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FROM 'AMBIGUOUSLY GAY DUOS' TO HOMOSEXUAL SUPERHEROES:
THE IMPLICATIONS
FOR MEDIA FANDOM PRACTICES

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GEMMA CORIN

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Abstract

Despite traversing the fine line between homosocial and homosexual (Brooker, 2000) in his controversial text *Seduction of the Innocent*, Fredric Wertham's (1954) description of Batman and Robin as a 'wish dream of two homosexuals living together' (Lendrum, 2004, p.70) represents one of the first published queer readings of superhero characters. This text can also be interpreted as the commencement of, and subsequent intense interest in the way superhero characters often portray a 'camp' sensibility (Medhurst, 1991) representative of a queer performative identity (Butler, 1993).

This is most evident today within comic book fan-communities online where the sexual identity of popular superheroes are continuously explored and debated in discussion forums and expressed through the production of slash fiction and queer-themed fan art. Indeed, the ambiguity inherent in superhero comics has traditionally allowed and encouraged fans to operate as 'textual poachers' (Jenkins, 1992) appropriating these texts for their own means.

Today, however, there exist a new generation of comic book superheroes, in the form of the *Young Avengers*, *Uncanny X-Men* and *The Authority*, which contain established 'out' gay characters. This paper will examine the implications of these series on the practice of fandom by analyzing fan reactions and responses to the manner in which the industry has opted to present a gay relationship between its superhero characters Wiccan and Hulkling and, Apollo and The Midnighter. The meaning of the shift from the 'implied' to 'actual' is examined in terms of fans' acceptance, resistance and desire to further appropriate the text.

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Chapter One: Introduction

1.1: Introduction and Thesis Structure

The characters Batman and Robin have long been subjected to queer interpretations of their fictional relationship, the first published suggestion of which was produced in Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954). However in 1992 the first mainstream queer superhero was outed on the pages of *Alpha Flight #110*. Since its lead character Northstar's departure from the anonymousness of the closet, homosexuality has become more prevalent in mainstream comics. No longer do fans need to grasp at vague or implied homoerotic signals from comics such as the *Batman* series, instead they have queer characters to analyse, discuss and recreate in the form of fan fiction and fan art. However, does the presence of gay superhero characters disrupt a key feature of media and comic book fandom, the speculation, intrigue and deep readings that comics generate? Do fans prefer the new 'out' characters or the mystery of the ambiguous hero? This thesis examines the way fans interact with the superhero comic text in order to satisfy their own personal needs, producing creative outputs such as fan fiction and fan art in the process and how gay superheroes facilitate or hinder these long traditions of media fandom. In particular it explores the way that a queer interpretation of a heteronormative text, such as Batman, is typically achieved within fan practices and whether having queer characters is more or less appealing to 'queer' fans than heteronormative heroes. This research is intended to add scholarly work to the small amount that has been procured around the subject, however it takes a different approach, exploring not only the comic text for the possibility of homoerotic undertones, but also the fan reactions, interpretations and discussions around out gay characters and their impact on comic fandom. It is hoped that this will add to the landscape constructed around fandom and fan interpretation by scholars such as Henry Jenkins, Matt Hills and Mathew J. Pustz. While analysis of the comics and the characters will be used, the emphasis of this work is on the issue of sexuality and fan reactions rather than in-depth analysis of the comics themselves. The fairly recent emergence of gay heroes makes this topic particularly

interesting, comic series' with gay superheroes are becoming increasingly common, including popular titles such as *Young Avengers*, *Runaways* and *Ultimate X-Men*. The characters are therefore coming to the reader's attention more often and generating responses on both the letter pages and on the fan sites on the internet. This thesis endeavours to put the relatively new, queer mainstream superhero into a wider context of comic history and to create a complex analysis, which includes textual analysis and some discussion of fan responses, including creative responses, with the comics selected.

