

Queering Super-Manhood: The Gay Superhero in Contemporary Mainstream Comic Books



Rob Lendrum

Concordia University

The comic book industry has attempted to develop a more culturally aware attitude toward the representation of its super heroes in recent years. DC and Marvel have begun producing comics with homosexuals as lead or supporting characters. Titles such as The X-Men, The Authority, and the Rawhide Kid employ different strategies of incorporation into the economically dominant superhero genre, including: tokenism, camp and radical alternative. This paper traces the historical origin of superhero masculinity and interrogates its reconstitution within a space that includes homosexuality.



In recent years the two largest comic book publishers have begun publishing series with homosexual males as leading or supporting characters. By examining three contemporary comic book titles, *The Uncanny X-Men*, *The Authority*, and *Rawhide Kid*, I will describe the strategies used to incorporate the gay superhero into the economically dominant model of comic production. This essay also seeks to determine what alternative or oppositional model of superhero masculinity each character offers. First, I think it is important to address the historical presence of homosexuality in mainstream comics because the writers of today demonstrate a genre awareness that is called upon when creating the queer heroes of today.

DEVIANTS, DELINQUENTS AND SEX MANIACS: THE RISE OF THE COMIC CODE

The superhero genre has been criticized in the past for being a proponent of homosexuality because of its homoerotic depictions of muscular men in tights. The most famous critic of comic books was Dr. Frederic Wertham who argued comic books were a major cause of juvenile delinquency. This term delinquency did not only involve violence or vandalism, it also included "sexual deviance." In his book *Seduction of the Innocent*, Wertham makes one of the first queer readings of Batman and Robin, stating that their life in Wayne Manor "...is like a wish dream of two homosexuals living together" (Wertham, 190).

His main criticisms focus on Robin in which he emphasizes two key aspects. He points out that the sidekick is positioned in the traditionally feminine role of "damsel in distress" and he highlights Robin's attire, the bare legs and green underwear, as a signifier of homosexuality.

After Wertham's crusade and a Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency, the Comics Magazine Association of America adopted a self-regulating censorship code to appease critics. Three key policies under the section "Marriage and Sex" can be seen as deterrents of homosexuality:

2. Illicit sex relations are neither to be hinted at nor portrayed. Violent love scenes as well as sexual abnormalities are unacceptable.

4. The treatment of love-romance stories shall emphasize the value of the home and the sanc-

tity of marriage.

7. Sex perversion or any inference [sic] to same is strictly forbidden. (Nyberg, 168)

The Comics Code may have, in a sense, worked against its own intentions. Because of the strict rules regarding the depiction of sexuality, heroes could not have overt sexual relationships (unless they got married). Even though homosexuality was not permitted, heterosexuality could never really be confirmed, leaving the relationship between Batman and Robin open to polysemic readings.

The *Batman* TV-show of the 1960s used the ambiguously gay relationship to their advantage. By acting out the comic book, the show drew attention to the absurd and homoerotic qualities of superhero masculinity.

HOLY REHETEROSEXUALIZATION BATMAN

Some bat-fans felt that the silly TV-show had ridiculed their beloved character, so in an effort to "dignify" Batman, the writers set out to reheterosexualize him. Andy Medhurst's article "Batman, Deviance and Camp" identifies the main source of Batman's gayness: Robin. To eliminate Robin, the writers had Dick Grayson leave home and go to college. While separated from Batman, Dick hung up his green underwear for good and retired his Robin costume. He decided to take on the more mature identity of Nightwing. The current dominant reading of the relationship between Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson is that of a tense father-son relationship. Later on, a new Robin, Jason Todd, replaced Dick but a bomb planted by the Joker would cut Jason's time short. Actually, the fans were responsible for the second Robin's demise as they voted for his death by phone. Finally a third Robin, Tim Drake, has entered the picture, but some changes have occurred to avoid any implications of a man/boy love relationship. The new Robin still lives with his own father and he wears a more modest costume with full-length green pants.

In one of the most famous Batman stories, *Return of the Dark Knight*, by Frank Miller, Batman's sidekick is a teenage girl, thus avoiding any homosexual connotations. It was this story that invoked the current trend of representing Batman and his world as dark and gritty.

