreed that "Homosexuals

³⁵ Herek, Gregory M. "Sexual Orientation: Science, Education, and Policy. Facts About Homosexuality and Child Molestation."
http://psychology.ucdavis.edu/rainbow/html/facts_molestation.html

are dangerous as teachers or youth leaders because they try to get sexually involved with children," or that "Homosexuals try to play sexually with children if they cannot get an adult partner."³⁶ In a 1999 national poll, fewer than 20% of respondents agreed with these claims.

But the damning associations are still invoked by anti-gay activists – and a certain number of Americans are still prepared to believe that "homosexuals try to play sexually with children." Given that the history of the gay-superhero discourse is rooted in the 1950s, the old stereotypes are still very much relevant.

A further incoherence relates to the question of just how old a child – say, a boy sidekick – needs to be before “pedophilia” ceases to be a relevant term. On the one hand, scholars of the history of sexuality have shown how the constructions of “acceptable” and “unacceptable” homosexuality in earlier cultures – most notably, the classical Greek world -- was very much dependent on age difference. In classical Greece, a grown man could seek out a young adolescent boy as an entirely appropriate partner for courting, sex or erotic play, while courting another grown man would have been considered grossly inappropriate. Contemporary Western norms have entirely reversed this standard – at least, in terms of what is sanctioned by law – making sex between men and male children the most closely held of taboos. The confusion also appears in legal definitions and proscriptions, in which it is often unclear when male-male sex is illicit because it is considered pedophilic, and when it is simply illicit because it is between members of the same sex. In Britain, for instance, a protracted battle ended in 2000, when the law was changed to make the age of consent for gay sex consistent with that for heterosexual sex, lowering it to 16 from 18. The United States maintains a patchwork of laws, varying at the state level, in which many states demand a higher age of consent for gay than for heterosexual intercourse, while others have laws on record that illegalize gay sex entirely. The question, then, is: at what point would it be “proper” for an adult superhero to be intimate with a younger sidekick? And can the discourse of anti-pedophilic sentiment be separated from that of homophobic sentiment at all?

We can now turn to the Batman story and its interpretations. In the semi-mythicized fan history of comics, “Batman and Robin” are understood to stand as a sort

³⁶ Herek, *op. cit.*

of originary ur-locus for the pedophilic reading, and the source of gayness that can be read out of the superhero story. The originary reader is Fredric Wertham, and his interpretation in *Seduction of the Innocent* in 1954. "Pedophilia" seems immanent in Wertham's original formulation of the gay-Batman reading: the Dick Grayson of the 1940s and 1950s was, after all, only a boy in relation to the grown man who was Bruce Wayne, and as Wayne's "ward" is clearly in a position which resemble, at least in some dimensions, that of child to parent or adult guardian. Wertham's analysis of Batman and Robin's relationship does touch on the eroticization of the child's body; in one oft-quoted passage, he wrote, "Robin is a handsome ephebic boy, usually shown in his uniform with bare legs. . . . He often stands with his legs spread, the genital region discreetly evident."³⁷ But although a contemporary perspective views pedophilia as a much more specific threat than simple homosexuality, Wertham seems not to have pressed hard on this particular aspect of the gay "wish dream" that he read in the Batman comics. Wertham's main conclusion from the Batman story -- or at least the main point he drove home -- was that superhero comics could seduce young boys into fantasies of romantic or sexual relationships with men -- which he read as an inducement to later homosexuality. The threat was not that grown men would be seduced into desiring little boys, nor boys made more vulnerable to the predatory advances of men. Homosexuality was viewed as the problem; specific pedophilia doesn't come up.

Whatever his original reasoning, Wertham's argument -- which raised a spectre of gayness that would haunt the Batman story for the rest of the century -- also flattened two significantly distinct problems: a possible reading of generalized homosexuality between male superheroes, and the perception of very specific pedophilic relationship between an adult superhero and the "boy sidekick" in his care. *This original conceptual elision, it seems to me, has to a large degree marked the "dark secret" that commentators on superhero comics have occasionally pointed to.* We might go so far as to invoke a value-loaded language of secrets, and say it has 'deformed' the historical conversation around homosexuality in the comics. This is a significant issue: to some extent, for many decades, every joke made about men in tights also invoked a spectral shadow-image.

³⁷ Wertham, as cited in Sarah Boxer, "When Fun Isn't Funny: The Evolution of Pop Gore." *The New York Times*, May 1, 1999.

This secondary image involved not simply men in tights who might like to tussle or make post-crimefighting love back in their headquarters – an image variously titillating, hilarious or repulsive, according to the imaginer – but an image of a man in tights, taking advantage of a dependent and possibly reluctant boy. As if the presence of potential gayness in superhero stories was not difficult enough to talk about, this shadow-image implicitly added a power imbalance and a pedophilic overtone to any conversation that would be held about it for the next several decades.

This is a powerful spectre indeed. At this point, we can hardly be certain that it has contributed to the lasting difficulty the genre has faced in allowing male homosexuality visibly into the sunlight. But it seems that it hardly could have made it any easier: Any attempt to address the issue immediately opened the door to something even *more* difficult to speak about or define away.

If we take as provisional that this essential blurring has marked and (quietly) shaped the historical evolution of understandings of gay meaning and metaphor in superhero stories, then this particular confusion can't have been helped by the fact that Robin's age – obviously an important point – has been very unstable. Pursuant to "accusations" of gay overtones in the stories, producers of the Batman and Robin narratives have regularly attempted to defuse the criticisms by eliminating some of the more suspect story elements. Sometimes, as Will Brooker documents, this involved adding women to the largely homosocial mix (Brooker documents the hasty addition of Batwoman and Batgirl to the mid-1950s comics, as well as that of the remarkably un-Batman-like Aunt Harriet to the 1967 TV show to defuse rampant whispers of camp. But at other times, it has also involved making sure that Robin – at least, the suspiciously young Robin – is not in the picture. Although Robin retained his youthfulness in the comics through the 1960s, as Batman's producers later attempted to resuscitate the character from his "camp" past, Robin was aged into a teenager, and then sent off to college. Since that time, Batman has spent a number of years on his own, and several years more with Robins in various states of adolescence – but seldom in a vulnerably childish state. In the Batman films of the 1990s *Batman and Robin* and *Batman Forever*, Robin was played by Chris O'Donnell, who was 25 when the first movie was made; the character is clearly out of preadolescence, and indeed seems almost out of adolescence

entirely. The films caught plenty of media flak for the variously-described “camp” and “gay” mise-en-scène of director Joel Schumacher – evidence of the profoundly homophobic reactions that can still flare up at the appearance of “Batman camp.” But it makes an interesting thought experiment to consider precisely how difficult these films would have been to make had Robin, flamboyant costume and all, not been well out of the underage danger zone.

If the uneasy blurring between male homosexuality on the one hand, and pedophilia on the other, has marked a fundamental ambiguity in gay and anti-gay readings of the Batman narrative and of superhero stories generally, it is still true that some readers have noticed the distinction. That is, contemporary creators have often made jokes about the pedophilic reading as something that exists separately from a more generalized gay reading -- although it is not clear that they often notice that the two are falsely intertwined to start with.

Some of these jokes imply an awareness of the confusion surrounding the sidekick-age question. In Grant Morrison’s 1989 *Arkham Asylum*, when a queeny, campy Joker asks Batman “How *is* the Boy Wonder? Started shaving yet?”, the question is actually harder to answer than it seems. The innuendo is obvious, given that the Joker has greeted Batman by calling him “honey,” asking him “Aren’t I just good enough to eat?” and goosing him under the his cape. But the question itself is a bit of a stumper: just how old *is* Robin these days, and which Robin are we talking about, anyway? If “the Boy Wonder” refers to some iconic Robin, then it really is not possible to be sure, at any given point, whether (to answer the Joker’s question) he’s entered adolescence yet. (The historical scholar might point out that the question of shaving, or facial hair, is precisely what defines the end of the age at which a boy, in the classical world, was thought an appropriate sexual object for a man.) However, Morrison and his Joker are interested in plumbing (or spoofing) the depths of Batman’s psyche, and clearly have suspicions about what might lie down there. Later in the book, mulling over a Rorschach-test ink-spot card, the Joker – having been curtly told by Batman that he sees nothing in it – responds, “Not even a cute little long-legged boy in swimming trunks?” It’s not clear whether the tone is mocking or wistful – given this version of the Joker, it’s probably both – but this

time, Batman refrains from replying. After all, in 1989, Dick Grayson – the first Robin, now an adult superhero known as Nightwing -- hadn't worn "swimming trunks" in years.

Perhaps as telling as the strapping young-manhood of Robin in the mid-90s films, or the Joker's curiously unanswerable questions in the 1989 avant-garde graphic novel, is the way that the pedophilia question has gone entirely missing in the popular late-90s satire "The Ambiguously Gay Duo." This series of animated shorts, which premiered on *The Dana Carvey Show* and moved to *Saturday Night Live* in 1997, features superhero characters Ace and Gary, who are close analogues for Batman and Robin – particularly their 1960s "camp" avatars -- in a ways both stylistic and narrative: we can see the similarities in their tight uniforms, in their phallic gadgets, in the playful grappling which often takes a turn for the homoerotic and surreal. Gary is seems to be the sidekick: he is visibly smaller, cheerily takes direction from Ace, and in general acts as a sidekick does to a superhero. Indeed, creators Robert Smigel and J. J. Sedelmaier play up nearly every conceivable superhero trope or commonplace that could generate a homoerotic reading (or, simpler, a gay joke).

In light of that intensely campy hyperbole, it's conspicuous that the once-defining age difference between Batman and Robin has vanished. In an episode in which we see Ace and Gary out of costume, the viewers see that Ace and Gary are both high-school students – athletes, no less, flicking towels at each other in the locker room.³⁸ We might read this as an attempt to situate *both* characters in the liminal, ambiguous space of late adolescence which recent Robins have occupied – erotically young, but old enough to be legal. However, the move also lays to rest any potential unease that might arise in the minds of viewers regarding the apparently dramatic age difference between the seemingly adult Ace and the seemingly youthful Gary. That may have been the one superhero joke that seemed to its creators to go too far beyond "good taste," even for this over-the-top burlesque.

From Batman and Robin, genre satirists have extrapolated a broader potential pedophilic erotics of the sidekick. Operating under the assumption that satire and "public jokes" often tell us more than "straight" information can – after all, the nudge-and-wink

³⁸ "AmbiguoBoys," air date May 8, 1999.

is meaningless unless the audience knows how to understand it -- we return to *The Tick*, a satirical superhero comic published in the late 1980s and 1990. *The Tick* is a rare example of a successful and engaging satire, and its jokes have much to tell us about what was invisible in mainstream discourse at the time.

The Tick #11 was published in 1990, and is of approximately the same vintage as the page I cite as the Epigraph to this paper. In this issue, the Tick (a benignly insane superhero, and the series protagonist) and Arthur (his clear-headed, soft-bellied sidekick, who left accounting for a career in a moth suit) have finally reached the City – the comically overdetermined center of all superhero life, where the over-swollen ranks of hero wannabes patrol the skies and streets, scrabbling pathetically to dig up crime. After a successful battle, the Tick is taken by his new friend Agrippa -- the Roman God of the Aqueduct, who wears one on his head -- to a posh superheroes-only nightclub. Arthur comes along, but, to his displeasure, learns he will have to stay in the Sidekicks Lounge, a cramped room whose status is indicated by a sign on the door showing a caped male figure being firmly booted in the rear.

Inside, Arthur finds a group of sidekicks passing the time: two talking animals and four young men. The room is cramped and slightly below-ground, and is furnished with a single unshaded lamp, a Yoo-hoo machine, and a floor littered with ashtrays. An action figure in a cape lies sprawled on its back, beside an abandoned copy of *Fighting in Lycra* magazine.

The boys are all similar in physical appearance: clean-cut, slender but muscular, with smooth shiny hair, and dressed in variously recognizable versions of superhero or sidekick uniforms. One wears a fish-scale-like mail shirt evoking the costume of Aquaman; another has a domino mask and costume emblem that suggests the Green Lantern; a third boy, freckled and smoking, wears a vaguely piratical ensemble, with a skull like that of the Punisher adorning his chest, and under it the logo “Captain’s Kidd.” When Arthur walks in, he finds the boys deep in what sounds like an often-repeated exchange of complaints and gossip. “He likes me to wear it *open*...” one young man in cape and brow circlet is saying, tugging at the tunic he wears unbuttoned over his smooth chest. “I’m getting sick of it!” puts in the boy in the domino mask. “Any excuse to stand next to me. And those stupid ‘Up, Up America’ weekends at the Poconos!!” “God, I

hear you,” says the kid in fishmail, looking up from the couch where he is sprawled, reading a wrestling fan magazine.

Arthur, casting a suspicious eye on this scene, is greeted with a hail of “Uh oh, fresh meat!” “Ha ha, just kiddin’,” adds one of the boys, introducing the rest: “I’m Johnny, and this is Johnny, Johnny, Johnny and Hector.” “You’re all sidekicks?” asks Arthur. “Emphasis on the ‘kick,’” confirms one of the boys, while another offers Arthur a Yoo-hoo. “How *old* are you guys?” Arthur asks. One of the Johnnys responds, “We’re all sixteen-year-old orphans with backgrounds in the circus, a thirst for adventure, and – “ “—And full, pouting red lips,” puts in another. “Yeah,” says a third, with a look of slightly melancholy confusion, “the lips seem to be important.” A skeptical Arthur points a finger and says, “I think you all need long talks with your social workers.”

The Tick is satire of a gentle strain; superhero burlesque that clearly positions itself as rooted in affection for the genre, it revels playfully in the very ridiculousness it mocks. That said, this scene is revealing in its assumptions about what readers already “know” about sidekicks, and what kind of jokes they know well enough to find funny. There is much to be read in line with D.A. Miller’s description of *connotative* knowledge. In this elegantly compact scene, Edlund starts by conveying the idea that sidekicks are all alike: young, a little dumb, and – tellingly -- all have pretty lips. These particular kids are even interchangeable down to the names, suggesting that all sidekick ‘kid characters’ are alike -- or that they can expect to be killed off regularly, an implication made explicit by the photos adorning the wall of the Sidekicks Lounge, which bear legends like “In memory of Johnny Republic, 1971-1989,” “So long Johnny Wingless, 1970-1991,” and “Memorium to Johnny Fathom, 1969-1987.” The joke is self-evident – sidekicks are interchangeable, and they shouldn’t expect to live past 21.

We also detect that the sidekicks are intimately involved in their heroes’ lives (their presence at the nightclub, those “weekends at the Poconos”) in a way that might be understood as the involvement of a teenage son with a parent – or that of a partner, wife, or kept lover. More interesting, and disturbing, the boys are represented in ways that imply they are possessed by their superheroes in implicitly erotic ways. The dialogue and imagery is strongly suggestive: the shirt that says “Captain’s Kidd,” the sidekick who gestures irritably to his tunic while saying, “He” – referring self-evidently to the

superhero, who is never mentioned but is an abiding unspoken presence in the room – “likes me to wear it open.” The artwork also transforms the familiar elements of costume into things far more explicitly sexual: the shorts, Spandex and sleeveless tops looks a little strange to begin with, but most blatantly provocative is the sidekick who wears not only the standard bodysuit, shorts, cape, boots and mask, but also a chain, running down from neck to waist and snaking below his arms. These chains serve no apparent purpose – they are clearly bondage décor, reminiscent of the decorative ropes Hooded Justice wears round his wrists. Here, however, they implicitly suggest the possession of a sidekick by a superhero. The familiar boy-sidekick shorts are transformed into something more explicitly sexy and unsettling. (Obviously, it is not only the Joker, nor Fredric Wertham, who saw something provocative in “the uniform with bare legs.”)

Reading this in the context of our other examples, perhaps most interesting is the uncertainty games Edlund plays regarding the question of whether the boys are, or are not, fully *aware* of the sexual overtones of their position. Really, Edlund plays the joke both ways: The boys have such a look of decadence – the cigarettes, the glossy ringlets, the fishnet shirts and saucy shorts – that they more closely resemble 1950s sidekicks gone to seed than the original innocents. The unspoken joke, importantly, *is* largely about innocence, and the distribution or corruption of knowledge and the power it brings. The first “Johnny” knows enough to be annoyed that his superhero always wants to stand next to him, and seems to know that, in making up “excuse[s],” the superhero is trying to deny this unsanctioned erotic dynamic. And yet the Johnny sprawling on the floor, the boy dressed in decorative chains, can say “The lips seem to be important,” with the implication that *he doesn’t know why this is*. How can one boy have a sophisticated understanding of what the superhero (or the sanctioned voice of the text) denies, while another doesn’t know why all his friends – need to have “full, pouting red lips”?

Things begin to get creepy fast, as the reader finds herself trying to literally interpret the implications made in this short but densely referential scene. How much *should* we assume the boys know? Are they aware that the superheroes get off on having them walk around in costume? Are the superheroes, perhaps, into looking and not touching? Or are the boys being set up – “groomed” – for some more explicit sexual role

later on? In light of this provocative uncertainty, the boys' petulant complaints -- as well as the actual evidence of their second-class position ("emphasis on the *kick*") -- blend the situation's humor with the innuendo of sexuality and possession. Contributing to this atmosphere is their liminal age (everyone's sixteen). Similarly, with the sidekicks' twin indulgences of Yoo-hoo (a chocolate drink) and cigarettes, the innocence of a childish sweet tooth is juxtaposed with adult vice, evoking a tawdry, barely-legal atmosphere, as at a mid-'90s Calvin Klein photo shoot. In the fog of ambiguity, the reader begins to wonder: does *Arthur* know what the sidekicks don't? When he makes his comment about "social workers," is he acting on a vague sense of unease? Or is it because Arthur's in on what adult readers of comics are "supposed to know" and children aren't: that the superhero-sidekick story is perpetually shadowed by a spectre of pedophilia?³⁹

The Edlund scene is very short, and the comic itself entirely funny. But it elegantly packs into two pages of jokes so many elements of the imagery, the innuendo, the hyperbole, and the vague creepiness that hovers around pedophilic readings of the superhero-sidekick dynamic.

To indicate just how dark and exhaustive the joke can get, though, I want to contrast Rick Veitch's *Bratpack*, one of those outside-the-mainstream satires that tells us so much about the mainstream itself. Published in 1994, *Bratpack* is a powerful and startlingly hostile satire on the theme of superheroes and their sidekicks. In describing its tone, "vitriolic" would probably not be too strong a word. The book is admittedly difficult to interpret, because it wears its own self-referentiality on its sleeve: the text labels itself a commentary on, and burlesque of, superhero comics *and* their critics, as is suggested by the liberal sprinkling through the text of jokey references to names like "Wertham" and "Moulton" (*Bratpack*, 78). At the same time, *Bratpack* narrates its improbable story with considerable intensity, and seems deeply invested in conveying its message about the nasty business its author sees at the dark heart of the superhero genre.

³⁹ One is reminded of Andy Medhurst's quotation of George Melly in *Revolt into Style*, who writes of the Batman TV shows: "Over the absorbed children's heads we winked and nudged, but in the end what were we laughing at? The fact they didn't know Batman had it off with Robin." (Medhurst 156; Melly, *Revolt Into Style: The Pop Arts in the 50s and 60s*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970/1989.)

Bratpack takes the representation to more explicit places than most works do, but its themes are also very familiar.

Bratpack's setting is a decaying cityscape, imagined with all the wasteland mentality of the 1980s filmic and comic-book imagination. Slumberg is “protected” by four superheroes, who swoop around in special vehicles, recruit sidekicks, and purportedly keep the city free of crime. But these “heroes” are obvious shams. Their money, power and science may be real, but they harbor ugly secrets, are fueled only by mercenary greed, and – worst of all – are fundamentally abusive toward the citizenry, by whom they are both worshipped and loathed. In particular, they are abusive toward their sidekicks, and the story’s plot follows these four heroes recruiting, corrupting, and callously destroying their latest set of sidekicks – the “Bratpack” of the title.

All four Slumberg heroes are based on recognizable “real-world” characters, though all are altered in more or less perverse fashion. Moon Mistress is a version of Wonder Woman, but is drug-addicted, nymphomaniacal, and literally castrating. King Rad is a riff on Green Arrow at his most anarchic (with elements of the Silver Surfer and Iron Man), and spends his time inhaling drug cocktails and “buzzing” the city in his skateboard-like vehicle. Judge Jury blends the violence of a Punisher with the patriotic fervor of a Captain America, becoming a literally Bible-thumping, hood-wearing Aryan racist who cruises astride a flaming cross. Last, there is the Midnight Mink: alter ego of Malcolm Maplethorp, “publisher of Playjoint magazine” and “the most famous playboy in Slumberg” (78-80), the Mink is an unrepentant Batman takeoff, resplendent in ermine cape and cowl and complete with a Minkhole (the headquarters), Minkslings (the plane) and a sidekick called Chippy. He’s also got thick, frequently pursed lips, a saturnine, leering grin, and an expression of almost hair-raising knowingness. The book braids together a number of homophobic stereotypes and anxieties to create a scorching, astonishing camp monster that walks like Batman. Figured in the most “flamboyant” possible ways, the Mink is a hyperbolically flaming version of the character, perhaps a “*travesti*” in that word’s multiple meanings of “cross-dresser” and “travesty.”