Section 1.1 introduces the thesis, and attempts to define the key terms and ideas that are applied within the study. Section 1.1 contains a short introduction of the topic with reference to gay superheroes, comics, and queer interpretations; and outlines the structure of the thesis. Section 1.2 investigates a short history of the comic in general, and the superhero comic in particular. Section 1.3 imposes a working definition of the comic book superhero, exploring the way that heroes are defined by costume, powers and purpose. Section 1.4 considers the changes that have occurred over the years as comics have evolved, leading to the eventual introduction of queer characters. Section 1.5 explores fan utilization of characters, and Henry Jenkins seminal work on fans as textual poachers. Fan fiction and art are introduced/analysed in this section for its themes and exploration of the original texts. Finally, Section 1.6 examines the introduction of the internet and the changes it instigated in fandom as a network, culture.

Chapter 2, introduces queer theory and the three areas which informed queer readings of the texts and exploration of fan reactions and utilisation of superhero characters within gay fiction. These elements include politics of identity, coming out of the closet (within the narrative arch of the comics, and the effect on readers) and masculinity. Section 2.2 introduces the evolving ideas of queer theory and the politics of identity in conjunction with the secret identity of the superhero, and the multiple identities of the gay superhero. Section 2.3 on the other hand explores the correspondence of coming out as queer and as a superhero, and the loss of the secret

identity. Section 2.4 investigates notions of masculinity through the ideal male superhero and how the queer hero challenges the politics of masculinity in superhero comics.

Chapter 3, sets out the methodological approach applied in this thesis, introducing the three forms of analysis employed in approaching this thesis – covering comic book texts (implied and explicit representation of homosexuality), fan discussion mediated via fan forums and fan fiction. It goes on to explore in greater detail the theoretical and methodological rationale for selecting an appropriate form of analysis for comic books which plot narrative in time and space differently from other representational texts as well as approaches to audience research. The chapter explores the approach adopted to outlining and understanding virtual expression of media fandom, including the selection process and the effect it had on the comic texts under consideration within this thesis.

Chapter 4, explores the way in which fans and social commentators (e.g. Wertham) interpret and identify homosexual themes within heterosexual character based narratives such as *Batman (and Robin)*. This chapter examines the ambiguity of these comics and the way it has allowed fans to interpret the characters as they wish, reflecting their own desires and interests. It explores the effect that the first public and published queer reading of Batman had on the industry in the 1950s including the introduction of the Comics Code. It also goes on to trace the evolution of Batman by considering the camp period of the 1960s, as a possible reaction to the 1950s, in which Batman was portrayed in a more homoerotic fashion, and the attempts to reheterosexualise the character.

In Chapter 5, *The Authority: Sexual Representation in the Text*, the superhero comic series *The Authority* is introduced. This series represents a break from tradition, while considered mainstream it is intended for mature audiences, depicting extreme violence, drug abuse and sexual imagery. The section examines the representation of

sexuality in a comic intended for more mature audiences compared to the mainstream comics like *Uncanny X-Men* which are aimed at more general audiences.

Chapter 6, *Northstar: Presence, Absence and Fans*, explores the way that the queer character is represented in the text itself. Using the queer superhero Northstar from *Alpha Flight* and *X-Men*, in this chapter, four of Kirk Fuoss' political strategies from his work *A Portrait of the Adolescent as a Young Gay: The Politics of Male Homosexuality in Young Adult Fiction* (1994), are employed in discussion of the text. Section 6.1 details Northstar's character biography, introducing one of the most significant queer superheroes within comic book culture, while Section 6.3 explores the way that fans responded to the revelation and treatment of gay characters through letter columns. The columns used include one from *The Flash #57* (1991), in which fans comment on the outing of minor character the Pied Piper. The second example is from *Alpha Flight # 110* (1992), which centres around fan responses to Northstar coming out, and the last example comes from *The Young Avengers #6* (2006), in which fans share their views on the gay characters Wiccan and Hulkling.