QUEERING SUPER-MANHOOD

The first contemporary gay hero I want to examine is the only hero in my study that came out of the closet, rather than broke onto the scene as a gay character. Northstar, a French-Canadian mutant on Canada's superhero team Alpha Flight, comes out publicly in *Alpha Flight* #106 to use his celebrity status to attract attention to the AIDS crisis. Fans had long questioned Northstar's sexuality and his outing was not his first association with AIDS. A story arc that ran through *Alpha Flight* #37-50 saw Northstar contract a mysterious condition that caused his body's systems to break down. McAllister's article "Comic Books and AIDS" explains that the Marvel Comics Group felt that having a character die of AIDS or even having a gay character was too controversial. After our hero has returned from a germ-free elf world fully recovered, he discovers an abandoned baby in a trashcan that carries the AIDS virus. Northstar adopts the baby, but she dies by the end of the issue prompting Northstar to come out in public.

Northstar has an unusual trait of paternal responsibility incorporated into his superhero masculinity. In *The Uncanny X-Men* #411 a situation that is similar to his baby with AIDS calls upon Northstar's heroism. In Fort Albany, Ontario, he finds a young mutant whose super powers have begun to manifest, prompted by an altercation with his abusive father. The boy's powers cause him to explode periodically and Northstar is unable save him. Northstar's paternal responsibility is central to his code of morality as it acts as a catalyst for him to help people living with AIDS, young mutants living with the difficulties of super human abilities, and abused children.

Since his joining the X-Men, Northstar's role has been insignificant. In fact, the reason he was brought onto the team by Professor Xavier was to offer his mutant students a unique gay perspective. Northstar's role is openly admitted to be the token gay member of the team. Although their article "De Margin and De Centre" discusses black film subjects, Isaac Julien and Kobena Mercer's explanation of the word tokenism still applies to Northstar as he becomes a "subject... positioned as a mouthpiece, a ventriloquist for an entire social category which is seen to be 'typified' by its representative" (454). His character is defined by a binary relationship between the heterosexual superhero and a stereotypical

effeminate homosexual. He is typified as a catty braggart who is overly concerned with his attire. His relationships with women, such as the gossipy school nurse, distance him from the other male members of the group. The rest of the X-Men and X-Women frequently date amongst themselves, yet no one is sexually attracted to Northstar. He is effectively castrated and his lack of sexual attention also serves to neutralize him as a threat to the dominant normative status of heterosexuality. While heterosexual masculinity is still centered, Northstar's homosexuality is pushed to the margins.

Midnighter and Apollo are a gay married couple featured in the DC/Wildstorm title *The Authority*. Again, parental responsibility is central to their code of ethics as the two have an adopted daughter. Visual representations of their intimacy and the fact that they are married explicitly demonstrate a sexual relationship. So they also offer an alternative from the sexually neutralized characters like the castrated Northstar.

Midnighter is a hyper violent hand-to-hand combat specialist considered the most dangerous man alive. Most superheroes use violence as a problem solving device, but Midnighter is especially prone to this strategy. His hyper aggressive masculinity spits in the face of the effeminate stereotypes of homosexuality. His costume quite clearly resembles the reheterosexualized version of Batman from the 1989 Tim Burton film.

Apollo is an ultra-buff, Jon Bon Jovi look-alike whose super powers are fueled by the sun. Just as Midnighter is a reference to Batman, Apollo is gay subversion of Superman. Comic heroes are often paralleled with Greek or Roman mythology. Being the most powerful of the heroes, Superman is often compared to the god of the sun, Apollo. Like Superman, Apollo is superhuman first, who then must dress-up to create his secret identity. Clark Kent is Superman's alter ego, but in fact he is a performance constructed to hide his true identity, the alien from Krypton. Rather than constrain himself with the burden of an emasculated, heterosexual secret identity like Clark Kent, Apollo chooses to be super and out.