Bratpack is a dense, rich text, and would reward a much fuller analysis and appreciation of what it has to say about the unspeakables of superhero comics in the early 1990s. What’s important for our purposes, though, is tracing the book’s central theme of

abuse to see how the superheroes corrupt their sidekicks – especially in respect to the relationship between the Midnight Mink and Chippy, which reflects the Batman/Robin dynamic.

An essential point of Veitch's take on superheroes is that the relationship of superhero to sidekick is one of exploitation and abuse. Four young people with a yen for fame are "recruited" to the secret world of sidekick life; from the outset, we know something is terribly wrong, since the recruitment leads to the "accidental" deaths of their parents in every case, paving the way for the child to be handed over to a new "guardian." And, indeed, within a few months, each character has lost his or her innocence: the girl recruited to be "Luna," Moon Maiden's sidekick, has literally lost her virginity (and has undergone multiple abortions!), while King Rad's sidekick is drug-addled, and Judge Jury's young "puke" has indoctrinated with white-supremacist rhetoric.

However, the relationship between the Midnight Mink and his sidekick "Chippy," is something special. If the Mink is a hyperbolically gay vision of Batman, his attitude toward Cody – the boy he later renames – recasts every nuance of the original Batman/Robin relationship in a light that makes the Batman figure a sexual predator, and the Robin figure an uneasy innocent, gradually being pulled down into dark waters. Cody is originally recruited through a church, by the offices of a guilt-ridden Catholic priest; this sets the tone for the ongoing innuendo of child abuse and the wrong use of power. As the story continues, we see that the Mink is not only flamboyant, but is also distinctly marked as both predatory and, somehow, "knowing." One of the first appearances of the Mink shows the character prancing across rooftops, singing aloud and doing extravagant backflips; pages later, we are watching him roll up his Spandex costume over one leg with the salacious attention of a dancer in burlesque (43, 86). His "background check" on his potential new sidekick involves visiting Cody's bedroom by night, where he seizes the boy by the chin with sharpened claws and murmurs, "Profile's right. The mouth is *perfect*," he adds with a leer (62). After Cody has been "adopted" and brought back to the Mink's stately home, he is dressed in the costume of the deceased Chippy: tight briefs, a fishnet tank top, and a collar around the neck to "symbolize your empancipation," as the Mink says. When he's done, the Mink cries,

“Son, when I see you standing there the effect is so intoxicating it makes my head swim! To the Minkslings, Chippy!”

Clearly, some of Veitch’s innuendo derives from the same sources as Edlund’s: like the boys in the Sidekicks Lounge, Cody is dressed in a sexualized version of the Robin costume, decorated with a bondage ornament, and (in a curiously specific parallel) evaluated for his lips. However, *Bratpack* takes the themes that Edlund only suggests and develops them in novel-length depth. An essential theme of the book is the sidekick’s loss of innocence, and the way the corrupting effect of the superhero drags the sidekick down into dark waters. At the book’s outset, Cody is literally a choir boy who “always trie[s] to do what’s right” (46). He seems to have no idea about the rumors that swirl around the Midnight Mink. We even learn from a previous Chippy: “When I was young, I could ignore the double entendres and innuendoes... But when I turned eighteen, he became more insistent” (18). The child sidekick, then, is innocent of the superhero’s desires.

And yet it’s a vital part of Veitch’s vision that the rest of the world *does* know this superhero’s “secret.” The reader learns this in the book’s opening pages, when a call-in radio host, vilifying the Bratpack, cracks: “Wasn’t it Chippy, ‘The Young Sensation,’ who was nominated for city man-hole inspector last year?” (22). The other sidekicks and heroes relentlessly insult Chippy – “faggot,” “enema-bandit,” “limp-wristed nancy-boy” (20) – and even the children of the city seem to know: when Cody tries to impress a girl he likes by telling her he’s been recruited to join the Bratpack, she responds, “Give the Midnight Mink a big smotch for [me]!” (52).

In one sense, *Bratpack* traces a very clear arc of the loss of innocence: children are transformed from innocent to too-adult, and the predatory images of the leering, smirking, fondling Mink present a powerful concretization of the spectral pedophilic threat. Yet, at the same time, Veitch insists on pulling things to the surface in a way that seems to disallow connotation or innuendo. Everyone in Slumberg knows that the Mink is gay, and Chippy suffers for his association, so how could the boy possibly maintain his ignorance? As with earlier texts – the *Tick* scene, or even Wertham’s reading of the original Batman and Robin stories themselves – the story seems to pick up on an epistemological uncertainty that is suffered by the reader him- or herself, transferring and

transforming the anxiety. Does the sidekick “know about” the hero? Well, does the reader? Cody’s stubborn ignorance, like that of the pensive Johnny who wonders about the importance of “the lips,” may be – like that of the reader – self-imposed. As a defensive maneuver, the will *not to know* avoids the fear that, in understanding one superhero to be gay, we will suddenly be forced to see unwelcome truths throughout the genre.

Indeed, this is the knowledge imparted in the end by the Mink. Rupturing the polite ambiguity of connotation, the Mink articulates his position in words as clear as they are campy: “I used to be much more sensitive to people’s opinions about me, chum. I constantly worried whether they saw me as a full-fledged archetype or just another stereotype. But I don’t care anymore! I’m out of the closet and onto the street!” (88-90) The Mink even takes on the personal responsibility of punishing the bigots who attack a gay crisis center (116-122). By the time the book reaches its climax, Cody seems to have reached the end of his self-imposed ignorance. He is able to turn to the Mink and say, “Malcolm, I’m not going to be able to cut this... I’m not gay” (126). Using the hero’s real name, even as he speaks the truth out loud, Cody ends the game of telling and not-telling, asserting his own identity as he does.

This shifts the discourse: the Mink responds, somewhat surprisingly: “Don’t kid yourself, chum. There’s a homoerotic side to every hero” (128). The book has now stepped beyond the game of innuendo, the are-the-or-aren’t-they of the predatory Batman figure and his helplessly naïve Robin. At the moment that the characters themselves acknowledge that the conversation is not about any individual’s sexuality, but is instead about superhero *archetype*, the hostile game of connotation is transformed into something larger. The Mink’s claim can be agreed or disagreed with, but, unlike the vicious stereotyping that preceded it, at least it can be addressed directly.

Although the deeply homophobic tone of *Bratpack* cannot be denied, it is nonetheless a complex text, and often surprising. Its stereotypes *are* over the top, its tone brutal; it is thus a useful site for looking at the most hostile and homophobic kind of interpretation of the pedophilic spectre, and of the “gay-Batman” reading as a whole. On the other hand, it unfolds in often unexpected ways, and Veitch’s willingness to let the

characters speak aloud about homosexuality can't help but remind the reader that most mainstream texts, whatever the metaphors they deployed, were too timid to permit such

As we have seen, the pedophilic trope has been variously interpreted in superhero parodies and fringe stories after 1986, without making a clear differentiation between the concept of pedophilia and the concept of homosexuality more generally. In contrast, the years since 2000 have seen a surge of interest in splitting apart these concepts and re-examining the genre's historical assumptions.

One recent instance occurs in the pages of *Powers*, written by Brian Michael Bendis. This series chronicles a police force that has to deal with superheroes and supervillains – called “powers” – alongside the more usual urban corruption and crime. The story arc in question, published in late 2003, concerns a former superhero team called Unity, whose members have since retired and used their trademarked images to establish a marketing empire. The team contains analogs to Superman and Wonder Woman, as well as less specific martial-arts, atom-powered, and flying-fighter heroes. An ex-Unity member, Red Hawk, has recently been disgraced by the discovery of a home porn video involving the superhero, “water sports,” and an underage female prostitute wearing the costume of Red Hawk's former sidekick. When Red Hawk is mysteriously killed, the police bring in the actual ex-sidekick --- a character named Wing. Wing, apparently now in his mid-thirties, lives in San Diego, is openly gay, and teaches “a wine making class at the community center.” In this scene, Detective Mack questions Wing in the interrogation room, while Detectives Walker and Pilgrim listen in on the other side of the two-way glass.

Almost before Mack can start grilling him, Wing – who is obviously distraught about Red Hawk's death – volunteers this remarkable testimony:

Wing: Just... listen, okay?... When I was just 17, I was very much in love with Broderick [Red Hawk]. Passionately, *deeply* in love with him. And I carried it with me, unrequited, for I don't know how many years. I mean, we were together *all* the time. He trained me. He gave me a purpose.

OK, so... So, after one *particular* case we solved... In the excitement of it
– I – I – I made a pass. I kissed him. It went very badly.⁴⁰

Detective Mack: *How* badly? [Wing is silent.] How badly?

Wing: He – um – he beat me pretty bad. He broke my arm. I was in the hospital.

I – uh – I...

Detective Mack: And *that's* when you guys ended the partnership...?

Wing: Yes, well, let's just say – it was ended for me... [W]hile I was healing in
the hospital.. all by myself.. trying to figure out what happened, exactly...
my belongings were moved out of the condo and into a small apartment on
the other side of the city. Then his lawyer came to visit me – where I was
handed a check of \$750,000 – a confidentiality agreement to sign – and I
was told to fuck off... But that was many years ago, and I have – yeah,
I've forgiven him... I have to take a lot of the blame. I mean, certainly I
do not condone violence, especially against me... but I -- if I had been a
little more *sensitive* to him – I mean, this man has so many unresolved

⁴⁰ The “excitement of it” is an important theme in the recent, relatively few explorations of superhero erotics -- as we may remember from *Watchmen*. A more recent exploration appeared in a 2000 issue of another “fringe-superhero” book, *Starman*, published by DC in 1997. The young hero Jack, known as Starman, talks with his girlfriend Sadie about super-battle and sex:

Sadie: You know how when you fight?... You told me how Wesley Dodds described it as sometimes being almost sexual.

Jack: Sometimes it is. I mean *normally* you're fighting big ugly guys. Which may float some heroes boats, but *not* mine [*sic*]. Thing is it's not who you're fighting that matters. It's the *action* itself. And you know how the French have that term for it, the end of sex. “La petit mort.” [*sic*]

Sadie: The little death.

Jack: Well somehow the fact that what you're doing is life and death is all mixed up in it, too. You know how badly paid cops and firemen and lots of other dangerous work can be... Well, I think that the reason they do it anyway. Apart from some degree of public spirit, is that life-and-death feeling. The living seems so much sweeter 'cause you're more aware of the alternative. Everything becomes more extreme.

Sadie: Even the sex?

Jack: Especially the sex.

(Robinson, *Starman: To Reach the Stars*, 24-25 (2000 reprint collection). Emphasis selectively included.)

issues, especially with his father, and... I should have taken it *all* into consideration. I should have...

Detective Pilgrim [on the other side of the glass]: Good *Lord*.

(*Powers* #26, December 2003)

Here, Bendis takes us a few steps back from the abstraction of the “superhero-sidekick thing,” to offer a look at the emotional dynamics that might inform such a situation for real individuals. Wing’s narrative reminds us of a point documented by Wertham, but glossed over by later history: the erotic fantasies triggered by the hero-sidekick dynamic in comics were generally documented in young men who fantasized about being willingly seduced by *older* partners, not the other way around. This reversal has the potential to upset the questions of power behind many objections to the “gay reading” of the potential superhero-sidekick dynamic.

By giving us the account from Wing’s point of view, Bendis also complicates the general presumption that a romantic or erotic relationship between a superhero and a sidekick would necessarily be a bad thing. If nothing else, Wing’s narrative clearly shows that Red Hawk’s reaction -- one that seems profoundly conservative in its homophobia and its violence, and, in that sense, its adherence to genre ideals of the masculine superhero -- would in practice be painful and abusive. It is enough to make most readers wish that the superhero, in this case, could have been sympathetic to his sidekick’s desires. We can go so far as to say that it seems clear that even the decision to *return* the sidekick’s affection -- that most unheard-of and taboo result -- would not have been half such a terrible thing as beating up a seventeen-year-old boy and kicking him out of the house.

Wing himself seems aware of the psychological interpretations to which the hero-sidekick relationship can be subjected. Noting that the prostitute with whom Red Hawk was videotaped was, in fact, dressed in one of Wing’s old costumes, Wing says: “I mean, it’s all the classic symptoms. *All...* Hiring young girls to dress like me -- and then... fouling them. I mean, come *on* -- *please!* I’m sure if that girl hadn’t run out of the room crying... in four seconds she would have been bent over the nightstand singing ‘Hallelujah Mary.’” Even as he infers repressed gay tendencies in the former superhero,

Wing blames himself for having somehow instilled something corrosive in Red Hawk. “This is all my fault in that... I sent him down this path of confusion and depravity,” he tells the officers. “I started this *whole* sexually confused thing, and he ended up dead from it.” Although he has apparently grown into a self-aware, comfortably gay man, Wing paradoxically blames his teenaged self for having corrupted Red Hawk – a curious inversion of the usual pedophilic critique – as well as forgiving Red Hawk all responsibility for the episode of physical abuse he graphically describes. This irrational self-blame is so obviously unfounded that even the watching police officers seem to be touched and frustrated. (*Powers* #26, 3-10).

Perhaps the most thoughtful take yet to emerge on the issue, however, was that posed in a 2002 limited series by Alan Moore – who, fifteen years after *Watchmen*, continues to probe the taboos and conventions of the superhero genre. Moore’s imprint America’s Best Comics (ABC) brought out the series *Top 10*, a 12-issue limited series written by Moore and illustrated by Zander Cannon and Gene Ha, in 2001 and 2002. *Top 10* is an ensemble police drama, character-based along the lines of *Hill Street Blues*, and follows the officers of Neopolis Law Enforcement Precinct 10, nicknamed “Top 10.” Neopolis is a city entirely populated by superheroes and other strange creatures: Everyone, from secretaries to six-year-olds, wears capes and Spandex or something like it, and most people have superpowers. It is a collapse point for superhero “continuity,” where everything is cross-referential and overdetermined: ghettos are inhabited by “ferro-American” robots, titans drink coffee at skyscraper-level kiosks, giant reptiles from Monster Island object to racial profiling, a sexually transmitted mutation called STORMS threatens the careless, and a top-40 boy band called “Sidekix” is likely to be composed of young men who actually *are* former child heroes

At the climax of the 12-issue series, the subplot that comes to a head involves the murder of one such former sidekick, shot in a nightclub just after the release of his band’s album (called “Boy Wondering,” in obvious tribute). The evidence leads Top 10’s officers to the super-group with which the victim had been associated: the Sentinels, a well-known superhero team, now mostly retired. Like hero teams in so many other postmodern or revisionist books, the Sentinels are an unflattering mirror-image of the

Justice League. The former Sentinels feature a Superman type called Atoman, the Wonder Woman-like Sun Woman, the Sizzler (a Flash-like “speedster” with fire powers), and a Batman type called the Hound, who “sniffs out” crime and keeps his trophies in an underground “Kennel.”⁴¹

Investigation reveals that the Sentinels are a sham: they never really fought any heroic battles, but instead are merely an elaborate façade that masks their real activity. Readers were as shocked as the book’s officers when Moore named this activity aloud: the Sentinels are a pedophile ring.

Dust Devil: Damn, Jacks. You’re saying the Sentinels *lied* about all them space wars? Well, what *have* they been doin’ all these years?

Lt. Peregrine: They’re a pedophile ring. From what we can make out, the Young Sentinels is a pedophile grooming operation.

Shock-Headed Peter: Hey, come on, you’re sayin’ *Atoman* is a short-eyes? Or the *Hound*? Kids make *up* allegations! You hear it all the *time*!

Lt. Peregrine: The kids aren’t alleging anything. We’ve got Atoman on film, being... serviced... by the Sizzler’s pre-teen partner, Scorchy. [Responding to the sudden silence and generally appalled looks:] Yeah. That was pretty much

⁴¹ The Seven Sentinels’ mirroring of the Justice League is well understood by fan readers, as is indicated by the comments found at Jess Nevins’ online *Top 10* annotation site, broadly considered the canonical Moore fan-annotations clearinghouse. (Nevins’ similar annotations to Moore’s *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* recently became the source for an officially-sanctioned book). Of the Seven Sentinels, Nevins writes:

I thought the following too obvious to mention, but a number of people wrote in to give the names, so I’m going to list them once and for all. The Seven Sentinels are analogues for DC’s Justice League of America (although as Ronald Byrd points out, there are eight members of the Seven Sentinels--perhaps similar to the misnumbering of DC’s Seven Soldiers of Victory?). The Scarlet Sceptre is the Green Lantern, the Black Boomerang is the Green Arrow, Atoman & Atomaid [*sic*] are Superman & Supergirl, the Hound & the Pup are Batman & Robin, the Kingfisher & Bluejay have no real parallel, the Sizzler & Scorchy are Flash & Kid Flash, Davy Jones & Davy Jones Jr. are Aquaman (by way of Popeye) and Aqualad, Sun Woman is Wonder Woman, and M’rggla [Qualtz, an alien later turned porn actress and serial killer] is the Martian Manhunter.

(<http://ratmmjess.tripod.com/topten12.html>)

our reaction. The Captain's given us permission to take down the Sentinels.
Commander Bailey will hand out assault weapons down at the Armory.
(*Top 10* #12; emphasis selectively included)

In the series' final issue -- subtitled "Court on the Street" -- the officers of *Top 10*, dismayed and angered, collect their assault weapons and head out to "take down the Sentinels." The operation results in the violent subduing and capture of most of the former heroes, a round-up of the juvenile Young Sentinels (including Scorchy -- who turns out to be female), and the suicide of the Superman-like Atoman. That last event is, in fact, carefully engineered by a psychologically astute robotic police officer -- which makes it all the more unsettling. After being forewarned of the police raid by his young female sidekick -- who clearly remains loyal to him despite the implication of ongoing statutory rape -- Atoman has shut himself up in his "Fallout Shelter," a fortress made of "impregnum," from which even the *Top 10* officers cannot pry him out.⁴² But the robot officer, Joe Pi, threaten Atoman him with the prospect of having his powers taken away, and reminds him that he will be sent "to prison... with all your old *enemies*... as a *child molester*."

Atoman cries out, "*No!* That can't happen!... You think Atoman is going to spend the next twenty years bending over for Doctor Dread or Antimax?"⁴³ He throws himself

⁴² Nevins writes: "Atoman, [who is] the Sentinels' Superman analogue, has a Fortress of Solitude analogue, as seen here."

⁴³ Many themes and symbols in *Top 10* echo earlier works by Moore -- as might be expected from someone who's been writing revisionist superhero texts so long and prolifically. Interesting here is the speculation on the dreadful prison fate of a former hero stripped of his powers, a fate which Moore worked out in some detail during Rorschach's imprisonment in Chapters 6 and 8 of *Watchmen*. In that book, Rorschach is sprung from jail after only a few days by his old companion in vigilantism, Nite Owl, and Nite Owl's companion the Silk Spectre. But the situation strongly suggests that if this had not occurred, Rorschach's defenses would not have protected him forever and one of his former enemies would indeed have eventually murdered him.

Alongside and next to murder, one of the central threats implied in such an environment is, of course, the threat of anal rape. This is referenced in passing during the prison scene in *Watchmen* (6.5, 6.6), and more menacingly (on page 6.12) when a prisoner behind Rorschach in the mess line murmurs "Boy, y'know, I'd sure like your autograph. I got my autograph book right here in my pocket..." while pressing a screwdriver to the seat of Rorschach's pants. In *Top 10*, part of what appalls Atoman

into the deadly “violet soundwave” he keeps sealed inside the fortress – the one thing that could destroy him – seeking, in his words, a “way out with dignity.” No one seems grieved by his death.