Chapter 7, *Young Avengers: Creative Constructions* examines the creative constructions that fans make while engaging with a particular fandom. These creative constructions include fan fiction, particularly 'slash' fiction, and fan art. It introduces fan participation and explores the appropriation of both straight and queer characters for the fan medium of slash fiction. It also considers responses to fan fiction from other fans.

1.2: Short History of Comics

Comics or sequential art has a long history that is often traced back to the hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt. Likewise the hyper-masculinised figure of the superhero stretches back to the Greek heroes of mythology. Superhero comics, on the other hand are a fairly recent phenomenon. The first recognizable figure in the superhero comic genre

was the one and only man of steel, Superman. Sold by his creators for a pitiful amount of money (according to Gerard Jones, one hundred and thirty dollars), in 1938, Superman established one of the main superhero stereotypes (having extraordinary powers, a symbolic costume and a codename) that was mimicked by other writers thus creating a new genre (Jones, 2004, p.125). The other style setter for the comic industry, Batman, followed soon after the introduction of Superman. Non-super powered though he was, he still fulfilled the genre requirements set up by Superman, he has a costume, a code name, and the ability to fight injustice.

Comic strips had been appearing in newspapers and several magazines since the late nineteenth century. By the early twentieth century several of these comics were appearing in thin leaflet like books, printed on poor quality paper and using a standard four colour process. As Mathew Pustz (1999), comments ‘most people think they know what comics are: brightly coloured pamphlets, about six and a half inches wide and about ten inches tall, printed on cheap paper, featuring superhero stories enjoyed primarily by children’ (p. 9). They would not be wrong, even today comics retain the same general appearance as the early comic books. Many of these early comics were westerns, detective or horror stories. With the birth of Superman in 1938, the superhero theme was established, proving one of the most popular genres. According to Mathew J. Pustz in *Comic Book Culture* (1999), a ‘survey done by the Market Research Company of America and reported in the December 27, 1943, issue of Newsweek, 95 percent of children ages eight to eleven read comic books regularly, as did 84 percent of those from twelve to seventeen years old’, (p. 27). The publisher of the Batman and Superman comics, who became known as Detective Comics Inc or DC, is still one of the two major publishing companies of comics to this day. Their main competition is Marvel Comics, originally known as Timely Comics. Originally there were many more comic publishers in the first half of the century. However the decline of interest from the late 1940s caused many of these companies to fold. This crash was influenced in no small amount by Frederic Wertham and the establishment of the Comics Code. Figures for the sale of comics by the 1990s had dropped slightly from the high sales of the 1970s, however Pustz estimates that ‘in 1998 a typical

successful mainstream comic sold one hundred thousand copies; a wildly successful alternative comic might sell ten thousand, and most rarely sell more than three thousand copies' (p. 12). Today figures average around one hundred and fifty thousand for the popular mainstream titles, *The Young Avengers #1* (2005), for example, sold an estimated 88,000 in North America alone (*Comic Buyers Guide*, 2007).

The Comic's Code was adopted October 26, 1954 by the Comics Code Authority (CCA) which was set up by the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA) (Nyberg, 1998). It was modelled on a largely un-enforced code that had been drafted in 1948 which was loosely based on the Hollywood Production Code of 1930. It was made up of several parts including what costume, dialogue and advertising were allowed; as well as guidelines on religion, sex and marriage. Elements such as zombies, werewolves and ghosts were banned under the new code (Nyberg, 1998). The surviving publishers adhered to the code in order to survive. The code was changed and adjusted over time, for example in 1989 it was changed to allow non-stereotypical portrayals of gays and lesbians. Eventually however artists and then publishers began to ignore the restricting rules of the Code which, being voluntary was unable to do anything. In 2001 Marvel withdrew from the CCA and created its own rating system. As of 2005 only DC and Archie comics are still submitting comics to the CCA, with DC only submitting stories from several of their different lines.