When Batman and Superman team up they are called "the World's Finest." Midnighter and Apollo are constructed with this bit of comic history in mind. In *The Authority*, the writers have "married" the first two major



superheroes and put them together as a homosexual loving couple, subverting the entire historical origin of superheroes. Their adopted daughter can now be seen as a tongue and cheek reference to Robin, Wonder Girl, Aqua Lad and the rest of the young heroes who always have uncles and aunts but no referenced parents. It is important to realize that although *Midnighter* and *Apollo* are created in direct reference to *Batman* and *Superman*, they are not parodies. They exist in their own comic universe and they do not mock the dominant center such as the way camp does.

Finally, *Rawhide Kid* recoups a deceased cultural form, the cowboy comic, and uses camp to subvert the hyper-masculine cowboy. The *Rawhide Kid* starred in his own title throughout the 1950s, 60s and 70s. He came to be known as awkward and shy around women. The writers of this most updated version play with this history.

The theme of the story is the reassertion of masculinity. The first scene of the comic sees a sheriff get shot, ridiculed and emasculated in front of his own son who gawks in shame. Rather than simply beating the bad guys, which he easily does, the main task that the *Rawhide Kid* undertakes is the restoration of the son's love for and confidence in his father.

In Andrew Ross' article "Uses of Camp" he explains that one of the main criticisms of camp is that it is not political enough. Camp relies on mimesis to destabilize norms, dethrone seriousness, or create humour. Other more radical theories strive to separate from dominant cultural practices in order to create new, alternative countercultural movements. Herein lies the problem with the *Rawhide Kid*.

The queered heroes of the *Batman* TV-show or *Rawhide Kid* fall under the tradition of camp because they only mimic the role of what straight dominant culture would call "real men." It is only dress-up. As Ross has argued, by using camp the queer hero mockingly states that he is outside of the dominant. However, by doing this he agrees with the dominant's "definition of who he is" (162). Using Ross' logic, the incorporation of homosexuality into the definition of super-masculinity never occurs with camp. Because of camp's reliance on mimesis, Ross says, it is only a "survivalist ethic, and never an oppositional critique" (163). If *Rawhide Kid* is not alternative or oppositional, then it could fall under two other categories described by Williams as novelties or facsimiles. The *Rawhide Kid* falls under the

category of novelty. The cowboy comic is a nearly deceased cultural form and the series hardly sparked a renewal of the genre. In fact, the series only lasted five issues, completing one storyline and then it was halted. Because of his short-lived stardom, the *Kid* does not offer a sustained alternative to the heterosexual standard of heroes that appears on magazine racks monthly.

On the other hand, denying camp as an alternative force denies the success of the shifts in masculinity that camp has caused. Rather than creating a new radical practice that separates from the dominant, camp sensibilities have caused a major change in the relationship between viewer and text. Gay rewritings of heteronormative cultural texts has destabilized the dominant reading of the cowboy and the superhero. The effect camp has had on superhero masculinity is best summed up by Medhurst when he says: "It's impossible to be somber or pompous about *Batman* because if you try the ghost of West will come Bat-climbing into your mind, fortune cookie wisdom on his lips and keen young Dick by his side" (158).

CONCLUSIONS—HYPERBOLIC GOOD HOMOSEXUALS

The way in which the masculinity of the new contemporary heroes is constructed demonstrates a keen genre awareness on behalf of the writers who reference the older heroes but also avoid some of the problematic areas of *Batman*'s homosexuality. *Batman* and *Robin*'s man/boy sexual relationship would be radical even today. In order to avoid concerns of homosexuality invading the family unit or corrupting youth, including the readers of the comic, contemporary gay heroes are given ethical concerns regarding family and parental responsibility. With the possible exception of *Apollo* and *Midnighter*, who offer the most radical incorporation of homosexuality because of their role as a married couple with a child, they don't threaten to destabilize the norm. But even *Apollo* and *Midnighter*'s relationship does not threaten the heteronormative tone of the book. However, the couple does succeed in opposing dominant understandings of masculinity, as well as offering an alternative to the stereotypes, such as *Northstar*. The gay superhero opens space for a plurality of masculinities and offers an alternative model to the dominant heterosexual superhero. Some models

are more problematic than others.

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