In this startling climax, Alan Moore once again seems to have been the first to dare to speak a frightening thing aloud in a superhero book. Just as he was perhaps the first to bring the sexuality of costumed superheroes “out of the closet” in *Watchmen*, in *Top 10* he gave a name to the existing, previously only connoted fear that sidekicks as a class could be somehow vulnerable to sexual exploitation – the fear articulated in *Bratpack* in 1994, and in *The Tick’s* telling 1990 scene in the Sidekicks Lounge. It suggests the fear that any superhero group might be nothing more than a front for something sexual: as the thought goes, what other reasonable explanation *could* there be for adults to act so ridiculous? More critically, Moore gave this specific fear a proper name and a proper punishment. The “Werthamite spectre” does not deal with homosexuality *per se*, but with a crime that has a name – pedophilia -- and is punishable by jail terms and ruination. The episode addresses, head-on, a long tradition of unarticulated innuendo. In a similar situation, perhaps one of the Johnnys from *The Tick’s* Sidekicks Lounge might have been satisfied that, the façade of superheroism having been exposed, his predatory superhero had run out of “excuses.”

However, Moore was not content to let his naming-aloud of pedophilia stop there. In the closing pages of *Top 10*, we find a return to the interest in human emotional complexity, ethical ambiguity, and history’s secrets that characterized the superheroes’ romantic and erotic lives in *Watchmen*. Captain Traynor is the precinct captain and paternal authority figure of *Top 10*, a kind-faced, hale but aging man, whose personal history does not emerge in detail until the series’ very end. All we know is that during his active superhero career he flew a plane with a supergroup called the Sky Sharks and went under the name of Jetman; and before that, he was a sidekick called Jetlad. As the Sentinels investigation heats up, we occasionally break in on Captain Traynor in

enough to drive him to suicide is the thought of being forced to submit sexually to his former super-foes. Aside from the usual horror of rape, why does this possibility seem such a likely and obvious consequence for the imprisoned superhero? And what kind of reversals -- of the world inside/outside the jail, of the normal state of dominance/submission -- might it imply?

pensive mood, gazing at a framed photo he keeps in his desk. It appears to depict a 1950s-era fighter pilot-cum-superhero, sporting an aviator's costume and a walrus mustache.

This mystery seems to find an explanation in issue #9, when a telepathic alien in the police holding cells, in the midst of a private and cryptic conversation, tries to reassure Traynor that she is not simply playing games with him. "Captain, if I wanted to *humiliate* you," she says, "I'd just tell everyone about you being a *homosexual*, wouldn't I?" (*Top 10* #9). Traynor's silent, shocked gaze confirms, as clearly as Hooded Justice's speechless stare did in Moore's *Watchmen*, that the accusation has hit home: the unspeakable thing just spoken aloud, hanging in the air, cannot be denied. Moore, however, can be counted on not to simply retread old ground. The full extent of this subplot's symmetry is not revealed until the end of the series' final issue, as the day that started with the violent take-down of the Sentinels fades into evening. As the characters disperse, we follow Traynor home, seeing for the first time where he lives (an ordinary house, a large garage containing a lovingly tended antique plane).

Ascending the stairs, Traynor is greeted with a call of "Hi, babe," and we see the other person in the apartment: a heavysset, distinctively mustached man – obviously a much aged version of the fighter pilot in Traynor's photograph. The men kiss, and Traynor's partner tells him that their lasagna will be ready in fifteen minutes. As the two sit down with wineglasses on the sofa, Traynor mulls over his reactions to the day's raid:

Traynor: I don't know what it was that got to me. [Atoman] killed himself in a beam of violet sound, but it wasn't that. He was a nasty bastard. Hell, they're all nasty bastards. They were a *pedophile* ring, for God's sake, but... Oh, I don't know.

Wulf: No? Well I do, sweetheart. You're thinking about '49. Boy, in that uniform? You were something.

Traynor: ... Says the big tough Sky Shark guy! Wulf, I was barely sixteen back then, and you were what, twenty-four maybe? How was what we did different?

Wulf: Hey, I was a dirty old fruit even back then. Like I'd pass on Jetlad. The difference is I loved you, baby. I still do.

Traynor: And I love you, old man. And that's enough, right? Even in a city like this?

The two sit before their picture window, watching the skies of Neopolis, filled suddenly in this panel with flying creatures out of childhood tales – Oz people, Peter Pan, a character from Maurice Sendak's *In The Night Kitchen*⁴⁴ – and Wulf, putting his arm around Traynor, responds, "Yeah. It's enough."

In a complicated move that adds yet another layer of nuance to an already-startling series of events, Moore seems to demand that his readers take the concept of superhero-sidekick intimacy -- which has just been dragged out into the light and positioned as a serious crime -- and re-examine it yet again. This time, the concept is filtered through a sympathetic character, who mulls over the complexities of the issue in the company of a clearly age-tested and well-beloved partner. "How was what we did different?" asks Traynor, and the answer, of course, is that it isn't clear. It's not so simple as it might have seemed to label age-crossing intimacy a crime; after all, we now realize, much depends on context, on individuals, and on love.

This is a politically charged suggestion to make, and Moore perhaps wisely assigns it to characters who have had decades to reflect on their choices and conclude they made no mistake. At the same time, a more subtle point is being made, one of tremendous significance for this particular discussion. The "hero-sidekick" pedophilia trope has long been assumed to be, and treated as if it were, a homosexual pairing. But as Moore points out – and as gay activists, in the real world, have increasingly insisted – this link is an arbitrary one. The most explicit exploitation we see practiced by the Sentinels involves adult men and young girls (Atoman and Scorchy, Atoman and Atomaid, and two half-naked young women – Boots and Blacky – whom the officers find in the Sentinels' tower); while exploitative pedophilic contact between superheroes and sidekicks of the same sex is certainly also implied, it is not foregrounded.

⁴⁴ Per Nevins' site, <http://ratmmjess.tripod.com/topten11.html>, "Page 32."

On the other hand, the relationship between the former Jetlad and his companion, which is held up as a partnership that has long outlasted the excitement of forbidden sex, is obviously homosexual and, apparently, in no way dysfunctional. Moore seems to insist that readers, rather than continuing to think of the pedophilic trope as a dirty joke, instead consider the more nuanced shades of sexual and emotional complexity that such human relationships might entail – as well as sorting through the nuances that differentiate the abusive relationship from the consensual, and that automatically stigmatize gay relationships by default while validating heterosexual ones.

This intelligent, nuanced piece of commentary on the pedophilic trope stands as a good bookend to conclude this discussion, one that started with Wertham. As we can see, the prevalence of the pedophilic trope in the transitional period of the late 1980s and 1990s has started to be answered by revisionary texts in the late 1990s and the early 2000s, in which writers like Moore and Bendis are interested in challenging readers to think consciously and carefully about the old, embedded assumptions and jokes.

Lest things seem entirely progressive in this regard, however, I would like to balance the mention of Moore's work with that of another writer important in remaking the field, Frank Miller. By a circumstance perhaps coincidental but certainly provocative, both Frank Miller and Alan Moore – two of the writers who shook up genre tropes in the 1980s with Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* and Moore's *Watchmen*, both discussed earlier in this chapter – produced germane new works in 2002. Moore produced *Top 10*, among other series from ABC; meanwhile, Miller published the long-awaited and much-heralded *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*, a sequel to the 1986 book. In *The Dark Knight Returns* (which will hereafter be abbreviated as *TDKR*, following fan convention), readers see a much-aged Batman return to save Gotham City with the assistance of a new sidekick, a thirteen-year-old girl named Carrie Kelly who takes on the name of Robin. In *The Dark Knight Strikes Again (TDKSA)*, set three years later on, an even older Batman returns yet again to save the world for once last time. This time he's assisted by most of the roster of the Justice League, Captain Marvel, the inhabitants of the bottle city of Kandor, and his now-sixteen-year-old assistant Carrie, who has changed her superhero name (and costume) from Robin to Catgirl.

The original book attracted some suggestions about the possible meanings of Robin's "transformation" into a girl, but *TDKR* made no strong suggestion about the relationship between Batman and his new Robin beyond that of an intense, paternalistic, quasi-military bonding. However, the sequel takes a different approach. Things start unobtrusively: a mysterious, Joker-like figure of evil is haunting Batman and his allies throughout the three book's three chapters. Obviously, this cannot be the real Joker, since he was killed by Batman by Batman in *TDKR*. This mysterious villain once attacks Carrie, commenting, "Kid sidekicks. You make me sick" (*TDKSA* 3:34), and a clairvoyant girl tells her later, "He hates you. He hates you more than anybody. More even than he hates Mr. Wayne" (*TDKSA* 3:33).

In the climactic final book, this perverse and mysterious figure of evil is revealed to have all along been Dick Grayson – the first Robin! Dick has, for some reason, gone over to the enemy camp of Lex Luthor and his ally, the evil alien Brainiac. "Radical gene therapy" has equipped Dick with superhuman strength and near-immortality, and from unspecified place, he has developed a deep-seated hatred of Batman and, particularly, Carrie. At the book's climactic scene, Dick/Joker traps Catgirl in the Batcave and begins to carve her up with a knife. "Get out of there," Batman cries over their communications radio. "Too late," Carrie answers weakly, and adds, "I love you." While the crazed Batman struggles to reach the cave in time to save Carrie, the evil Dick Grayson continues to slice away. "He loves you," Dick murmurs, as he presses his body and mouth against her. "The daughter he never had. So pretty. Sweet sixteen. I'm going to skin you alive." When the torture scene is interrupted by Batman (in a sort of holographic projection), the dynamic shifts to the tension between Dick and Batman. The scene that unfolds is increasingly bizarre. Batman, seeing through Dick's disguise, needles him, reminding him of the long-ago night he "fired [Dick's] sorry butt. For incompetence... And did you bawl like a baby or what? You were pathetic, Dickster. You were always pathetic."

Dick drops his Joker disguise to reveal the strangely inappropriate red-and-green Robin costume. He threatens Batman with gruesome vengeance, as well as with an awful fate for Carrie -- "your little piece of jailbait here." Batman counters with threats of his own, while at the same time he caresses Dick's cheek and calls him by poisonously

precious names: “bobbin,” “dondi,” “button,” “peach.” In the midst of all this, he stomps on Dick’s face, cuts off his head with an axe, and then drops him into a volcano. “Lava,” he says. “An ocean of it. Rising fast. Coming your way, blossom. You’ll be vaporized. Feel the heat yet, plum?”

Due to Dick’s modifications, the former two moves aren’t enough to kill him. Pulling himself back together, he cries out to Batman: “*Damn you! I loved you!*”

“So what?” asks Batman. “You were useless. You didn’t have the chops. You couldn’t cut the mustard.”

“I loved you!” says Dick. “I would have done *anything* for you!”

“You’re breaking my heart,” says Batman, and hurls both of them down into the volcano.

Batman, of course, is saved via a quick and timely rescue by Superman, but Robin falls to his final death. As Batman watches him fall, ordering Superman to “[t]ake me to Carrie,” we find him thinking: “So long, Boy Wonder.” On the book’s final page, we find Batman reunited with Carrie in the Batmobile. As they fly toward safety, Bruce addresses her as “darling,” and muses silently to himself: “You were right about one thing, Dick Grayson. I love her.”

This sequel reveals less about the evolution of the “pedophile” trope over the past fifteen years, at least in Miller’s thought, than it does about the contrast between Miller’s attitude and those of other creators – particularly Moore. It is surprising to see how consistent Miller’s attitude toward the potential gay readings of the Batman story has remained. After all, if his treatment of the Joker was arguably homophobic in TDKR, then its recritulation in *TDKSA* is equally so. The abrupt introduction of Dick Grayson makes less sense as the appearance of an individual than it does as a representation of the figure he stands for – “the boy sidekick,” or Batman’s boy sidekick specifically. And if the death of the Joker reads like an attempt to brutally exorcise any potential gay tropes from the text, what are to make of it when Miller re-stages the same destruction, this time on the body of the eternally controversial and provocative boy sidekick?

Viewing things this way, it is hardly surprising that Batman’s final stopping place, mere pages later, is at the side of his new, female companion. “She’s stable. She’ll be all right. Sturdy as ever,” he thinks. The bond with the female companion is positioned as

“stable” and will endure; irrespective of whether we read the implications as parental, romantic, or incipiently sexual, we can see that it is one of requited love. What makes this scene of substitution deeply disturbing, of course, is the way that Robin cries aloud his love for Batman, at the violent climax -- and Batman dismisses him with insults that sound suspiciously like “sissy.” Substituting a female character for the original Boy Wonder is a move that is open to many readings, but does not demand a homophobic one. On the other hand, the transformation of the original Boy Wonder into a murderous villain and his destruction amid a hail of words like “peach” and “button,” as he cries “I loved you!” and Batman answers “So what?,” do seem specifically to demand to be read as homophobic and defensive. The scene seems to be attempting to repudiate any dangerous possibilities that have ever lurked in the potential love between Batman and his boy sidekick. Unfortunately, Miller’s methods are brutal and violent. (One has the sense, all those years back, Batman and Robin might have enacted a scene in the Batcave not unlike the one Bendis describes for Wing and Red Hawk. By curious coincidence, after all, both Batman and Red Hawk wound up moving on to young women dressed in the costumes of their former boy sidekicks.)

In many ways, Miller seems curiously behind the times. His violent destruction of the foppish, obsessive Joker seemed homophobic and overly defensive of Batman’s “masculinity,” even in 1986; resurrecting the story in 2003 to destroy the too-cute, obsessive Robin suggests a certain paucity of imagination. On the other hand, Miller’s apparent obsession can be viewed as a demonstration of the staying power of pedophilic anxiety. Miller seems to have an *idée fixe* about exorcising potential gay readings from the Batman *story*. Just as his representation of the dynamic between Batman and the Joker in TDKR presents a rich text for reading that tension, Miller’s move to destroy the “boy sidekick” offers a fascinating demonstration of the fear, hostility, and paranoia that have been inspired over the years by Wertham’s pedophilic spectre. This time, of course, the bad element is identified as being the Boy Wonder – almost literally a spectral figure, who cannot be killed, but eternally returns to bother Batman no matter how often the hero repudiates him. Eventually, the revenant can be destroyed only by being “atomized” in the bowels of the earth... and being replaced by a girl.

As we have seen, the discourse of gayness in superhero comics is not merely recent -- nor is it limited to comics in which gay characters actually appear. Instead, this conversation reaches back more than fifty years. Over the last half-century, comics writers and readers have formulated ways of talking about, implying, satirizing, burlesquing or denying the implicit possibility of homosexuality in the superhero text. At times, this has provided the only outlet for discussing the operations of gayness in superhero genre texts, as various forces -- many of them the same historical influences that have shaped the contours of these tropes -- have caused mainstream comics to exclude and deny gay possibilities, perhaps in a maneuver of self-defense.

From this discussion of the history of the discourse, we now shift to close readings of texts that have emerged since it started becoming feasible to speak gayness aloud. Although these texts claim to offer an "open" portrayal of gay characters, we shall see how the shaping forces of this historical discourse contribute to their representations of gay characters -- and to the images of gayness against which they define themselves. As always, history informs and shapes the present, even if what the present claims is nothing short of a representational revolution.

Part Two:

Close Readings

In the last chapter, we looked at ways in which the gay-superhero discourse has manifested in implied and non-specific ways, and how its connotative meanings have been defined in the negative space of mainstream superhero comics – in burlesque, satire, transmedia adaptations, and the mainstream’s avant-garde and fringe. As we saw, the past fifteen years have seen gay superheroes, and the conversation around them, move gradually out into the mainstream. This discourse ranges from the explicit and playful analogies in mainstream transmedia adaptations – from *The Ambiguously Gay Duo* to *X-Men United* -- to the emerging “sunlit” conversation about gay superheroes in comics at or near the heart of the mainstream, as seen in titles like *Powers*, in which writer Brian Michael Bendis uses Batman and Robin analogues to address the pedophilic Wertham spectre, or Alan Moore’s *Top 10*, in which Moore brings a nuanced approach to the same question, echoing the way his work broached the topic of hidden superhero gayness in *Watchmen* sixteen years before.

At the same time, we have seen that the threads of the conversation in contemporary comics are tangled and far from consistent, as is suggested by the curiously homophobic climax to Frank Miller’s *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* (2003). Miller’s hostile evocation of the Batman and Robin relationship, and the story’s violent destruction of the spectre of an unhealthy same-sex obsession, seems to echo the original’s impulse to revisit and exorcise gayness from the superhero text. It also suggests the abiding discomfort around gayness still found in many superhero comics. Although Miller is unusual in using “revisionism” to make potentially gay subtexts visible before attacking them, most superhero stories far closer to the mainstream still leave gayness invisible, indulge in explicit or implicit stereotyping, or frame same-sex attachments of gay characters as implicitly threatening.

Having looked at the ways in which a conversation about homosexuality in superhero texts has emerged over the past fifteen years, I now consider more recent irruptions of gay visibility in superhero texts. In this chapter, I examine three recent

instances in which gay characters were brought *explicitly, denotatively*, and with great *visibility* into a superhero text. The first close reading looks at the gay superhero Northstar, giving some background for the character's history and paying attention to his well-publicized "coming out" in 1993, and his 2002 reintroduction into the Marvel universe as an openly gay character. Second, I look at Apollo and the Midnighter, a pair of characters created by writer Warren Ellis in 1998 for a series published by Wildstorm Comics, who received considerable media attention in early 2002 when they were "brought out" as "the world's first gay superheroes." Third, I examine the sequence of events surrounding the outing and subsequent much-publicized gay-bashing of a sidekick character, Terry Berg, in DC's *Green Lantern*, as written by Judd Winick, and consider what the story suggests about violence and protection in superhero genre fictions..

In this section, we will move from examining the way gay representations, and the discourse around the gay superhero, has existed at the margins of the mainstream to examining how it has tentatively begun to enter mainstream narratives themselves. Consequently, two elements will be the main focus of these readings. First, I am interested in the ways of knowing that creators present readers with in these representations: How are we given to know that a character is gay? How do the other characters within that fictional universe acknowledge or fail to acknowledge it? (That is, how does this knowledge become *denotative*?) Second, I am interested in examining these texts' self-aware relationship to the history of the superhero: what claims do they seem to be trying to make about the impact of gay characters on the genre conventions of a fictional world like the superhero comic? Third, I am interested in other patterns of representation, whether acknowledged or unacknowledged, that manifest in these stories. These questions may have to do with matters like victimhood, public image, and the economy of violence in the superhero world. These stories are characterized by a claim or desire to be "out" and "open" about their superheroes' sexuality. But do they also show us things about the contours of the discourse that are less immediately visible? What might some of those patterns, questions, or contradictions be?

READING #1: ALPHA FLIGHT AND NORTHSTAR

“Frightened of what he thought he was, and what he feared he might become...”

In 1992, Northstar, a member of Marvel's Canadian superhero team *Alpha Flight*, performed a highly visible “coming out.” He was the first superhero in the Marvel Universe to do so -- in fact, the first superhero in any “mainstream” series -- but the event followed ten years of character development in which the character’s homosexuality had been implied but never made clear. In this section, I examine how homosexuality has been implied and represented – connoted and denoted – throughout the history of the Northstar character. This path will take us from the character’s “ambiguously gay” representation during the 1980s, through a symbolic AIDS crisis of extraordinary proportions in 1986, and through to the character’s coming out in 1992 and the nexus of cultural, political and narrative tensions which that storyline brought to light. Then I briefly consider how, after a long absence, the character’s 2002 reintroduction to X-Men comics has presented a kind of template for representing the modern gay superhero -- complete with a platform of identity politics and a direct address to the Werthamite threat.

Epistemology of the Superhero Closet: How do we know what we know?

Alpha Flight debuted in August of 1983. The cover of the first issue touted the characters as “exploding from the pages of *The X-Men!*,” which was indeed where the team had made a guest appearance in 1979 (*Uncanny X-Men* (Vol. I), #120). The characters had been created by popular writer John Byrne, who also wrote and drew the first twenty-four issues of the new book. Alpha Flight was a specifically Canadian super-team, and Byrne, Canadian himself, carefully delineated the characters and described their settings. He seemed to view the book as a labor of love.

The character Northstar was introduced as the secret identity of Jean-Paul Beaubier, a professional downhill skier and proud Quebecois. Northstar had mutant powers of flight and of super-speed; he had also been recently re-united with a long-lost twin sister, named Jeanne-Marie and code-named Aurora. Aurora had similar powers,

and together the two could generate powerful blasts of light. Identified to the reader as mutants, the two were both slightly elfin in appearance, slender and graceful – a common aspect of Byrne’s art style – with sloping eyebrows and slightly pointed ears.