While Wertham may not have approached the topic appropriately, (taking a negative and one-sided view of the possibility of homoeroticism in superhero comics. As all the youths who he worked with at the clinic were gay or had homosexual tendencies, it is therefore reasonable to assume that they would associate their own sexual desires with the superheroes in the comics that they read) and thereby just about caused the entire industry to crash, he did have a point. It is entirely possible that even at an early stage before the camp style of the sixties, Batman and Robin could be construed as gay from a stereotypical viewpoint. Examining Figure 1.1, which was printed in *Batman #84*, (1954), it would almost appear that Bruce Wayne and Dick Grayson are

sharing a bed. It is entirely possible that the two are actually in separate twin beds; however in possible queer reading of the image, it may further suggest that the two are engaged in a more intimate relationship than friends or father and sons figures. However this image was set just before Wertham brought the undertone of homosexuality to public notice, after which the producers of the Batman comic subsequently worked at erasing such undertones as best they could.



**Figure 1.1: Bruce Wayne And Dick Grayson Wake Up Side By Side.
Panel From *Batman* #84, 1954.**

Between the 1950s and the 1990s, reliance on the governing influence of the Comics Code lessened and romantic plotlines were more openly used. Those comics that featured more adult overtones or violence simply left off the stamp of the Comics Code Authority. The outbreak of the underground comics' scene in the 1960s allowed writers and artists to use more adult content in their work. However it was works such as Frank Millers *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986) that led the revolution

of mainstream superhero comics, creating new grittier and more adult oriented stories. By the early 1990s queer characters began to be openly featured within mainstream comics, though generally it was only a small amount of secondary characters such as The Pied Piper from the *Flash* comics. In contrast to the 1950s, today's mainstream superhero comics are more open to both depicting human death and to sexuality being portrayed on the panel, though there is still a long way to go for queer characters.

Superhero comics are of course not the only genre of the medium. Both DC and Marvel publish a wide range of genres including horror, detective, humour, romance and others. Both companies also publish adult series under different publisher brands such as *Vertigo* (DC) and *Max* (Marvel). Adult comics have long had queer characters in them as have underground comics; however I do not particularly explore these two areas in this thesis except in the case of *The Authority*, as they are not marketed at a mainstream audience. *The Authority* was examined however, because the comic is far more graphic in the depiction of queer characters and also challenges the stereotype of the vain, catty queer character that Northstar sets up within mainstream comics. It also explores some issues around queer culture such as homophobia which most mainstream comics tend to avoid. Therefore I investigated the series though it does not completely fit the criteria that I had set for my samples.

1.3: A Definition of a Hero

At first it may seem simple to define a superhero, one would be tempted to explain the superhero as a character with extra-ordinary powers who runs (or flies) around dressed in a tight, flashy costume to conceal their identity, saving people and fighting evil. Or perhaps, "The term Superhero defined as 'extraordinary heroism' by its prefix, generally involves amazing strength worthy of great moral and physical tasks" (Symonds, 2007, p. 155). While this may give a simplified description of a superhero it does not begin to explain what a superhero is and why. Understanding what a

superhero is, is essential to understanding why they attract such interest from wide ranging fan bases.

Coogan (2007) suggests that ‘an understanding of the superhero genre is crucial to the definition of the superhero because the definition arises from the genre’, (p. 22). It seems that the superhero genre had been defined by 1942 when Abner Sundell, a writer of golden age comics, wrote a guide to selling superhero stories in which he uses the term superhero throughout his writing without defining suggesting that the term or the genre itself was generally accepted. By 1940 the superhero formula made popular by Superman, had been repeated and imitated enough to be parodied in a mark of success.