From the start, readers were given to understand that each Alpha Flight team member had troubling secrets and hidden pasts – a well-established approach to engaging readers with new characters. Aurora, for example, seemed to have a personality disorder which was – probably inaccurately -- labeled schizophrenia. Northstar’s issues were less clear. He was positioned as a hostile character, ready with a biting wit that often caused friction, and during the series’ first two years some slightly unsavory aspects of his past emerged: he had apparently once been involved with a radical Quebecois separatist group; he had knowingly used his mutant powers to advance his athletic career. But Byrne’s stories also repeatedly suggested that there was something else about Northstar that hadn’t quite been brought into the light. In Issue #7, for example, Jean-Paul walks his sister to a restaurant in a quaint quarter of Montreal, to introduce her to an old friend who “helped me through some difficult times.” Upon hearing Jeanne-Marie expresses surprise that her brother is familiar with “such a place” as this, he tells her, “I have... depth you do not suspect, dear sister” (4). The friend turns out to be a restaurateur named Raymonde Belmonde; when Jeanne-Marie tells him that her brother has told her all about him, Raymonde replies, “He has? That surprises me a little, my dear. But,” he adds, kissing her hand, “may I say how delighted I am that Mother Nature so graciously imparted Jean-Paul’s features to a woman, where handsome may become beautiful.”

Things go on this way for quite some time. Over lunch, Belmonde comments, “Then you have not really told your sister *all* about me, after all, Jean-Paul? I thought that would have been odd” (7). It’s clear that the reader is missing some information about the past, but it’s also clear that Jean-Paul and Raymonde were once close. As Raymonde says when he invites Jeanne-Marie to use his first name, “We are all like *family* here” (8). When Raymonde’s teenage daughter suddenly enters, Jean-Paul is apparently shocked, asking: “But *how*? I mean... You never told me of a daughter.” Raymonde explains that the girl, Danielle, has recently come to live with him after her mother’s death: “a treasured reminder of the very different man I once was” (9).

This sequence is an example of the kind of exchange that some readers read as containing “coded gayness.” It makes nothing explicit; it maintains what D.A. Miller might call an “abiding deniability.” A reader might take nothing from the scene other than that Jean-Paul has some kind of mysterious background. But a reader more attuned to the cues with which gayness is often communicated in conversation or literature, might well read the scene as suggesting that Jean-Paul and Raymonde’s past together was intimate in a way that goes beyond the expectations of conventional heterosexual masculinity, and that both claim gay identities or gay pasts. The scene concludes with an even more provocative event. Agents of a local thug named Ernest St. Ives interrupt the protagonists at lunch, seizing Raymonde and hustling him away. Jean-Paul is blocked from interfering and pushed aside – the thugs call him “pretty boy,” an insult he often faces – and Jeanne-Marie is kidnapped, while Raymonde is abruptly killed. As Danielle weeps over her father’s corpse, we read this description of the internal state of a grim-faced Jean-Paul:

Jean-Paul Beaubier feels a great, black emptiness open in his heart, a gaping maw threatening to swallow whole his world... Raymonde Belmonde had been the most important person in his life. More than a father, much more than a friend, he had found Jean-Paul, scarcely more than a boy, alone and frightened... of what he thought he was, and what he feared he might become. And Raymonde had led him out of that dark fear, into the bright clear light of self-acceptance, teaching him not to fear his *mutant* powers, or any other thing. Now... an iron door has closed upon a chapter of his life, and Jean-Paul Beaubier is alone again.

(AF #7, 13, emphasis original.)

As the panels close in on Jean-Paul’s clenched fists and angry face, we find him thinking: “You have made a grievous error, Ernest St. Ives. You have taken from me my sister and my friend. And for that I will kill you” (13).

This sequence, one of many like it, gives a sense of the “connotation” that surrounded Northstar throughout the first two years of *Alpha Flight’s* run. Always plausibly deniable, the things readers learned about his past and the way he reacted to situations consistently contained hints that savvy readers could pick up on. Sometimes this even manifested in the way other characters spoke about him. A flashback to “the origin of Northstar” saw the team’s founder telling the new recruit, “You had it all –

money, fame, women... Although the women don't seem to have interested you overmuch" (#10, 21). A later adventure sees a captured Jeanne-Marie regaining consciousness to wonder, "And just what is Jean-Paul doing here? And with a *woman!*" (#22, 17).

After Byrne departed the series and other writers took over, the tone of *Alpha Flight* became uneven, but it continued to offer moments which attentive readers could interpret as hints about the character's sexuality. They ranged from the subtle to the blatant – by 1986, things had reached the point where Aurora could make a joke about Northstar's fondness for men in tight costumes (*AF* #41, 4). The same issue contains an intriguing scene in which Northstar is "outed" as a mutant to a group of ski fans, who angrily repudiate him – and after *that*, he is promptly taken over by a mind-controlling teenage fan, who commands him to be her "boyfriend" and is disappointed by his stiff response. But this innuendo, for all its accumulated weight, never came sufficiently into the open to be clearly discussed within the narrative, or given a name.

In 1987, an extraordinary symbolism entered the storyline. A multi-issue storyline saw Northstar beginning to suffer from a mysterious disease -- a hacking cough, and a slow weakening of his superpowers of speed and flight. The inescapable symbolic implications of this plot turn led some readers to believe it was leading up to the revelation which they had long been expecting (*AF* #43 and 44, February and March 1987). In the world outside the comics, the ever more visible spectre of AIDS had begun to intertwine the themes of homosexuality, disease, and morbidity, lending them the ominous resonances which they were to retain through the late 1980s and into the 1990s. Interestingly, in the 1986 issue which "outed" Northstar as a mutant, another character, in another context, made a passing reference to AIDS -- mere months after then-President Ronald Reagan famously uttered the word in public for the first time (#41, 4).

Shortly thereafter, *Alpha Flight* began a storyline that focused on a mad doctor, who used his superpowers to alter the flesh of his victims. The effect was a grisly display of organic deformation and disease (#45-49, April-August 1987). These stories seemed unrelated – except that, the reader learned, Northstar had originally held out hope that the doctor could cure him of his secret disease. And, as the villain warped and deformed their bodies, yet another *Alpha Flight* character, this one an amputee to whom the doctor

had restored a pair of lost legs, found the new limbs beginning to rot and deteriorate -- manifesting telltale "blotches" as a sign of their decomposition.

To a reader with the idea of Northstar's homosexuality in mind, and aware of the AIDS issues unfolding in the culture in 1986 and 1987, the action narratives accompanying the character's deterioration into sickness must have become a kind of horror-show house of distorting mirrors. This reading sees the images of superhero (or horror) genre story being turned into overdetermined symbols, as they echo a real-fear of morbidity and sickness. The story was accompanied by a chorus of characters all manifesting symptoms of some suggestively awful disease, of which Northstar's cough and bodily weakness was the most visible locus. Throughout, the failure to clarify what Northstar's ailment actually was only made things seem worse.

Yet, when Northstar's illness was finally resolved, the explanation read like an abrupt rerouting of the narrative into an unforeseen directions. In a plot twist ridiculed by many fans, it was revealed that Northstar and his sister, Aurora, had never been mutants at all, but were instead the half-human children of a creature from Asgard, a plane of existence populated by god-like and demon-like creatures. Northstar's disease was attributed to the simple fact that he had lived for too long on Earth. In the action-packed Issue #50, the team was trapped in an infernal underworld. Aurora selflessly donated some of her light powers to her brother, which turned out to be all the cure he needed; then Aurora was bundled off to Hell by a pack of demons -- possibly this is implied to be an appropriate consequence of her hysterical attacks and tendencies toward nymphomania -- while Northstar, emerging from the battle healed but alone, decided to rejoin his father's people, thanks to the surprise appearance of a Heaven-like dimensional gate in the sky (*AF* #50, Sept. 1987).

On one level of the narrative, Northstar had simply been magically cured of his illness and then gone to live in another dimension -- which, after all, is not a terribly remarkable plot sequence in a superhero universe. On a more symbolic level, however, it is not difficult to read Northstar as having died and ascended to heaven, in a welter of familial sacrifice and visual iconography that would not have been out of place in a Victorian sentimental tale. Either way, his disease had been "managed," his ongoing mysteries retroactively explained, and the character himself safely packed away out of

the book -- without anyone having to mention a thing about homosexuality, closets or outings, or AIDS.

In 1992, the series' apparent policy of ambiguity changed radically when Northstar performed a highly public "coming out." (This amounted to a self-outing on at least two levels: the character came out both to the readers, and to the other characters in the universe of *Alpha Flight*.) The issue in question -- *Alpha Flight* #106, published in March 1992 -- has been the target of some ridicule in the years since: it is "a rather clumsily-written and amateurly-drawn story," as one online fan put it.⁴⁵ Other critiques derives from the fact that Northstar makes his announcement during a battle sequence, in which he is fighting the washed-up Major Mapleleaf, a tragic figure with an unfortunately hilarious name.

The issue's action involves Northstar adopting an abandoned, AIDS-positive baby girl in a grand public gesture. We learn that the retired Mapleleaf is a former Canadian national hero, who now spends his days sunk in depression, agonizing alone over the AIDS death of his only son. Mapleleaf becomes incensed when he sees the sympathetic TV coverage of Northstar's child, and, in an illogical move that can only be explained by his derangement, he travels to the Toronto hospital to attack the baby. When he and Northstar wind up in a fight, Mapleleaf complains about the inequity with which gay and "innocent," non-gay AIDS sufferers are treated. Eulogizing his son, Mapleleaf cries,

His whole life was reduced to a statistic!... In the end -- all I could do -- was watch him die! And now you come along... with your cute and sweet and lovable and photogenic little orphaned girl! "She's too young to have done anything to bring the disease upon herself," people think. My son wasn't guilty of anything. But because he was gay, he didn't rate!

"Do not presume to lecture me on the hardships homosexuals must bear," answers Northstar. "No one knows them better than I. For while I am not inclined to discuss my sexuality with people for whom it is none of their business -- *I am gay!*" (16-20, emphasis included selectively). Mapleleaf reacts by calling Northstar "selfish," and

⁴⁵ Todd Verbeek, "Beek's Books: Lesbian, Gay, and Bi Super-Heroes." <http://www.rzero.com/books/gaysuperfull.html>

telling him that as a public figure he has a responsibility to out himself. The two end with a kind of reconciliation, and the story's final page depicts a "newspaper" article with the headline, "Alpha Flight's Northstar Proclaims Homosexuality" (AF #106, 22, 29).

Certainly, the comic is unsubtle on some levels. But although the issue uses the hyperbolic conventions of superhero melodrama to drive the action and conversation, the issues it seeks to open up -- the increasing visibility of the AIDS pandemic, the hypocrisy of government silence and failure to fund AIDS research and treatment, the stigmatization of gay men and their placement in opposition with "innocent" victims, the vexed responsibility closeted gay public figures have to be open -- are knitted together in a relatively sophisticated and certainly sympathetic way. The press conference at the issue's end feels particularly significant. Reading the "newspaper" story, we learn that Northstar has stated his wish to become a role model, as well as calling for "greater openness" and better funding for AIDS research. The series never addresses just how much of a surprise Northstar's announcement is his teammates. But it is obvious that for the purposes of the debate about political rhetoric that the story opens up, Northstar's announcement would have little value without such a press conference. It functions as a necessary part of the concretizing, clarifying action of "coming out" as a powerful speech act -- the kind of speech act that, in 1992, was just beginning to see the effects of many years' work by gay activists in publicizing it as a powerful rhetorical strategy for improving the obscured and weak position of gay people and AIDS sufferers. Reflecting the mid-combat conversation between Northstar and Major Mapleleaf, we can read the press conference as Northstar's agreement with the Mapleleaf's assertion that public figures have a responsibility to be out. To an extent, this is a rephrasing of the well-known ACT UP equation of "silence" with "death" and disease -- and, conversely, the equation of openness with an assertion of the right to live. Northstar's outing, then, clarified his position *to readers*, as well as making a space for the publicly gay celebrity superhero in the Marvel universe -- even if the potential of that space was not much developed. And it also cleared the air after a convoluted ten years during which the character's presumed homosexuality, had been regularly hinted at but never openly discussed -- and in which storylines which seemed to be leading up to revelation were redirected or cut short.

Northstar's history is one of the comics universe's central examples of the ways in which stories about gay characters can get caught up in ambiguities, confusions, and evasions, and ultimately deflected into being "really" about something else entirely. It indicates the complexity of the contortions, the confusing logic, through which stories will sometimes go in order to avoid talking about, or coming to conclusions about, homosexuality. With Northstar's 1992 "coming out," however, a new standard of clarity seemed to be set as a challenge for superhero titles: it would seem there is nothing so straightforward as a declaration of "I am gay."

Archetypes and Effects: Genre Consequences

Strangely, however, the consequences of Northstar's "revelation" never saw much development. The event did not seem to have an impact on the other inhabitants of the Marvel universe, nor did it lead to Northstar's evolving presence as symbolic figure. With a few exceptions, after the "press conference" at the end of #106 -- which is only represented as a newspaper clipping after the fact -- the views of other inhabitants of the Marvel universe are not mustered to the occasion. Northstar's outing was not used as discussion fodder for sensitivity training among the Avengers, nor did he immediately join the North American Gay and Lesbian Superheroes Association -- because, of course, there isn't one.⁴⁶ Alpha Flight did not appear to be interested in exploring the possible meanings of a gay superhero for public space within the Marvel world, or his impact on the fabric of its superheroic structures.

Nor was Northstar's personal life developed. In fact, after *Alpha Flight* ended two years later -- with issue #130, published in 1994 -- Northstar was little seen for years. The character reappeared briefly in a 1994 miniseries, but readers expecting further exploration of his sexual identity or personal history were disappointed. Although it made many oblique references to past secrets and torments, the miniseries never mentioned explicitly or implicitly that the character was gay. In fact, it presented a woman from his past who -- it was implied -- might have been an old girlfriend. After the

⁴⁶ However, Northstar did become an icon for gay comics fans. His name and image have graced the Northstar APA, a collective -- and unofficial -- fan magazine by and for gay superhero fans, since 1989 -- well before his "official" outing.

<http://welcome.to/northstarapa>

dramatic “coming out,” the entire subject was swiftly allowed to sink down again into ambiguity, ambivalence, and a long silence.

As we have seen, the peculiar nature of superhero history and publishing renders comics characters, and the histories and personalities established for them by writers, particularly vulnerable to being “written over” in this way -- altered by other writers, overruled by editors, or rewritten in new revivals. One interpretation might be that the world of superhero fictions was not prepared to accommodate this breakthrough as a new standard for speaking-aloud. It was into this well of unclarity, ambiguity and retroactive erasure that Northstar and his newly-established identity slowly vanished.

Unlike so many other lost or changed characters, though, Northstar’s story has an interesting coda. In 2000, Northstar was dusted off, after years of obscurity, and began making guest appearance in the X-Men titles. In late 2002, he was re-introduced to a prominent position in the Marvel universe in one of the publisher’s most high-profile books, *Uncanny X-Men*. How the character was reintroduced, and how his sexuality has been treated, provides an excellent opportunity to ask: what is the state of gay superheroes in the Marvel universe now?

In Part One, we saw how Northstar’s reintroduction provided an almost immediate opportunity for the series’ writer to dismiss the Werthamite spectre by clarifying the difference between pedophilia and Northstar’s “normative” heterosexuality. Other aspects of the character’s reintroduction also suggest an attempt by the series creators to define or position the precise meaning of Northstar’s sexuality for this new era. In the two or three issues in which he has featured prominently since his return, Northstar’s gayness has been clearly verbalized and discussed. In issue #414 of the current *Uncanny X-Men* (December 2002), in which Northstar is reintroduced, we see Charles Xavier – Professor X, the leader of the X-Men -- travel to Montreal to invite Jean-Paul Beaubier, the now-inactive Northstar, to teach at Xavier’s famous school for young mutants. Xavier frames the invitation explicitly in terms of what Northstar might have to offer the school, including his “unique outlook” on sexuality. In a boardroom of Northstar’s Montreal corporation, Charles Xavier offers Northstar a job, but has to do some persuading:

Northstar: Educate children. And what might convince me to do something so...
magnanimous?...

Xavier: ... I do believe you might find the experience beneficial. An opportunity
to share your *unique* point of view with open minds willing to learn.

Northstar: I have no deep-rooted urge to make mutant unity my personal mantra,
Charles...

Xavier: I was not referring to your *mutant* point of view, Jean-Paul.

[Northstar frowns.]

Xavier: I have devoted my life to aiding those whose genetic differences set them
apart. We both know that “sexual preference” is a misnomer. The term
should more accurately be termed [*sic*] “sexual *determination*.” There are
those with that determination who need support. Guidance... Have I
interested you?

Northstar: You always interest me, Xavier... but what would you have me teach,
as a former Olympic athlete? Boy’s gym [*sic*]? Even *you* could not be so
progressive.

Xavier: No. Indeed not... I was thinking of something more suited to your less
obvious love and talent. Business and Economics [*sic*].

[After a long silence, Northstar smiles.]

Northstar: You *do* intrigue me.

(#414, 2-4, emphasis selectively included)

This conversation opens with a nearly unheard-of maneuver: a conversation that
had seemed to be about the “mutant point of view” turns out to actually be about
homosexuality. Northstar’s response is ambivalent. His tangibly sarcastic question to
Xavier about whether he will ask him to teach “boy’s gym [*sic*]” clearly refers to the fear
that associates gay men with predatory pedophilia, and perhaps even evokes the
Werthamite spectre. When Xavier turns the conversation away from Northstar’s sexual
orientation and appeals to his “less obvious love,” Northstar relaxes.

Of course, although the conversation uses terms as specific as “sexual
orientation,” no one ever says out loud that Northstar is gay. This delicate dance of

naming and not-naming leads, later in the issue, to a conversation between Northstar and a sick mutant boy, Peter, whom Northstar must carry to safety: Peter's homophobic response to learning of Northstar's homosexuality provides an opportunity to dispel associations between homosexuality and pedophilia: "I'm not into little boys. I like men with hair on their arms," says Northstar to the child he carries in his arms, as the Werthamite spectre hovers perceptibly over their shoulders. The revelation also creates an opportunity for the two to bond over their abusive relationships with their fathers, and for Northstar to counsel Peter on affairs of the heart. Peter relaxes with Northstar and learns to trust him during their long overland flight, and the boy's tragic and unavoidable death at the issue's end acts to humanize the originally prickly Northstar, as -- lying wounded and bandaged in a hospital bed -- Northstar decides to stay and teach at Xavier's school after all.

Engaging as it is, this issue often feels experimental -- as if it were a guidebook on how to represent Homosexuality for Superheroes in the newly complicated political and cultural world of 2002. After all, since Northstar's last "coming out," our culture has moved into a period that is post-Ellen, post-Rosie, post-*Will and Grace* -- although not, perhaps, post-"don't ask, don't tell." The teaching points may not be conveyed subtly, but they do come across. In his initial meeting with Northstar, Professor X weighs in on the eternal debate of essentialism vs. constructivism -- we learn that sexual orientation is inborn, not chosen. This is addressed again in Peter's homophobic reaction to Northstar, which -- like much of the rest of the issue -- seems designed to forestall the reader's own potentially homophobic reactions to the reintroduction of the gay superhero.

Finally, we see both Xavier and Peter "reaching beyond" Northstar's orientation to communicate with him on other levels: Xavier is aware of his professional experience; Peter laughs at Northstar's comment about hairy chests and apologizes for having called Northstar a "fruit." By the end of the issue, it is thoroughly clear that Northstar will no longer be presented as merely a crypto-homosexual. The story seems to promise that his presence will bring future statements on issues around gayness -- whether because the character's presence provides the opportunity to address these issues, or because addressing them seems a necessary prelude to developing the character among the X-Men.

However, in the year since Northstar was added to the comic, the character's reintroduction has been slow to generate any more abstract conversation about gayness among superheroes – or even about gay culture within the superhero world. (For instance, we have not seen Northstar with gay friends, talking with family members, or talking with or about other gay superheroes – who do exist in the Marvel universe.) Interestingly, however, the story has suggested some things about the immutability of sexual orientation. In the issue after Northstar's reintroduction, we see Northstar, now establishing himself at the school, developing a somewhat surprising "crush" on the apparently hopelessly straight Iceman, Bobby Drake. The new school nurse, Annie Ghazikhanian, demonstrates great gay-friendliness, showing enthusiasm at the idea that she might be able to help Northstar and Bobby hook up, offering her opinion on Northstar's taste in men, and encouraging him to pursue Bobby. But Northstar ultimately tells her, in a tone of authority, that "[Bobby's] straight, and that's the end of it... some loves just aren't meant to be." This echoes Northstar's words to the child Peter in the previous issue: "You are what you are, my friend. There's no changing sides once God places you." That comment is contextualized as a statement about *mutanthood*, not sexuality. But like much of what goes on in this issue, the statement addresses both both questions at once, invoking the long-standing vision of the mutant as a genetically predetermined class apart and implicitly evoking the parallels between *mutanthood* and gayness. At the same time, the events involving Northstar and Iceman implicitly exclude the possibility of anything between hetero- and homosexuality: bisexuality, at least in men, does not seem to be considered a possibility. In context, this could be read as a strategy of *containment*: If Northstar is not likely to be changed back away from homosexuality, as the story seems to promise, there is also no possibility of his gayness "corrupting" other characters or the superhero team in a larger sense.

As we have seen, the history of the Northstar character provides a prime example of the changes in gay superhero representation during the past two decades. The character's first ten years offer a wealth of coded – or *connotative* – representation of gay meaning, which was sufficient for gay readers to adopt him as a sign both of pride and of the ongoing frustration of the closet. The weighted, symbolic storylines of the late 1980s

suggest the lengths to which a superhero story was prepared to go in order *not* to speak homosexuality aloud. And his disappearance, shortly after the 1992 coming-out, gives evidence of the vulnerability of superhero characters to being overwritten, revised, or erased. However, the character's 2002 reintroduction to the Marvel universe's fictional world seems to suggest a new strategy of clarity – of *denotation* – when it comes to positioning gay characters in the superhero world, a strategy which seems to include an ideology of essentialism and genetic predetermination. At the same time, *Uncanny X-Men* has thus far held back from seriously exploring Northstar's sexuality and its meaning in his life, nor has it explored the implications of a newly gay superhero presence for the genre world at large.

Although Northstar was in some sense the first out gay superhero, his reintroduction was unquestionably shaped by the advent of two characters who appeared in 1998. These characters provided a challenge to questions of archetype, and opened a door to further conversation about the future of gay superheroes. It is to Apollo, the Midnighter, and *The Authority* that we turn next.

READING #2: APOLLO, THE MIDNIGHTER, AND *THE AUTHORITY*

“Superheroes who happen to be gay”

In February of 2000, a flurry of newspaper articles announced a dramatic event: the arrival of “the world’s first homosexual superhumans.” In the *Times* of London, reporter Stephen McGinty asked, “What would Lois Lane think?... The American comic company that gave the world Superman and Batman is creating the first homosexual superheroes. In the past, caped crusaders fought for truth, justice and the American way. Now gay rights will be added to their muscle-bound repertoire...” The story added that the characters appeared in a comic called *The Authority*, published by an imprint of DC Comics. Characterized as “a loving couple who cohabit in a giant spaceship,” the heroes, known as Apollo and the Midnighter, would be officially outed in the next month’s issue, when they would be seen kissing (McGinty, Sunday *Times* of London, 27 Feb. 2000)

This news piece was picked up and re-reported around the world. Clearly, it tapped into powerful interest the characters in question had generated among comics readers – as well as suggesting a new interest on the part of mainstream media in revolutionary events in superhero comics, such as this “outing.” The outing of Apollo and the Midnighter evidently represented a watershed, and the event thus marks a crucial moment for the emergence of open discourse of gay superheroes into mainstream comics.

That widely-repeated article contained a few omissions and factual errors, which were echoed in later coverage (a familiar phenomenon in the coverage of comics stories in non-comics-specific press). Among other things, McGinty’s piece misspelled the name of the title’s Glasgow-based current writer, Mark Millar. Other omissions glossed over the complicated history of the comic – which, in turn, informed the “outing” in ways that are important for our discussion. For instance, McGinty did not see fit to mention Wildstorm, the name of the publisher, which had originally been an independent publishing house but was bought by DC shortly after the characters had first appeared. He also credited Millar as the comic’s “creator” without noting that the series and characters were actually creations of Warren Ellis, the writer who had created *The Authority* in 1998.

Although the original *Times* piece ran under a predictably sedate title (“Gay superheroes come out of the closet”), as other papers picked up the story, the coverage manifested a certain sensationalist streak. “It’s a bird, it’s a plane, it’s a same sex couple” was the headline in the Melbourne *Herald Sun*, while the *Toronto Star* marveled “Shazam! They’re gay!,” and the *Ottawa Citizen* added, “Holy same-sex partners, Batman!” The bad puns came thicker than usual, too; the national paper *The Australian* contributed “Camped crusaders up, up and a-gay!,” while someone at the Australian *Hobart Mercury* was unable to resist the quip: “It’s AC/DC with gay comic way.”

For all their cavalier fact-checking and trivializing titles, the proliferation of these pieces suggests global interest in an issue that, until recently, had seemed to be of limited interest. An American reader, particularly one who had been following gay comics fandom and grousing over Northstar for years, might well have asked her- or himself: when, exactly, did gay superheroes become newsworthy? But the story spread rapidly to mainstream papers on three continents, appearing in the following days in English-

language newspapers in Ottawa, Montreal, Toronto, Melbourne and Sydney, as well as national newspapers in Australia and Scotland.⁴⁷

Given all that, it is curious that many regular readers of *The Authority* felt all the hype was somewhat misleading. This is because many of those who had been reading *The Authority* for the past year and a half felt *they already knew these characters were gay*. They felt that, within the text, the characters had been “established” as gay the year before. To these readers, the “outing” was much more like a public declaration to the press than any kind of revelation within the text. How could this disconnect exist between the sense of the comic’s readers, and the ideas being conveyed in the wave of news? That question demands we examine the ambiguous nature of knowing as it appeared in the comic.

The Epistemology of the Gay Superhero : “Flying Out of the Closet”

As regular readers of *The Authority* knew, the history of Apollo and the Midnighter went back farther, and was more complicated, than the mainstream coverage was able to explain. The characters had first appeared in a comics series called *Stormwatch*, a title that Scottish writer Warren Ellis had taken over for the American publisher Wildstorm. Like many other Wildstorm comics, the series was a relatively conventional superhero narrative with a high-violence, global-scale tone. The super-powered characters belonged to a secret organization funded by the U.N., lived on a state-of-the-art orbiting satellite, and took care of incipient world problems under cover of high secrecy.

When Ellis took over the series, he began to tinker with its genre conventions – a practice that would become a trademark of his superhero-related work. Focusing on character development and giving each character a distinctive voice, Ellis also began to introduce large geopolitical questions, permitted the characters to mock the genre

⁴⁷ By early April, the story had triggered responding opinion pieces in *The Independent* of London and the *Toronto Star* (including an earnest reminder from a reporter fan that the *real* “first gay superhero” had been the Canadian Northstar). Curiously, the story was picked up by few major American papers, but the cosmopolitan press in the rest of the English-speaking world was abundantly interested in the new queer heroes.

conventions they themselves conformed to (such as periodic self-reinvention through new costumes), and introduced new characters. Among these were two male superhumans known only by their code-names of Apollo and the Midnighter -- evidently the only two remaining products of biological experimentation undertaken by a power-mad scientist who had been trying to produce his own super-team. Apollo, fair-haired, cheerful, large and handsome, has super-strength and heat vision and can fly; the dour and tight-mouthed Midnighter, who hides his face under a leather cowl, is superhumanly fast and strong and has an inhuman genius for fighting strategy. The two had been "living rogue" on Earth since their original teammates had been destroyed in a suicide mission engineered by their creator. They entered the Stormwatch universe to assist the protagonists with a mission involving a secret biological project; after an initial mixup and fight scene of the all-too-common kind had clarified that the pair were friends and not foes to the StormWatch team, the two were allowed to return to Earth together with new names and identities, even as Ellis made it clear to the readers that the Stormwatch team leaders had a way to track the two down again if necessary (*Stormwatch* Vol. 2, #4.)

In this initial *Stormwatch* appearance, it is by no means clear that Apollo and Midnighter should be read as gay. Certainly, the two are inseparable, stick side by side, and fight together. They also present a charmingly complementary set of personality traits: the dour, lethal Midnighter contrasted with the sunny, smiling Apollo. Their costumes and iconography are complementary: the Midnighter dresses in black, wears a crescent-moon symbol on his chest, and is named for the night, while Apollo wears a white costume with a golden image of the sun and is named for the Greco-Roman sun god. But, if anything, their intimate interpersonal dynamic could be read as being easily "protected" or "explained" by the genre conventions of superhero tales: they may be superheroes who seem to be pair-bonded, who travel and work together as a team and are loyal to the death. But the history of genre conventions seems to create a space for this that isn't subject to "suspicions" of any hidden gay activity or subtext.

The following year, Ellis reintroduced the characters in the first issue of a new series called *The Authority*, whose first issue was published in May 1999. After killing off most of the members of the Stormwatch team, Ellis launched a new superhero team composed of some of the surviving former members of Stormwatch, along with a few

new additions. These characters comprised a super-team that reported to no earthly authority. Instead, they followed their leader's idealistic vision of using their powers to safeguard the world and make it a better place – to create “a finer world,” as the series' early motto had it. This new team's characters included team leader Jenny Sparks, an apparently ageless English woman with the power of electricity and the strange property of being “the spirit of the twentieth century”; Swift, a Tibetan expatriate who could sprout great wings for flying and talons for fighting; Jack Hawksmoor, a man who had been altered by aliens to be able to thrive in urban environments; Angie Spica, the Engineer, who had nanomachines in her blood that allowed her to transform her metallic body at will; the Doctor, a magic-using “shaman” and former junkie from Amsterdam; and Apollo and the Midnighter. The team lived in a vast spaceship called the Carrier in high Earth orbit, and tried their best to save, and change, the world.

Notably, the “event” that was being touted to the press in February of 2000 – the outing of Apollo and Midnighter -- came at precisely the moment that the writing of the series was handed off from Warren Ellis to Mark Millar. Ellis had completed twelve issues of the series, a year's worth, when both he and artist Bryan Hitch left the series, to be replaced by Millar and new artist Frank Quitely. Given the buildup, the event that the *Times* described as “reveal[ing]... [Apollo and Midnighter's] sexuality” is a small thing. The *Times* notes -- slightly inaccurately -- that “[t]he first comic recording their adventures appeared twelve months ago... But next month, when Miller [*sic*] takes over the storyline, they fly out of the closet when they are seen kissing at a party on the spaceship.” While all this is literally true – the issue in question shows Apollo and Midnighter kissing on the mouth, for the first time, in the corner of a crowded room within a small panel – as mentioned, regular readers of the series felt this was hardly an “outing.” they already knew that Apollo and the Midnighter were gay. Many readers point out that Ellis had been dropped suggestive hints from the first issue, though they were far from being incontrovertible proof. And numerous fan sites state that Apollo and Midnighter were revealed to be gay in Issue #8 of the Authority (December 1999), two-thirds of the way through Ellis's run and a good four issues before “outing.” The contradictions point to ambiguities in the ways readers receive and interpret “clues” about

gayness. In the absence of a shouted *cri de coeur*, like that of Northstar, how is a reader to be sure that a character is gay?

“It Looks More Brotherly Than Gay”: Connotation and Ambiguity

For the fan looking for evidence of Apollo and Midnighter’s sexuality, reading the first eight issues of *The Authority* is a little like reading John Byrne’s early issues of *Alpha Flight*. From the start of *The Authority*, Ellis seemed to be dropping hints that a knowledgeable reader – meaning one savvy to some of the in-jokes and loaded references of contemporary gay culture – might have been expected to register and to wonder about. In early issues, Apollo and the Midnighter don’t engage in much physical contact – although they do seem to be together all the time – and the word “gay” certainly never comes up. Yet other characters, notably the irreverent and worldly-wise Jenny Sparks, make jokes that suggest some shared knowledge aboard the spaceship that the reader isn’t quite privy to. “Where’s the Dynamic Duo?” Jenny asks the Engineer in the first issue, to which the grinning Engineer responds, “They went for a walk. And if they heard you call them that –” “In this job,” says Jenny, exhaling cigarette smoke, “I have to steal my laughs where I can, no matter how pathetic or snide.” The eternally cheerful Apollo – who is strolling with Midnighter far away in the bowels of the ship -- apparently exercises his super-hearing, and tranquilly tells his companion in the next panel, “Jenny Sparks is laughing at us again” (*The Authority* #1).

At the start of the next issue, as the team tries to plan their assault on a shielded island, Apollo won’t stop asking questions about a force field that nearly led to his death in the previous issue. “Oh, will you shut up about [that]?” snaps Jenny. “You moaning ponce...” Apollo ignores the insult, and simply repeats, “What are we going to do about the force-field...?” “It’s like working with me bleeding mum or something,” mutters Jenny. Later, at the strategy table, a frustrated Jenny tells the Midnighter, “The hell with this. I’m not calling you ‘Midnighter’ all the bloody time. Don’t you and Apollo have proper names?” “No,” says Midnighter, with his customary scowl. In a close-up panel on her face, Jenny wickedly raises her eyebrows -- and cigarette -- and quips: “All right. Who wants to be Bert and who wants to be Ernie?” The next panels’ reaction shot shows Apollo rubbing his temple in a gesture of frustration, while the slouching

Midnighter says curtly, "Can we just get on with this?" "All right," says Jenny, the smile not yet faded from her face. As they leave the room at the scene's end, Jack Hawksmoor, observing the Midnighter approaching the Engineer to ask her a question, observes to Jenny, "You see that? The Midnighter actually spoke to someone who wasn't Apollo or you." Jenny replies, "This mess might turn into an actual team yet..." (*The Authority* #2).

As should be obvious from these few references, Ellis is certainly playing some kind of game about knowledge and innuendo. How is a reader to interpret the relationship between Apollo and the Midnighter? They are a fighting pair, that's clear -- and yet the fact of their togetherness is, for some reason, subject to jokes from the other characters. We know that Midnighter hardly speaks to anyone except Apollo, and that should not be funny... except that, for some reason, the other characters think that it is. Jenny's "Bert and Ernie" crack will certainly remind savvy readers of the underground cultural joke that suggests the Muppet pair on Sesame Street are really a gay couple -- a "half-known joke" similar to the schoolyard giggle about Batman and Robin. Of course, the "Dynamic Duo" crack is even more provocative, because it reads like a joke *about* the gay-Batman-and-Robin joke itself. Ordinarily, it might be simply funny to call a superhero team "the Dynamic Duo." But why is the Engineer grinning quite so broadly? And what does Jenny mean when she calls the joke she's just made "snide"? Most gamesmanlike of all, of course, is Jenny's reference to Apollo as a "moaning ponce." "Ponce" is British slang often used to refer to an annoying, effete, or gay man. The Jenny Sparks character is British (as is writer Warren Ellis), so it is consistent for her to use such a word, but it provokes intriguing questions. The mere fact that Jenny calls Apollo a ponce, in front of the entire group, need not imply that he really is gay. But the fact that he doesn't *complain*? In effect, Ellis seems to have been telling his readers that Apollo is gay and everyone on the team knows it -- if only the readers were clued in enough to British slang to recognize the word, or were willing to let themselves take the hint.

In short, the early issues of *The Authority* consistently drop hints about Apollo and Midnighter's sexuality without explicitly stating it. These clues rely upon, first, multilayered allusions that readers familiar with contemporary gay in-jokes might recognize; and, second, a curious environment in which the *behavior of the other characters* around Apollo and Midnighter suggests that there is some joke that the reader

can almost register, but which has not yet been fully explained. This can accurately be described as connotation, using the terminology D.A. Miller outlines in “*Anal Rope*”: readers are given to understand something that is not stated aloud. It is hardly surprising that many readers interpreted these hints as Ellis’s clues that the characters were gay – after all, as Miller notes, in a culture of silence like ours, such unexplained social tensions are often the only available indicators of unspoken homosexuality. (Compare this to the “clues for homosexuality” in the somewhat clumsier, but still telling, encounter between Northstar and his old friend Belmonde in *Alpha Flight* – or to a still more contemporary example: Marvel Comics’ revisionist Western miniseries *The Rawhide Kid* (2003).) At the same time, of course, there is nothing conclusive about any of this innuendo. Being connotation, it maintains an “abiding deniability” (Miller 124), and readers who preferred not to see anything gay in Ellis’s presentation of the pair were free to interpret as they chose.

In *The Authority*’s seventh issue (November 1999), Ellis finally offered readers something that many read as conclusive... or at least as implying that something more conclusive *had* to follow soon. The storyline, complex as always, starts with an invasion by the attack fleet of an alternate Earth, called Sliding Albion; the goal of their supercilious, blue-skinned alien leader is to turn our earth into a colony and “rape camp,” in which the last remnants of their aristocratic race will do their desperate best to sire hybrid children on the planet’s women. Albion strikes first, transferring a unit of rifle-bearing cavalymen onto the Authority’s spaceship. In protecting his teammates from the threat, Apollo uses up his reserves of stored solar energy and drops to the floor, unconscious. The Midnighter rushes to Apollo’s side. He explains the situation to the others, telling them, “[Apollo’s] been on the Carrier too long, been fighting at dusk and dawn too often. He’s drained himself.” Then he cradles Apollo’s head to his chest, in a wordless panel, as the Doctor and Jack Hawksmoor react with tense but ambiguous expressions. The gesture of tenderness seems so out of place, in a genre in which too much tenderness between men is automatically deemed suspect, that some readers wondered what Ellis was telling them.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ The speculation was not hurt by the fact that Apollo, in this issue, is dressed casually in a tank top marked above the breast with a circular logo that seems to contain an inverted

As the battle escalates, it becomes clear that the Authority must cross dimensions to destroy the Albion government at its own headquarters -- but they must also counter an invasion fleet that has appeared over Europe. It is decided that only Apollo has the strength and powers to hold the fleet at bay, but they must take the chance that dropping him into the sky over the Atlantic Ocean will allow Apollo enough time exposed to the sun to recharge his energy, before he falls to his death or is killed by the enemy. As the eighth issue begins, a weak but now-conscious Apollo has changed into his costume and is preparing to be teleported into the sky over the Atlantic.

As the panel framing closes in on the two of them, the Midnighter chides him: "I can't believe you're agreeing to this... You won't have enough power to fly..." Apollo tells him, "Listen, Midnighter; no one else can do this. It's a job for me." Midnighter, placing his hands on Apollo's shoulders and jaw, responds, "*You can't do this... You'll die.*" In a wordless panel, Apollo leans forward and kisses him on the cheek, Midnighter seemingly turning his head away with an expression of pain.

"I wouldn't dare," Apollo says, in the next panel, smiling, as he turns away toward the teleport door. "Besides, if I did, Jenny would just have me dug up and put to work again." "He's got a point," says Jack Hawksmoor. At battle's end, all team members reunite safely on the ship, and Midnighter and Apollo are seen locked in a tight hug. As the two stand with arms around each other, Jack waves a dismissive hand at them. "Get a room, you two," he says (*The Authority* #8).

Understandably, after seeing this, many readers felt Ellis was dropping enough hints that they were owed, at the least, some kind of confirmation. Some fans felt this was sufficient evidence to confirm that Apollo and Midnighter were, in fact, lovers, but

pink triangle. It's an amazingly ambiguous detail: the reader cannot easily be sure of the color, since all the indoor scenes in the issue are bathed in a red glow from the dimensional light outside the ship's windows, and the logo at first seems to simply be a version of the symbol emblazoned on the front of Apollo's costume -- a large inverted gold triangle, with a white circle in the center. The symbols and colors seem to represent the sun, but, as becomes evident after reading this issue, it can also be read as the upside-down triangle associated with gay pride. A well-thought-through page layout by Ellis and/or artist Bryan Hitch allows Apollo's pink triangle to be invisible early in the issue, but it becomes increasingly obvious as the battles progress, and is clear to see by the time the Midnighter makes his ambiguously intimate gesture.

others maintained that there was no concrete evidence to prove they had “that” kind of relationship. The online critical magazine *Sequential Tart* poked fun at the attitude of those who preferred to “deny the evidence,” as this made-up letter in a parodic “letter column” in the issue of December 1999:

Dear Kady Mae,

In the most recent issue of *The Authority*, Apollo and Midnighter were revealed as being gay. I'm having a hard time accepting that these two superheroes, these iconoclastic figures [*sic*], are "up each other's arse". If you look at the artwork, it doesn't seem to me that they're doing anything gay; Apollo just kisses Midnighter on the cheek when Midnighter displays some concern for his friend, and then they give each other a big bear hug later on. It looks more brotherly than gay. What do you think?

Signed,

- *Where's the Pink Lamé?*

Dear Pink,

Oh, they're just friends...very, very intimate friends. Their intro in *Stormwatch #4* comes to mind. Good friends who just happen to sleep naked together.

- *Kady 'Queen of Subtext' Mae*

PS. They're not gay, just fuck buddies.⁴⁹

The phrase in quotation marks presumably refers to a comment which was widely repeated and reported among fans around that time: when asked if the kissing scene was meant to signal to readers that Apollo and Midnighter were gay, writer Warren Ellis, writing on one of his computer forums, is reported to have confirmed it with a comment along the lines of “Yes, they’re up each other, and what’s the big deal?” “Kady Mae” further refers to “*Stormwatch #4*,” the issue in which Ellis first introduced the characters. That issue’s opening pages depict a dramatic, shadowy scene, set in a dimly lit warehouse, in which the two previously unknown characters are discussing “put[ting] on the colors” to go into battle. The reader gradually becomes aware that among the shadows both are naked, and although they are not obviously in physical contact, their companionable and explicit nudity -- even in the context of changing into costumes -- is provocative. (Perhaps this is because, like so many revisionary comics moments, it asks

⁴⁹ “Kady Mae.” “Dear Kady Mae,” *Sequential Tart*, December 1999.
http://www.sequentialtart.com/archive/dec99/dkm_1299.shtml

readers to contemplate what certain givens of superhero life would “really” be like if viewed naturalistically. After all, wouldn’t Batman have to be naked with Robin an awful lot while they’re changing to their costumes? What would that really *mean*?)

The *Sequential Tart* “letter” parodies a mode of thinking in which comics readers seem not to “want to know” about gayness in superhero texts -- even when it’s fairly obvious, and, in this case, when it has also been extra-textually confirmed by the comic’s writer. (“Pink Lamé” paraphrases Warren Ellis in the phrase “up each other’s arse.”) The fictional letter-writer is *a priori* unable to believe that “these two superheroes” might be intimate (though it seems perhaps the writer meant “iconic” rather than “iconoclastic”), and musters old-fashioned genre explanations to read the scene without any gayness in it. Couldn’t the Midnigher simply be “display[ing] some concern for his friend”? Placing the characters in line with a long tradition of simply “brotherly” comrades-in-arms, “Pink Lamé’s” reading assumes -- *and insists* -- that the embraces we saw must have an explanation “innocent” of gay meaning.

The *Tart* column points out the complexities associated with bringing superhero characters out of the closet. Although many readers felt that seeing characters behave intimately with one another -- as Apollo and Midnigher do -- was far preferable to a historic battle scene like that in which Northstar came out, the problem remains that, so long as no one has said the word “gay,” it is possible for readers to interpret around it. As the writers by naming their fictional correspondent “Where’s the Pink Lamé,” many readers assume that a “really” gay comics superhero would be marked by stereotypical attributes that would distinguish him from other characters. The *Tart* writers seem to suggest that this is a fundamentally heterosexist assumption: Couldn’t gay superheroes be just like all other superheroes, but *just happen to be gay*?

Normalization and the Hypermasculine: Heroes Who “Just Happen to be Gay”

As the *Tart* commentary makes clear, much of the attention drawn by Apollo and the Midnigher was related to this fundamental question: How could a gay superhero be distinguished from a non-gay superhero? Need there be any obvious differences in representation? Or could a gay superhero be as “normal” as a straight one? This question recurs in the commentary of fans, the media, and the series’ creators.

Obviously, it is also an important issue for the future of gay representation in the superhero genre. Let us spend some time looking at how a conversation about archetype, normality, and masculinity took shape around Apollo and Midnighter, and how it played out in the text.

An important point, and one that went without saying for many of the series' readers, is that Apollo and the Midnighter are blatant reflections of Superman and Batman.⁵⁰ Archetype and iconicity are, then, immediately implicit. Scholar Geoff Klock summarizes the ways in which Apollo and the Midnighter act as types for Superman and Batman:

Apollo and Midnighter are clearly Superman/Batman analogues. Apollo possesses sun-powered superstrength, flight, and heat vision; the Midnighter, grim and efficient, has peak fighting ability, wears all black, and has arm buckles where [Frank] Miller [in *The Dark Knight Returns*] placed fins... [With] the open homosexuality between the two masculine powerhouses of the team, Apollo and the Midnighter... *The Authority* takes the homosexual subtext that Miller... brought to the fore and brings the volume all the way up, openly troping it as the foundation of superhero literature in the figures of Superman and Batman. Ellis embraces his inheritance [i.e., the tradition of superhero narrative] and insists that homosexuality functions at full volume, rather than as concealed subtext. This is not a subtle homoeroticism that may or may not be there: this is the two most powerful men on the team making out with each other and swapping playful banter with the rest of the team about their sexual orientation.

(Klock, *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why*, 143)

Although Klock's take on the easy, "playful" nature of the characters' characterization is perhaps too simplistically celebratory, he is on target about how the characters reflect Superman and Batman. He also perceptively points out the significance of the fact that the two gay characters are the team's "masculine powerhouses." The "iconicity" of the two characters -- as reflections of the ur-superheroes Batman and

⁵⁰ The publishing history that allowed this is complicated: when Warren Ellis created the characters, the *Stormwatch* series was being published by Wildstorm, an independent publisher with no ties to DC, which owns Batman and Superman. In 1999, DC acquired Wildstorm. Obviously, this complicated the parodic aspect of the characters. They remained essentially unchanged at first, although the subsequent years saw an increasingly strict censorship imposed upon *The Authority*. Claims vary as to how much of that censorship had to do with the gay relationship between Apollo and the Midnighter.

Superman – and their “masculine” “power” continually inform conversations about them.⁵¹

This concept is repeatedly referred to in the press. The *Times* article on the “coming-out” issue notes: “In an attempt to avoid gay stereotypes, [writer Mark] Miller [*sic*] and the comic’s artist, Frank Quitely... have ensured that *both characters have no effeminate qualities*” (emphasis mine). McGinty goes on to summarize the characters’ superpowers, adding that Midnighter wears a black leather mask and coat “similar to Batman’s” and concluding: “Both, however, possess bulging physiques that would put Superman to shame.”⁵² Another article, this one from the *Ottawa Citizen*, is revealingly subtitled “Superheroes who happen to be gay step out of the closet in comic books.” The piece reports, “They [have] the usual comic-book attributes... rippling muscles, flowing hair, and super powers that come in handy...” The story goes on to quote series editor Jack Layman as playing down the importance of the outing, saying: “To be honest, I’ve heard a lot of reporters, and think perhaps a bigger deal is being made of this than needs to be.” Millar was paraphrased as saying “the creators haven’t made the relationship the focus of any of the stories,” “the kiss that caused such a fuss was handled discreetly,” and the characters’ homosexuality “will be an interesting background feature, same as with

⁵¹ Of course, the name “Apollo” is rich with a different iconicity: a subtext of myth and eroticism that, though never explicitly explored in the story, presumably influenced the character’s naming. In Greek and Roman myth, Apollo was among the most bisexual of the gods, and many of the myths about him involve the deity’s desire and pursuit of beautiful boys. In Ovid’s classic Latin text about the loves of the gods, *The Metamorphoses*, we find three very similar stories about Apollo’s dalliances with young (demi-)mortals: one about Daphne, a (female) nymph, and two more about Cyparissus and Hyacinthus – both young men. Because of his status as a lover of boys, Apollo – along with the objects of his affection -- served during the Renaissance, and into the nineteenth century, as one of the “classical” references that contained an unspoken subtext of male homosexuality.

⁵² This seems like an exaggeration. In fact, the original appearance of Apollo’s physique seemed to be closely modeled on the one Superman is usually portrayed as having. Meanwhile, the Midnighter – who is half-concealed by his coat anyway – is no more “bulging” than his prototype Batman. But McGinty’s point stands: Both characters evoke the superhero archetype of “the strong guy,” with all the attributes of masculinity and power that entails. (It should be acknowledged that Frank Quitely, the artist who took over the series’ artwork after Bryan Hitch departed the title, often rendered characters with much larger and more grotesque muscles than those drawn by other artists.)

the other characters.” Millar added that he didn’t plan to turn the comic into a “progr[am] like *Ellen*,” with “the gayness as the one thing that [carries] along the story.” Meanwhile, Peggy Burns, “a publicist for DC Comics,” was “afraid gay readers who turn to the comic to read about the two heroes will be disappointed that the subject is not referred to regularly. ‘We feel bad,’ said Burns, ‘because if people do go to read about the two gay characters because they’re interested in it, they’re not going to find much because there’s just not a lot there.’” (James Moran in *The Ottawa Citizen*, 15 July 2000).

These comments reflect a consistent platform that suggested the characters’ homosexuality was not something the creators considered very important; that fans should not consider it important either; and that it would not, and should not, become too important in the text (presumably at the expense of “the story”). The explicit comment in the *Times* about the creators’ plans to avoid “effeminate qualities” suggests a more sensitive matter: it implies a promise to concerned readers that the characters will not fall into stereotype, and that neither one of them will – as the colloquial discourse have it – be set up to “become the girl.”

The press coverage also puts considerable emphasis on things that seem to demonstrate the characters’ “normal” masculinity. In one article, we learn that in the much-discussed Issue #8, Apollo, a “burly superhero,” gave his lover a kiss before a dangerous mission – which was shocking, because the lover was “another burly superhero”! (Michael Sangiacomo, *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, 5 August 2000). In another article, David Allison, a spokesperson for the British gay and lesbian activist group Outrage!, invokes precisely such questions of masculinity and stereotype when he says, “A gay superhero is a great idea – it will make a wonderful retort to the typical stereotype of the handbag-swinging poof... The heroes could provide teenagers coming to terms with their sexuality with a powerful image” (McGinty, *Times* of London). Here we have an implicit assumption that any ordinary “superhero” would, by definition, be entirely different from a “handbag-swinging poof” -- and, intentionally or not, an implicit assumption that a “powerful” image would stand in clear opposition to it.

The frequently-repeated assurances of the characters’ “normality,” the approving references to their “power,” and the promise that their sexuality would remain “discreetly” handled in the background all emphasize the centrality of the claim that

Apollo and Midnighter would be superheroes who “just happen[ed] to be gay.” That formulation raises a number of rather important, and usually unstated, questions that surround superherodom and gayness. Among other things, it points out one of the most obvious aspects, and seldom formulated, aspects of superhero fiction: heroism usually is implicitly defined in a peculiarly masculine way, one intimately tied to strength and to “power.” This leads to a discourse that equates the ideas of the “heroic” and the “powerful,” often to the exclusion of all else – for instance, while self-sacrifice may be heroic, in specific contexts, weakness or vulnerability are usually a serious problem. This leads directly to the fact that the *baseline* in the superhero genre, insofar as the baseline protagonist is a superhero, is already *hypermasculine*. This complicates any analysis of “effeminacy” in terms of the superhero – perhaps for similar reasons to the way that “the feminine” has a hard time functioning within these genre assumptions. It also raises questions about the possibility of comprehending, within these genre boundaries, a representation that would encompass a spectrum of gender-identified behaviors. *Could* there be such a thing as a “purse-swinging,” effeminate male superhero? What might that mean?

In commentary about them, and in their earlier incarnations within the text, an emphasis on Apollo and Midnighter’s “normality” seemed to assert that, yes, conventional masculinity – or the conventional hypermasculinity – of superhero genre was compatible with homosexuality. The storyline of *The Authority* also seemed to make a point of ensuring the characters’ “normality”: Apollo and Midnighter, despite being perhaps the first “practicing” homosexual characters in a mainstream superhero story, would participate in *The Authority*’s team activities to the same degree that any other “masculine powerhouse” would. Since superhero teamwork largely entails fighting enemies and bonding with other heroes, this naturally has consequences in the sense that the characters participated fully in these “masculine” activities. In an important sense, this seems to be related to their “iconicity.” As Klock suggests, these characters do in fact form the core of the Authority’s muscle, and their business is the exercise of power. Midnighter’s superpower itself is related to fighting strategy, while Apollo is close to invulnerable and his strength nearly limitless: readers see him, in hyperbolically superheroic fashion, do things like knocking down buildings by flying through them,

traveling through volcanoes and outer space, and using the heat rays from his eyes to cut swathes through enemy armies or to sterilize an alien infestation on the moon.

Whether because of the archetypes on which they are based, because of their uncompromised deployment of fighting power, or a combination of the two, Midnighter and Apollo possess an “iconic power” that seems to go unchallenged. Even if the characters are of recent invention, they are unquestionably icons – icons *of the superhero*, if nothing else. This is important, because in some very real sense, Warren Ellis seemed to be offering an answer to the question of “don’t ask, don’t tell” for superhero genre. The creation and outing of Apollo and Midnighter is a tangible demonstration that a character can be gay, and still maintain the uncompromised attributes of power and hypermasculinity associated with the “real” or iconic hero. Such a character, a superhero who “just happens to be gay,” can still perform the central genre tasks of team-bonding and violent battle. That is, a superhero can be gay, and still be a soldier.

Masculinity and Its Violations: Victimhood, Revenge, and Ambivalent Homophobia

To step back for a moment, and re-focus our examination: In discussing a shift that I’ve called a movement from implicit connotation to explicit denotation, certainly seems that the explicit naming-aloud of gayness is more progressive, braver, and more satisfying to readers – both gay and gay-friendly -- than the deniable, implicit *suggestion* of homosexuality. However, this does not always mean that an increased focus on the sexuality of gay characters makes for a more progressive, more honest-feeling, or even less homophobic book. There are so few titles featuring gay characters in existence that it is difficult to offer a taxonomy of homophobia in superhero fictions, nor is it this paper’s task to describe them. However, *The Authority* offers an example that is rich in contradiction and paradox. The reading that follows is not strictly objective, and will offer some judgments about the implicit or explicit homophobia of certain aspects of the series’ later evolution. I believe this is important, however, particularly because there exists so little public dialogue about the ways in which these newly open gay characters are represented.

When Warren Ellis left *The Authority*, Mark Millar became the writer of the series from May 2000 until the last issue of that incarnation of the series (*The Authority* #29).

Along the way there were hiatuses, censorship problems, cancelled issues, and fill-in writers, but Millar was generally responsible for the later part of the series. Millar handled the homosexuality of Apollo and the Midnighter with a different tone from that Ellis had created and sustained. Millar did not “retcon” the characters into heterosexuality, nor did he ignore their relationship or their sexuality (as had happened to Northstar).

On the contrary, the characters’ gayness began to be highlighted in the stories with increasing regularity. Readers of the series who kept an eye on Apollo and Midnighter saw many things that brought them great satisfaction: the characters were depicted as a couple, lived in a suite of rooms together, and were shown in occasional domestic scenes of TV-watching or of ironing shirts. Even more satisfying, together they took over the care of a baby girl (when the defunct team leader, Jenny Sparks, was reincarnated as an infant – the sort of thing that sometimes happens to superheroes (*The Authority* #17ff.)). In the series’ final issue, the two were married in a shipboard “solar wedding” and were pronounced “husband and husband” (*The Authority* #29). Certainly, these were images that had never been seen before in mainstream superhero comics, and they were groundbreaking.

At the same time, however, the storylines also begin to introduce elements of homophobic abuse, violence, and assault directed against the gay characters. Violence *per se* was nothing new to *The Authority*. As Millar intensifies it, however, some of this violence seemed to take on a specifically anti-gay tenor that some readers found unsettling. Nearly every villain who fought with Apollo or Midnighter now addresses them in virulently anti-gay terms: They are “a couple of sissies” to a team of military superheroes (“The Nativity”); “degenerates,” “poofs,” and “those two fat queens” to an evil ex-shaman (“Earth Inferno”). By the time the series has reached its concluding arc, a villain is calling Midnighter “that leather-clad nancy-boy,” and making battle chit-chat with Apollo along the lines of, “Aw, don’t cry, honey-pie. [The Midnighter will] be mincin’ around in heaven soon enough,” Villains also miss no opportunity to trivialize the characters’ relationship. After apparently killing Midnighter, the villain Seth says to the weeping Apollo, “Y’all’re really broken up about this, aren’t you, Apollo? What’s

the matter, fairy-light? You sad nobody's gonna be sendin' you a big, gay Valentine's card next year?" ("Transfer of Power.")

Writers do not always consistently work on their titles, and during Millar's run, other writers often wrote fill-in stories. Perhaps predictably, but also somewhat unnerving, stories by other writers also took on a similar tone. A fill-in story by Joe Casey saw a female superhero, a former teammate of Apollo and Midnighter now returned from the dead, snarling at them, "You girls always made me nauseous. Finally... I can *do* something about it." (In this character's original appearance, in a *Stormwatch* issue written by Ellis, she evinces no apparent homophobia or intolerance; of course, at that time, the Apollo and Midnighter characters were not obviously gay.) Other, similar scenarios see the characters being referred to deprecatingly as "Liza" and "Cinderella," for no apparent reason other than that they are gay.

Part of what seems so disturbing here is that it implies a world in which *everyone* who is not gay is actively anti-gay, at least to the degree of sniggering and calling names. Nor are the character's fellow teammates particularly supportive. All the aggressive characters are villains, to be sure, but as Millar writes it, there are no longer any major characters in the book other than heroes and villains. This offers a peculiarly slanted vision of the world: If the default attitude of *every* other character – even of every villain – is homophobic, the effect is a world devoid of supportive characters; other gay people; or people who simply don't much care. This also maintains a focus on the characters' gayness, perpetually "marking" them as different – and thus as targets for aggression.

A further unnerving development is a recurring threat of anal rape, usually against Apollo. In Millar's very first storyline ("The Nativity"), we meet a team of loathsome, military-designed superhumans called "The Americans," a takeoff on Marvel's classic team the Avengers. The Americans battle the Authority, and a character called "The Commander" – a character riff on Captain America that can really only be called sordid – defeats, beats and then, in a clearly signaled "off-panel" scene, anally rapes Apollo as alternate-world versions of Thor and the Wasp look on.

It is not clear at that point if Apollo is dead – we see the Midnighter weeping over his bleeding body later in the issue (on television, no less). As we discover in the next issue, Apollo has survived and physically recovered. The issue of the rape is never

explicitly brought up again, although we see Apollo meditating revenge. In the story arc's climactic battle, however, we Apollo fights the remaining "Americans" and kills them all with his heat vision, with the exception of the Commander, whom he brutally strikes with his heat vision and paralyzes from the waist down. As he lies on the ground, the Commander yells:

Hell, soldier, what kind of excuse for a move was that? Don't you have the stones to kill me properly or something?... Unless [it] violates whatever code of ethics you super-sissies call a rule-book... Or is it just that you don't have the heart to snuff out a hunky, ex-Marine [*sic*] you find so damn attractive. Is that the problem here, boy? Does the Commander give you feelings you only read about in *Cosmopolitan* magazine?

(Millar, "The Nativity")

To this, Apollo replies, "Don't be ridiculous. I just promised you to a friend." He rises into the air and flies away from the field of battle. In the next panel, we see a low-perspective view of the Commander looking up from the ground, horrified, at someone who has planted two black boots nearly astride his head. Then we see that it's the Midnighter, and that he's extending toward us an enormous, phallic power drill. "A pleasure to finally make your acquaintance," he says.

The scene ends here. Rape is answered with implied rape, and Apollo is, apparently, avenged – in a way that can't let us stop thinking about these super-characters' apparent brutal sexual attacks on each other. Why is this the case? Whatever Millar intended, he certainly infused the narrative with highly pervasive sense of brutal male-on-male sexual assault as an ultimate show of victory or power in this setting. A similar theme arises in a later storyline, in which the Authority is overthrown by evil American political interests, and each member is subjected to some particularly vicious form of torture. While most have their personalities or intelligence altered in humiliating ways, Apollo is deprived of the sunlight that gives him power and is left onboard the Carrier to be used as a "punching bag" by the usurpers who have taken the roles formerly occupied by Apollo and Midnighter. We see Last Call, the leather-clad Midnighter replacement, beating and kicking a strung-up Apollo, while calling him names and telling him that the Midnighter is dead: "Your boyfriend's the only one who didn't make it out,

twinkle-toes.” When Apollo is finally rescued (by the Midnighter, who, it turns out, is not dead but escaped with Jenny Quantum, their superpowered baby girl), it is just as Apollo is about to be sexually molested by his own analogue, an Aryan superman called Teuton who has decided to “broaden [his] horizons” with the captive (“Transfer of Power”).

What to make of all this anti-gay name-calling, humiliating punishment, and sexual assault against this gay character? Any generalizations would have to be complicated by the fact that Millar’s *Authority* heaps abuse and humiliation on *all* the characters. Brutality runs high, verbally as well as physically, and images of extraordinary violence are as common as aggressive verbal references to defecation. In the storyline mentioned earlier, for instance, the torture to which Apollo is subjected seems profoundly hateful, sexually tinged, and even emasculating. However, among the other characters things are also not so good: the Engineer has had her nano-blood stolen, had her memory erased, and has been placed into the fictional life of a miserable woman who raises evil children on welfare and is badly abused by her husband, while Swift, a strong-minded feminist character and vegetarian Buddhist, has been cognitively altered into a subservient “Stepford wife” who finds all her pleasure in servicing her wicked politician husband; we see her happily cleaning grease-coated dishes with her tongue

While it might be argued that the context makes Apollo’s torture less unique, and thus less easy to characterize as homophobic, the pattern that emerges is hardly more comforting. The other male members of the team are humiliated in other ways -- Jack Hawksmoor’s IQ is reduced by half and he is left to rant on the street, while the shamanistic Doctor finds his spiritual home, the Garden, invaded and paved over for a theme park. But physical, psychological and sexual tortures are reserved for the female characters -- and Apollo. The series often seems to take pleasure in the spectacle of humiliation, to a degree that can be unsettling; and since it is not clear why, logically, the torture needs to occur in the first place, it is hard not to read it as sadism for its own sake. These questions aside, it seems clear that at least part of the various tortures suffered by Apollo are implicitly or explicitly linked to the character’s homosexuality.

Because the entire tone of the comic at this point is so brutal and sadistic, it’s difficult to claim with confidence that it expresses particular hatred or degradation of

women or gay characters. However, it is certainly these characters who come in for the vast bulk of the sexual aggression, violation and humiliation, and whose tortures are depicted on-panel and in graphic detail. This raises several points. First, it stands in marked contrast to Ellis's and Millar's early comments about their desire to keep the characters' gayness "an interesting background feature." On the contrary, as we can see, the characters' homosexuality is now being raised at every turn, and there seems to be no violence against them that is not also, specifically, homophobic violence. The turn of events also suggests one of the broader problems in the representation of gay superheroes, one that will need to be confronted as the genre evolves. Namely, it suggests a conflicted apprehension about how to reconcile the "power," hypermasculinity, and invulnerability of the iconic superhero with the concepts of implicit vulnerability, "weakness," or voluntary submission often associated in this culture with gay men. It seems like an oversimplification to suggest that superhero readers and creators are apprehensive about male homosexual characters because of a direct nervousness about anal sex. And yet *The Authority*, as it has evolved under Millar's guidance, offers an almost laughably transparent guide to the anxieties and hostilities that at least some creators bring to bear on the subject. If, as Millar so proudly claims, the series was "selling more than Superman" shortly after he took over,⁵³ clearly Millar's working-out of those anxieties appealed to a broad superhero readership, as well. Yet the unresolved tension in those stories, and their tangibly hostile and homophobic atmosphere of those stories suggests that this is an issue that creators in the genre will have to work out much more fully before the representation of gay characters can move beyond homophobic stereotype or anti-gay aggression.

Apollo and Midnighter: Conclusions

It is clear that Apollo and the Midnighter are of great importance for understanding the ways in which gay representation has functioned among contemporary superheroes. They matter partly because of the great publicity attracted by their outing,

⁵³ Millar is quoted in an interview at Julian Darius' "Continuity Pages," <http://www.continuitypages.com/authorityMILLAR.htm>

and partly because of what Ellis's manipulation of their "iconicity" can tell us about public understandings of gayness in the superhero narrative as a whole.

But the story of Apollo and Midnighter also matters because of how their narrative developed. As the heavy media coverage of the 2000 "outing" suggested, the appearance of the gay characters was read as meaning more than the individual appearances of specific characters: Apollo and Midnighter *represented* something larger, i.e., an integration of homosexuality and homosexual figures into a "mainstream" superhero narrative. At its most radical, this could be interpreted as a statement that gayness and superherodom were compatible; at the very least, it could be viewed as an "experiment" to see if indeed the concept would work.. If a character can be homosexual, and still retain its value and iconography as archetype, then to a large extent the case has been made that the iconic traits of the superhero are not incompatible with homosexuality. To give this move the pro-gay, or at least integrationist, reading it deserves, we could say that to the extent that the characters were made visible in all their "firsts" – cohabitating, kissing, adopting, marrying – the uses of the character in *The Authority* strongly fulfilled the original attitude elucidated by Warren Ellis and repeated by Mark Millar: to create superheroes who "just happened to be gay" -- which, itself, was capable of altering the assumptions of the superhero world.

But the characters' story also provides a graphic illustration of the ways in which the narrative of gayness in superhero stories may operate, even when it *claims* not to be doing so. In *The Authority*, we have a narrative whose creators claimed, throughout, to be making a text that contained superheroes who "just happen to be gay." And yet, without any explicit acknowledgement of a change in that approach or desire, the tone of the story – and the characters' representation – gradually shifted, developing increasingly into an atmosphere marked by anti-gay rhetoric, homophobic violence, and the regular threat of rape. The fact that neither DC, Wildstorm, nor any members of the creative team acknowledged a change in their representational project suggests strongly that *the shift was, somehow, invisible to them*. We might read this as suggesting that -- at least to some creators, and some editors and consumers – there is an invisible transition between considering gay superheroes as characters who "just happen to be gay," and reading them as figures defined by their gayness and, by default, subject to ridicule and violence

because of it. The fact that intermixed with this narrative are admittedly “groundbreaking” moments of domestic coupledness suggests the complexity and self-contradictions embedded in this representation, and the moment of flux in which it appeared. But it also suggests that a truly non-homophobic integration of “iconic” gay superheroes may be harder to achieve than it seems – particularly if some creators are unable to perceive homophobia, even as it enters into their stories.

Apollo and Midnighter were in some sense a modern version of Northstar: the “first gay superheroes” for a new millennium. We will now turn to another recent exploration of gayness within the superhero universe, heralding the new age of representation. This is Judd Winick’s run on the DC Comics title *Green Lantern*, in which a minor character with a sidekick-like function – Terry Berg --- first came out (in 2000, and then became the victim of a violent gay-bashing in 2002). The *Green Lantern* issues both resemble, and differ from, the *Authority* stories. Unlike Ellis and Millar, writer Judd Winick has a clearly stated (and clearly pro-gay) agenda: he is interested in putting homosexuality onto the map of what superhero stories can cover. Also unlike *The Authority*, the gay character in *Green Lantern* is not himself a superhero. Instead, he is simply one of the people they’re suppose to protect. However, the *Green Lantern* arc is significant in a number of ways: It has much to tell us about how gayness in superhero stories is presented, understood, and received by the public, and what creators and publishers think it is important to have superheroes say on the subject. And, like the *Authority* stories, the *Green Lantern* stories tell us both certain things that the creators claim they want to say – and other things the creators may not be entirely aware. In this case, we see a more disturbing vision of the function of gayness in the superhero code of honor, violence, and revenge than perhaps Winick entirely meant to show.

READING #3: GREEN LANTERN AND TERRY BERG

Superheroes, Sidekicks and the Big Gay-Bashing

Green Lantern has long been among DC Comics' stable second-tier titles: beloved of fans, but nearly unknown in the common cultural pantheon. If a film is ever made of the series, the effect on the hero's popularity is likely to be similar to that of *Daredevil*, and the pre-release publicity will have exactly as much explaining to do. Unlike the back stories of Superman, Spider-Man, Batman or even the X-Men, the history of the Green Lantern is opaque except to his readers.

The original Green Lantern was a conventional hero with a surreal origin, but strong historical continuity continues to imbue current versions of the hero with the warm sense of "history" conferred by Golden Age origins. The first Green Lantern, Alan Scott, was an engineer who survived a train wreck with the help of a magic lantern, which instructed him to forge a ring from its metal. The ring enabled its bearer to fly, and to use his willpower to do amazing things (usually entailing the creation of fantastic "constructs" out of the ring's energy, which invariably glowed green). Like the powers of most thoughtfully-crafted superheroes, the ring had limitations – its bearer had to recharge it with the "lantern" every 24 hours – and it could not affect anything made out of wood. In 1959, the "Silver Age" Green Lantern series debuted with a new hero -- Hal Jordan, a brash test pilot given his ring by a dying alien – and a new weakness: now the ring could not affect anything yellow. A new back-story was invented, too. Now the Green Lantern was not a lone hero, but part of a body of interstellar police officers, the Green Lantern Corps. The Corps furthered the cause of peace and order in the universe; they worked under the direction of a benevolent, intellectual race called the Guardians who lived on a planet called Oa; each "sector" of space was represented by at least one Green Lantern, even if he had to work in secret, and each planet had a Green Lantern watching over it. This cosmic expansion led to a broader range of story possibilities: *Green Lantern* could now be a spacefaring "science fantasy" series, while the central character could also fight crime and team up with other superheroes back on Earth. Like

Alan Scott before him, Hal Jordan was a stalwart member of the Justice League of America

In 1994, Hal Jordan had been the primary Green Lantern of Earth (and of the DC Universe) for thirty-five years. Those years had brought a proliferation of human Green Lanterns, including the brash Guy Gardner; John Stewart, an African-American hero; and Jennie-Lynn Hayden, a.k.a. “Jade,” the green-skinned, superpowered daughter of original Green Lantern Alan Scott. As a cataclysm overtook the Green Lantern Corps, destroying most of the Guardians and leading to the death of Hal Jordan, a new Green Lantern was introduced: Kyle Rayner, a fresh-faced, dark-haired young man. Kyle was clearly a Green Lantern for the nineties, with his tattoos, his urban Manhattan lifestyle and his career as a starving graphic artist.

Epistemology of the Gay Sidekick: Self-Outing

In 2000, the writing duties on *Green Lantern* were assigned to Judd Winick. Winick’s résumé was in many ways unique: he entered the public eye during the 1993 incarnation of MTV’s “Real World,” and made his comics-publishing debut with the 2000 graphic novel *Pedro and Me*. That book dealt with Winick’s friendship with Pedro Zamora, his gay and HIV-positive “Real World” costar, who dedicated himself to gay activism until his death in 1994. The heterosexual Winick remained identifies himself closely with gay activism and the effort to increase tolerance in the culture at large.

His work on *Green Lantern* was no exception. When he took over writing the title, Winick introduced new storylines that focused on the personal life of his protagonist, rather than on superheroic battle scenes. In Winick’s first story, Kyle is offered an exciting new job creating a comic strip for a trendy magazine called *Feast*. Winick introduced a host of new characters, including Kara Stone, the hard-edged editor (clearly modeled on Tina Brown, formerly of the *New Yorker*), and Andre Choi, the effusive art director. Winick also introduced Terry Berg, a sixteen-year-old magazine intern who became Kyle’s personal assistant, teaching him how to use illustration software and keeping him on schedule (*GL* #129).

Terry and Kyle bond over the work and quickly become friends. But Terry’s peculiar reactions when Kyle resumed a relationship with a former girlfriend, Jen, leads

some readers to wonder if they should read Terry as having a crush on Kyle. Indeed, in Issue #137 (June 2001), after Kyle lets slip that he has asked Jen to marry him, Terry comes out to Kyle – or, rather, Terry becomes so upset and incoherent that Kyle finally recognizes Terry’s feelings for him. To his embarrassment, Kyle learns that although it had never occurred to him that Terry might be gay, other people are far ahead of him. His girlfriend Jen tells him, “It’s fairly obvious to me that he seemed a little sweet on you. I thought it was cute.” “Am I just the last person in the world to pick up on stuff?” asks a disbelieving Kyle (*GL* #137, 15). At Jen’s suggestion, Kyle visits Terry at his home, and the two have a “man-to-man” discussion of what Terry’s feelings might mean. Kyle reaffirms their friendship, although he makes it clear that he does not return Terry’s romantic feelings. He also offers affirmation of Terry’s possibly gay identity. “[I]f you are gay, well, that’s okay,” Kyle tells him. “You hear me? There is nothing wrong with you... Some people say it’s a sin, but I certainly don’t think so. It’s just who you are. And it’s okay to talk about it. You can talk about it with me” (*GL* #137, 18-19).

These issues certainly marked a new level of attention given to gay issues, at least in mainstream comics: *Green Lantern* dedicates an entire issue to the coming out of this secondary character (an issue entire without fighting, as some letter-writers noted with irritation), and gave over six pages to Kyle and Terry simply talking things through. The issue also shows a high proportion of people talking *about* talking about things. Feeling he mishandled the original encounter with Terry, Kyle seeks guidance not only from his girlfriend, but also from his editor, Andre, and – indirectly – from his friend and fellow superhero John Stewart. Winick seems to be interested in showing that Kyle needs to be educated about some things: he is not quite mature enough, perhaps, to handle this on his own, but he *is* mature enough to know when to seek guidance, and to learn and grow from it.

Winick, and those at DC responsible for the title, were forthcoming about their goals with the storyline. In a *New York Times* article published in 2002, Bob Schreck, the DC editor in charge of *Green Lantern*, is quoted as saying that he had been planning the Terry Berg stories for the past three years, and that they were personally meaningful to him, since he is bisexual (George Gene Gustines, *New York Times*, 13 August 2002). In an AP story from the same period, Winick’s record is explained (amusingly, he is

identified as “married and living in San Francisco,” as if to clear up any doubt), and we further learn that “[i]f there's a lesson in dropping gay issues into *Green Lantern* ... ‘it might be that it would be great for young people to see that the Green Lantern doesn't care that Terry is gay. He's a person,’ says [Winick]. Terry represents acceptance” (Verena Dobnik, Associated Press, 13 August 2002). He also offered a sentiment widely quoted as a sound bite: “Terry... had a crush on Kyle. Who wouldn't? He's tall, with all those muscles.” The jovial, inclusive tone – “Who wouldn't?” – implies an inclusive attitude toward gay readings of superhero stories, in terms both of characters and of fans.

As we saw in the press coverage of Apollo and the Midnighter two years before, Winick and Schreck seem to have had a goal of normalization in mind, as well as an explicit interest in role modeling for readers. One interesting difference, though, is that Winick's scenario focuses on how his superhero character *responds* to the presence of gay people in his life. “Role modeling,” here, is not so much about providing the image of a “powerful” gay superhero as about providing the image of a *gay-friendly* superhero. Tolerance and support of a gay friend -- in whatever context -- is the character trait Winick explores in his protagonist.

At the same time, Winick seems to be interested in both defining and blurring the lines between the “superhero world” and the “everyday world” of Kyle's life. In this case, the conversation about homosexuality is methodically integrated into both spheres. Kyle's editor Andre knows nothing of Kyle's superhero life. But his girlfriend Jen is herself a former Green Lantern, and shares Kyle's secret life. And we learn through Jen that John Stewart – a current Green Lantern – also “read” Terry, because he himself has a gay brother (*GL* #137). This may well be a clever way of getting around the problem of the “untouchability” of long-established characters. Winick presumably would not have had the authority to make a character like John Stewart himself gay, but apparently nothing in his continuity forbade the introduction of a gay sibling.)

Winick is also willing to be slightly playful about Kyle's own sexual identity – within very specific limits, it's true, but the jokes Winick drops in are nearly unheard-of in most mainstream titles. For examples, a few issues after Terry's coming-out, we see Kyle and Jen eating in a restaurant when Terry passes by and waves through the window. He is hand in hand with another boy. Jen asks Kyle if it's Terry's new boyfriend, to

which Kyle replies that he doesn't want to "make any hasty assumptions." "Friends can hold hands," he says, to which Jen shoots back, "You hold hands with *your* friends? You and [fellow Green Lantern] John Stewart hold hands all the time?" "Yes," Kyle replies, deadpan. "Not *all* the time, but sometimes. Mostly on the subway." "You have become more odd..." mutters Jen, good-humoredly (GL #148). Perhaps Kyle has learned to loosen up after the events of Terry's coming-out issue. One pointed episode particularly stands out. Talking to Andre Choi, the art director at *Feast* magazine, Kyle finds himself embarrassed when he makes one too many assumptions about markers of homosexuality – and has the assumption turned back on him:

Kyle: I think Terry... has a crush on me or something... I don't know what to say to him... What was it like for you when *you* came out?

Andre [lifting an eyebrow]: Came out of *what*?

Kyle: Well, "the closet." When you told people you were gay.

Andre: Why does *everyone* think I'm gay?! I'm *so* sorry I'm thin, I'm sorry I dress well, that I have earrings, that I'm an art director. I don't like show tunes, disco does nothing for me and I'm attracted to women. Not. Gay. God, what about *you*, man. You're an unmarried artist living in Greenwich Village. What do you think people say about *you*?
(GL #137)

As we can see, Andre's monologue doesn't exactly try to divorce homosexuality from its presumed markers – he seems to offer a lack of interest in disco and "show tunes" as evidence of heterosexuality, while at the same time insisting that his interests in fashion and art should *not* be read as gay– but it suggests the unreliability of these trappings. Certainly, the final question about Kyle's own "suspicious" image turns the tables.

In subsequent issues, we see Terry exploring and becoming happy with this new part of his identity. He becomes involved at a Manhattan gay and lesbian youth center, makes new friends, and finds a boyfriend. In Issue #140 (Sept. 2001), Kyle attends Terry's seventeenth birthday party (towing along Alan Scott, the Golden Age Green Lantern and Jen's father, for an interesting cross-generational encounter). The party is a dance mixer, put together by "[a] mess of [Terry's] friends from school and from the downtown gay and lesbian center." Kyle summarizes the last few issues' story

development around Terry in interior monologue: “He’s been doing great. He’s happy and he’s open about what he feels. I’d say he’s doing way *better* than your average seventeen-year-old.... It’s amazing what honest talk, understanding parents and a safe environment can do for a young person” (*GL* #140, 5).

Some readers were upset with this kind of writing and regularly wrote in to say so, complaining about the “super-liberal” Winick’s ““soapboxing,”” “pure pro-gay propaganda” or “preaching the ‘moral flavor of the day’” (“RJL,” letters column, *Green Lantern* #140; Barry L. Branscomb, letters column, *Green Lantern* #141). Whether or not we read it as “preachy,” Winick’s writing at moments like this is certainly not subtle. The storyline does have an agenda, in line with the larger-than-life political statements made by comics in years past (such as the famous Green Lantern-Green Arrow crossovers of the 1970s). The agenda is not hidden, of course – “Terry represents acceptance,” as Winick said. One effect, however, is that the questions we asked earlier about epistemology and ambiguity – the operations of knowing and denying that were in play around Northstar, Apollo and the Midnighter – are rendered moot. Winick does not seem to have much interest in ambiguity. After all, one of the things irritating the letter-writers is the amount of space Winick devotes to having his characters, gay and non-gay alike, talk about homosexuality and what it means: the kind of dialogue noticeably absent from either *Alpha Flight* or *The Authority*.

Victimization and the Iconography of Martyrdom

In Issue #154 (cover-dated Nov. 2002), the mood changes. Terry and his boyfriend, David, became the victims of gay-bashers in a violent incident that leaves Terry in a coma with serious physical injuries. The story is recounted in flashback, narrated by the grief-stricken David while Kyle, Jen and friends gather by Terry’s hospital bed side. The scene’s poignancy and drama is affecting, and the story leaves readers anxiously wondering: will Terry live, or die? And if he does recover, will he be the same?

It was this story, far more than Terry’s original coming out, that received significant coverage in major news outlets. The coverage publicized the fact that DC – and, by extension, superhero comics -- *had* gay characters, as much as it did the gay-

bashing itself. What's strikingly interesting in the way the story constructs the figure of the injured Terry: Terry is positioned as a *martyred* gay teenager – an image that resonates with other figures from recent stories, both real and fictional, and that also provokes questions about the role of the superhero.

From the beginning of the storyline, the violence against Terry is described in words and images that heighten the impact of the assault. In the issue's opening passage, Terry's boyfriend, David, recounts his memories of the attack, while pictures illustrate the flashback in a grim and muted color palette. The two boys leave a downtown gay dance club, and spontaneously kiss in the street; someone whistles at them; a group of three men begin to chase them down. David and Terry lose their heads and split up. When David returns to find Terry minutes later, the images do not show Terry's face, only glimpses of a body lying on the pavement and a close-up of David's tears. "When I found him," says David, "... I didn't, wasn't even sure it was him... at first... If it wasn't for... his shoes... I recognized the shoes before I could recognize his... his face. There he was. Just lying there. There was so much blood" (*GL* #154, 5).

On the following pages, the reader – over the shoulders of Terry's grieving parents -- sees Terry lying intubated and bandaged in a hospital bed. On the full-page splash panel, captions read: "Berg, Terrence. Patient is a 17-year-old male suffering from multiple compound fractures of the head, chest, and extremities. He has a left orbital blowout... He is status post emergent craniotomy for decompression of an epidural hematoma and thoracostomy tube placement for traumatic hemopneumothorax..."

This clinical language, which conveys an ominous gravity through its very obscurity, is followed by Kyle's mental commentary. "In English: Terry has a broken arm, two broken legs – one of them broken in three places. His left hand is mangled. He has four broken ribs and a collapsed lung. He also has a skull fracture. He may lose an eye. They drilled holes in his head to relieve the pressure from the bleeding in his brain. He's on a respirator. He's in a coma. He may die" (*GL* #154, 6).

The striking cover art of *Green Lantern* #154 foregrounds the shocking violence of the attack. A slumping Terry is borne up by two of his attackers; their eyes cannot be seen, but their grim faces show teeth. One of them yanks Terry's head up by the hair, revealing a face terribly bloodied and hurt – strangely shocking, given the traditionally

bloodless battle imagery of superhero comics, in which wounds appear, if at all, as elegant red gashes skimming the surface of a cheek or pectoral muscle. But Terry's bruised face shows softened flesh, the bend of a broken nose, the ugly split of a pulped lower lip. In its explicitness, the image evokes the bygone days of EC comics, in which physical suffering was dwelt on for its own sake -- or to make a point.

It is clear that the violence of the assault against Terry is meant to evoke sympathy, but also to bring into play larger questions of blame and danger. Terry is clearly an innocent attacked by an intolerant world. The already-obvious is clarified as it is asserted and reasserted that Terry, like David, was innocent of any wrongdoing that could conceivably have justified violence against. As the bewildered David asks, "Does he deserve all this just 'cause of one simple kiss? W – we didn't, we didn't – *do* anything. ... Why are... why would... I – I—just don't understand." In the follow-up issue, #155, Kyle comments to Jen of Terry: "He's *such* a good kid. A heart full of good, and the world tried to break his skull open." (GL 154, 19). In this context, the heavy focus on the violence becomes particularly painful to the reader. Kyle's comment shifts the blame away from individuals, and to an abusive "world," implicating the reader in the aggression. Terry is not merely a victim, but a martyr of intolerance.

The goals of this iconography seem fairly clear. As Shreck and Winick tell interviewers, they are trying to make a point about the wrongness of intolerance and violence, and to raise awareness and drive home the point by showing a sympathetic character suffer. "[I]n this hate crime, we're discussing the worst side of the gay issue," said Winick (Dobnick, *AP*), while Schreck told the *New York Times*, "It's a story that needs to be told... Where we're bringing Terry is very similar to the Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard moments" -- referring, as the *Times* adds, to "the cross-dressing woman in Nebraska who was murdered in 1993 and the University of Wyoming student who was beaten, tied to a post and left to die in 1998" (Gustines, *New York Times*).

The iconography of martyrdom can suggest an innocent wounded by a world that wrongly fears or hates him; here and elsewhere, this hearkens back to the martyrdom of Jesus at the origin of Western Christian tradition. Superhero comics have evoked this iconography at various times, with varying degrees of subtlety. The "fear and hatred" the X-Men suffer at the world's hands, for instance, was discussed earlier in terms of its

metaphorical relationship to modern bigotries. This has gone so far as to use crucifixion imagery at various points, e.g. in the 1985 Chris Claremont graphic novel *God Loves, Man Kills* (in which Charles Xavier is brainwashed within a mental space of crucifixion and torture), or a story arc in *The Uncanny X-Men* this past June that saw mutant teenagers crucified by an intolerant religious movement. In the real world, the iconography of martyrdom is also used to focus outrage around the deaths of innocents. The murders of Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard -- the two young queer people killed in the Midwest -- have been associated with a system of martyr imagery. This is particularly the case for Matthew Shepard, who was, literally, lashed to a fence and left to die of exposure, in an image whose resemblance to crucifixion was not lost on commentators or political cartoonists.

In the case of Terry Berg, this imagery seems to seek to mobilize protest against a trend of violence against the defenseless. By emphasizing the innocence of the victim (who is guilty of no crime but love); the brutality of the violence (which is usually less consequential in superhero genre stories); and the free-floating responsibility for the blame ("the world"), this iconography inspired the reader's sympathy as well as his or her discomfort: disturbed by the reminder that such violence exists, the readers is reminded of his or her own responsibility to make "the world" safer for innocents.⁵⁴

Within the superhero world, this iconography may also have a more specific meaning. The "economy" of violence within superhero genre stories places great significance on the distinction between hero and victim -- between the characters who need saving, and the character who is strong enough to save them. These lines can be blurred to provocative effect: the 2001 advertising campaign for *Smallville*, a new television show about the life of Superman as a teenager in contemporary Kansas,

⁵⁴ The specific shape of Terry's victimhood reflects a trend of recent years. Terry is a budding cartoonist whose injuries threaten him with the loss of his hands; while this has obvious relevance within a comic book, but it also calls to mind similar gay artist-martyr characters of recent years. The gay artist Simon, played by Greg Kinnear, is incapacitated after being attacked in the 1997 film *As Good As It Gets* (thus appealing to the hardened heart of the Jack Nicholson character). The teenage character Justin on Showtime's TV series *Queer as Folk*, like Terry, is a young cartoonist, who was gay-bashed at the end of the 2001-2002 season and threatened with the loss of his drawing hand.

centered on an image of the Tom Welling, the young actor playing Clark Kent. Welling was stripped to the waist, limp and sweating, and lashed to a stake with a red “S” scrawled across his chest, against a backdrop of luminous cornfields. The obvious reference was to the vulnerability of adolescence, but the iconography was electrifying, and drew at least as much attention as the (rather banal) concept of the show itself.

The tension – which many viewers found provocative, and some saw as erotic – lay in the softening of the lines between the invulnerable hero and the profoundly vulnerable victim, and the specifics of the image provoked many viewers to compare it not only to the obvious crucifixion reference, but to the iconography surrounding the Midwestern murder of Matthew Shepard. The show’s producers never acknowledged a link to Shepard specifically, or to the imagery of gay martyrdom in general. But the complexity of the resonances may be summed up by the opening lyrics to *Smallville*’s theme song: a passionate demand, “Somebody save me – I don’t care how you do it.”⁵⁵ The provocative tension is evident. After all, one of the most fundamental rules of superhero genre is that it is the superhero who does the saving. After all, that is the essential function of a superhero, as he is usually defined.

Revenge, Retribution, and Genre Effects: “What is the point of being heroes if we can’t help people?”

In the context of superhero fiction, the imagery of martyrdom and victimhood invite a larger conversation about questions at the very heart of the superhero story: power and weakness, protection and violence, victimization and salvation. The “grammar” of violence – or, better yet, the *economy* of violence in superhero comics – operates in ways that have seldom been fully examined. Such a project would be beyond our scope here, but it is worth delineating some of the questions that this confluence of ideas provokes. After all, how can a hero operate without someone to save? And yet this economy of violence, which is often bloodless in the superhero world, requires victims when it operates in the real world – and leaves people as bloody as the image of Terry so

⁵⁵ The song, by Remy Zero, is entitled “Save Me,” and its lyrics are suggestively sexual as well as passionate: “Somebody save me / Let your waters break right through/ I don’t care how you do it.../ Come on/ I’ve been waiting for you.” Lyrics are online at <http://www.stlyrics.com/lyrics/smallvillev/savemesmallvillethemesong.htm>

harshly shows. In a sense, the story uses its “real-world” positioning to suggest part of the paradox of a character who leads a life like Kyle Rayner’s: in the “real world,” violence is not glamorous, and “real-life” victims can be seriously hurt.

This question is pushed further in the following issue, #155. In this issue, Kyle, mad with rage and terrified that Terry will not recover, embarks on a number of actions of last resort. He visits the Justice League at their moon base, pleading with the Flash to use his powers on the “Cosmic Treadmill” to turn back time and save Terry. (Of course, the League refuses the request on principle: “We *all* want a day back,” says Batman. “We can’t ever take it.”) Later, taking his frustration out on some convenient asteroids, Kyle is visited by the Spectre, a reincarnation of former Green Lantern Hal Jordan combined with a metaphysical personage, who consoles him about his guilt over his use of his powers. At the end of the issue – after unexpectedly wakes from his coma and we learn he will recover – Kyle decides he is so frustrated with Earth, and so disillusioned with humanity, that he needs to stop being the Green Lantern of Earth for a while. He hands over his responsibilities to John Stewart, and, accompanied by Jen, takes off for a sojourn in outer space.

Earlier, however, Kyle takes the rather radical step of using his powers to chase down Terry’s assailants and round them up and into jail. At one point, this entails entering the high-security prison at Rikers Island and torturing up a prisoner in order to extract information, all the while maintaining the illusion of an empty cell to passers-by: “There’s a hologram sitting in front of this cell that looks like you lying in your cot sound asleep. Trust me, no one will know.” He unsettlingly employs the language of torture: “That’s me *squeezing* the broken wrist. Now, that’s just your wrist. I can do so many other things to you. We’ve got all night” (*GL* #154, 14). Later, Kyle tracks down the other guilty parties, who are about to flee town, and beats them up in a nighttime alleyway, reciting the litany of Terry’s injuries as he beats the perpetrators (*GL* #154, 16-20).

Obviously, this is disturbing on some level – it is evident to what degree Kyle is answering violence with violence. How do we read this? In one sense, it seems that, things have to fall out this way: under one understanding of the superhero world’s economy of violence, revenge is the only way to express love or loyalty to a fallen

comrade. Had Kyle not gone after Terry's assailants, would the assault on Terry seem to have been trivialized? Interestingly, some fan criticisms of Kyle's actions hinged not on the point that Kyle should not have sought revenge, but rather upon pointing out that the character had not had a similarly strong reaction when, under the writing of an earlier writer on the series, Ron Marz, Kyle's then –girlfriend was brutally murdered (and her body stuffed into a refrigerator). If *that* had not caused Kyle to snap, grow over-violent, and leave Earth – the thinking seems to go – then Kyle's rage and ultimate inability to cope with things upon seeing the violence against Terry, a mere friend, seemed "out of character."

However, it seems clear that Winick is trying to provoke readers to think about the double standards around superhero violence (and perhaps cannot find a comfortable resolution himself). As Winick said when interviewed, "Was Kyle right in hunting these guys down and beating them?... I think there's a lot to be said there" (Gustines, *New York Times*). Even within the comic, Kyle is criticized: On the JLA's moon base, he accuses Batman of being unfeeling, saying, "You're so far gone... you don't even remember what it's like to be a person[,] much less a hero." Batman replies: "You mean a hero who breaks into Rikers Island? A hero who fractures the wrists of an inmate to attain *[sic]* information? *That* kind of hero?" Kyle shoots back, "You pull the same garbage a hundred times a day before the rest of us even eat breakfast." "Maybe," Batman replies calmly. "But that is *me*, isn't it?" (*GL* #155, 8). Indeed, Winick is not the only one reminded of Batman's apparent pleasure in criminal punishment; as we may recall, the cheerfully sadistic Midnighter is a Batman avatar. Kyle's torture scene in the prison is alarmingly reminiscent of a scene in *The Authority*, in which the Midnighter, visiting a prison to extract information, similarly tortures the inmate, albeit in a more "professional" way. Unsettlingly, the Midnighter uses precisely the same "hologram" trick to prevent the wardens from witnessing the torture (*The Authority* #18, "Earth Inferno").

If Winick's version of *Green Lantern* suggests that open-mindedness and tolerance are among the qualities of a real hero, then we may read this disturbing use of violence as an exploration or interrogation of how a hero should react to the victimization of a targeted minority – or a friend. Even if letter-column readership was split about

whether gay-bashing was an “appropriate” subject for a superhero comic, the position of Winick’s superheroes seems to be clear. As Flash tells Kyle when he refuses his request, “This isn’t just about Terry. This is about every teenager who is terrified of being different... because of race, because of appearance, because of who they love. This goes on every day, Kyle!” Flash’s meaning seems to be that it would be inappropriate to take extreme measures to save Terry, because such an act would not stop a pattern of violence that is endemic in the world – and because superheroes cannot, in this way, save everyone. If this seems slightly paradoxical, Jen picks up on the paradox when she says sadly, “Terry... he isn’t a part of our world. He’s not supposed to go through this” (#154, 5). The comment reminds us of our shock and unease at seeing Terry’s badly abused face, and learning the consequences of the violence against him. Jen is right: Under the ordinary genre conventions of superhero comics, “civilians” are not supposed to be subjected to the same kind of violence as superheroes. Civilians cannot get away with so few consequences.

But, as we have already seen, Winick is interested in making sure that his characters’ superheroic and civilian worlds *do* overlap – the heroic characters spend time together off-duty, have romantic relationships, and turn to each other for personal advice. (Kyle even proposes to Jen with a “spare” Green Lantern ring.) This makes it all the more painful for Kyle to be faced with the intrusion of serious violence into civilian life, and his inability to do anything about it. The economy of violence of the superhero narrative is not supposed to extend to non-superhumans -- as Kyle seems to realize as he beats Terry’s assailants in the alley, finally slowing and pulling his last punch so it hits the wall instead of the boy he’s pummeling. The problem is that, for real-world violence like this, the revenge structures built into superhero genre cannot really help. The formal, ritualized structure of power and vengeance becomes largely meaningless. But as Kyle cries out, frustrated, at the Justice League’s base, “What is the *point* of being heroes if we can’t actually help people?” (GL #154).

Flash and Batman have no answer for him, other than to imply that this kind of violence is an inevitable aspect of life, and that there is nothing to be done about it. For Kyle, this is not satisfactory. The attack on Terry has forced Kyle to confront a problem that is increasingly troubling for contemporary superheroes: their systems of honor,

violence and revenge seem increasingly irrelevant, in light of the systematic injustice and pain that affects people in the real world. Violence cannot heal violence, and if Kyle's friendship with Terry allowed Winick to write stories suggesting that a real superhero should be tolerant and gay-friendly, then the attack on Terry to some degree implies the frustrating corollary: a real superhero should be enraged by the futility of anything he can do against the real-world victimization of innocents that occurs every day. ("I think it's the helplessness that's throwing us all off," as Jen tellingly says (#155).) How *can* the superhero – who spends most of his energy beating up superpowered villains – respond to petty, ordinary human injustice?

By pointing out this apparent gap in the structure of superhero honor, Winick was following in a tradition that some writers had followed before. After all, Kyle's predecessor, Hal Jordan, had had his political consciousness raised by his comrade Green Arrow decades before. Indeed, *The Authority* had confronted a similar question within the previous three years. But while the solution chosen by Warren Ellis and Mark Millar was to have their superheroes try to change the world to make it "worth saving," as Ellis's Jenny Sparks put it, Winick's Kyle Rayner is ultimately frustrated by the contradictions to the point that he temporarily loses his faith in humanity. "I've lost my will to protect them," as he tells Jen in Issue #155. He is forced to take the radical step of ceasing to act as a superhero on Earth for a time, leaving his duties in the hands of John Stewart while he seeks to regain his sense of balance by saving other worlds, with Jen, in outer space. Kyle found no answer to the helplessness that accompanied his realization that he could not save everyone in the real world. With tolerance, he learned a frustrating lesson in the limitations of superhero ideology.

Conclusions:

Further Study and New Directions

The study of superhero genre fiction is still so new that almost everything remains to be formulated. In this thesis I have attempted to provide the basic history of gay representation in genre superhero comics, and to discuss the important directions gay presentation is currently taking. I have not been able to cover the subject comprehensively, and I have been forced to leave out many interesting and useful examples, but I hope this will suffice to lay the groundwork for the conversation.

As we have seen, the history of this discourse has been shaped by silence and anxiety. Since the days of the activism of Fredric Wertham and the moral panic that ensued, superhero creators and readers have been haunted by the “spectre” of a homoerotic threat. Superhero comics went out of their way to avoid any mention of possible gayness, possibly reacting to an unstated fear that allowing this possibility in would “infect” the entire universe of superhero fiction. Until the late 1980s, gay characters were entirely absent from mainstream superhero comics.

During the 1980s and 1990s, gay characters and the open discussion of homosexuality gradually began to filter into mainstream comics. However, the shift to open representation was slow and irregular. At the same time, the *indirect* discussion of homosexuality in superhero fictions rapidly increased. Comics used a set of metaphorical *tropes* to imply a connection between gayness or deviance and the superhero “lifestyle,” without naming the connection out loud. Among the most identifiable tropes are the vision of the superhero as a costume fetishist; the superhero as flamboyant or campy; the superhero as a sadomasochist; the superhero as suspiciously homosocial; and the superhero as a potential pedophile. Film scholar D.A. Miller has used the term *connotation* to describe how homosexuality can be implied in a text without being stated out loud. In the late 1980s and 1990s, we see an increasing number of superhero stories using these tropes to *connote* homosexuality in the superheroes they described, without explicitly acknowledging they were doing so. Frequently, the most telling use

connotation is found slightly outside the mainstream, in superhero satires, burlesques, parodies, or film adaptations.

In the late 1990s, the representations of explicitly gay characters in superhero comics increased rapidly. It seems that comics are entering a new period, in which it is possible to have “sunlit,” *denotative* – not connotative – depictions of gay characters. By examining three recent examples of such depictions, we can see some of the patterns of this new representation. Northstar is a Marvel character whose history demonstrates how uneven the integration of gay characters into the superhero universe has been: he was trailed by innuendo during the 1980s, “outed” in the early 1990s, and then disappeared for nearly a decade. Northstar’s recent reappearance implies that Marvel is now prepared to have openly gay superheroes, accompanied by a curiously essentialist ideology. Northstar’s gayness has not yet to be seriously discussed within the comic.

In the late 1990s, independent publisher Wildstorm and writer Warren Ellis developed the characters of Apollo and the Midnighter, “iconically” masculine superheroes who also, as the media coverage put it, “happened to be gay.” As the series evolved, it became clear that Apollo and Midnighter did serve a normalizing function, reconciling homosexuality with the normative hypermasculinity of superhero genre works. However, the series’ intensifying focus on anti-gay abuse and violence also suggested a minoritizing and homophobic understanding of the characters, creating a complex and often contradictory situation.

Finally, in 2002, a supporting character in DC Comics’ series *Green Lantern* became the victim of a violent gay-bashing. When the character, Terry Berg, had come out a year and a half before, writer Judd Winick used the opportunity to show the superhero protagonist -- Kyle Rayner, the Green Lantern – expressing acceptance and support for his friend, as well as a willingness to learn about the unfamiliar. With the gay-bashing episode, Winick mustered the iconography of victimhood, innocence, and martyrdom to condemn anti-gay violence. Kyle was forced to reconcile the fact that his superpowers – and the unstated codes of honor and revenge that flourish in the genre – were insufficient to protect the innocent against the violence of the world. Faced with the possibility of irrelevance, Kyle was in the end unable to find an answer for the problem.

Winick diverted the problem by having his hero abandon Earth for an extended adventure in outer space.

These stories – along with many others that I do not have space to include here – together suggest a progressive pattern in the representation of gay characters within the superhero universe. Famously conservative and “masculinist” on many levels, superhero fictions dodged the question for decades after gay and lesbian images became familiar in the genre fictions of other popular media. The years between 1986 and the late 1990s constituted a “transitional period” in which the metaphorical discourse of homosexuality burgeoned in and around superhero comics -- appearing once again in the form of connotation; of the “tropes” that have historically alluded to gayness in the comics; and in the burlesques, satires, and public conversations that surrounded superhero stories – which, at this point, included both comics themselves and the trans-media adaptations of superhero fictions.

Explicitly gay characters were rare in superhero comics during the 1990s, and their representation was uneven. But by the end of the decade, openly gay characters and an explicit conversation about gayness had begun to appear more frequently, shifting ever closer to the heart of the mainstream. (Though more historical distance will be required for a clearer judgment, it appears that the “outing” of Apollo and the Midnighter -- an event that can be placed anywhere from 1998 to 2000 -- indicated a turning point in the discourse.) As of the middle of 2003, the trend appears to be on a curve of rapid expansion, and it seems likely that the genre as a whole is close to reaching the “critical mass” after which gay representation would become less problematic, and almost unexceptional.

I hope that this study will lay the groundwork for future research on this subject. Superhero genre fiction is much in need of reasoned analyses of its operations, particularly at a moment in which the genre as a whole is so open to self-examination and reinvention. Similarly, the increasingly varied discourse around superhero fictions needs to be enriched by opening discussion about the questions which the genre has so long evaded. The genre cannot mature as fiction, nor can the scholarly discourse progress far, unless its creators, scholars and consumers are willing to openly examine its “dirty secrets.”

I think that new studies could fruitfully take any of a number of directions, of which I will here mention only three. First, we should explore the past, researching more closely the early history of the discourse and the ways in which connotative knowledge worked in superhero comics of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Second, we should keep pace with the future, taking the rapid growth of gay mainstream characters as a sign that the genre is at a crucial turning point and being prepared to chart its patterns as they evolve. Third, we should go *deep*. The questions raised by the vexed history of gay representation – its history, its metaphors, and the anxieties and hopes it brings to light – offer us indispensable insights into how the superhero genre defines its own sense of normality, of power, of masculinity, of right and wrong. Understanding these unstated assumptions are key to more fully understanding the genre. These are understandings that will serve researchers, readers and scholars well in the near future, not only as superhero fictions take an increasingly prominent place in popular entertainment, but also as we continue to grapple with understanding the workings of “America” and Americanism. By looking at the fears and the truths concealed in the stories that this country unselfconsciously tells itself *about* itself, we acquire another tool for trying to understand how we, as Americans, define ourselves.

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