According to Coogan’s theory there are three elements of the superhero genre, ‘These three elements – mission, powers and identity- establish the core of the superhero genre’ (2007, p. 28). The first of these elements, mission, is generally the driving force behind the narrative of the comic. The mission is the superheroes fight against what they perceive as morally wrong rather than what is against the law. Richard Reynolds (1992) also claims that superheroes are ‘driven by moral justice rather than the law’ (p.12). However this is not always true, the Hulk, is often a hero without a mission or an anti-hero due to the amount of indiscriminate damage that he causes to public and private property. Also with the rise of the anti-hero many superheroes or characters who fit the profile of a superhero, are not always guided by morality or law as can be seen by heroes such as Deadpool, a mercenary who often teams up with the mutant Cable in the Marvel universe (having their own comic series (*Cable & Deadpool*, 2004-2008). While he is often portrayed as a villain, he is generally classed as an anti-hero for fighting on the side of ‘good’ though he often does so for the wrong reasons such as to prove himself as a serious mercenary by becoming a superhero.

The second element identified is having super powers. Super powers are the most recognizable element of a superhero other than the costume. Super strength, super

speed, psychic powers and unusual abilities such as shrinking and controlling the weather. These are just a few of the many different abilities possessed by superheroes and one of the areas that distinguishes them from ordinary heroes in other genres such as detective novels and action films. However many superheroes do not actually possess superpowers. This includes characters such as Batman (DC), the Green Arrow (DC), and Iron Man (Marvel). The Green Arrow, like Batman, is a rich playboy who takes on a role as a vigilante. Rather than powers, he relies on his wits and expansive selection of gadgetry and weapons, particularly his range arrows. His costume and persona is based upon Robin Hood, his comic first appearing in *More Fun Comics* #73 (1941), and continues to this day. Like Batman and Green Arrow, Iron Man is a rich playboy who uses his wealth to create weaponry, in this case an iron suit. His suit, originally to keep him alive due to a severe heart problem, eventually evolved into a high-tech weapon. He was one of the original Avengers, funding the group and providing them with a base to work from. Apart from *The Avengers*, his own comic has been circulating since 1968.

Superheroes with no powers can be put into two categories- those who improvise by using super powered armour, like Iron Man, or by using power enhancing drugs such as the MGH (Mutant Growth Hormone) seen in *Young Avengers*. Or there are those who rely on their intellect and superior but worked for physical abilities. Batman and Green Arrow fit this last category. One thing that these three non-powered superheroes have in common is the fact that they are all incredibly rich, playboys which seems to often be the case with non-powered superheroes. It gives them access to resources in order to create their weapons, armour and other equipment. It also gives them time to follow their chosen pursuit rather than working. However being rich is not a requirement though it is common, several non-powered superheroes are not portrayed as incredibly wealthy such as The Question (a paranoid character who is obsessed with conspiracy theories that first appeared in *Blue Beetle* #1, 1967) and Hawkeye (much like the Green Arrow he relies on his variety of arrows, however he was originally a villain before joining the *Avengers* in 1965).

What makes the difference between non-powered superheroes and heroes of other genres is that the superheroes are often faced with super-powered super villains that also wear a costume. This leads to the third element in Coogan's definition which is identity. He claims that 'the costume is the strongest marker of the superhero genre' (2007, p. 28). However identity also comprises of a codename. The codename is important because it is not only a tool to hide the heroes' real identities but it becomes symbolic, a word to 'strike fear in the hearts of villains'. Codenames also give an indication of the character or biography of the hero. Superman is superhuman therefore his codename represents his character whereas Bruce Wayne chose his codename after encountering a bat in his study when he was seeking a suitable disguise.

Like the codename, the costume is used to hide the heroes' true identity; however it also serves as an emblematic symbol of the hero. The 'S' on the superman costume, the bat symbol on the Batman costume both have become emblems of the superheroes powers and character. This also becomes useful as a marketing tool, making merchandise around the superhero comics as well as the film and television counterparts, instantly recognizable to the consumer. The costume also commands instant respect from the villains as it makes the hero recognizable as a superhero, alerting the villain to the fact that they will be harder to beat or manipulate than the police or a citizen. In the animated film *The Incredibles* (Bird, 2004), the superhero costume is parodied. Mr. Incredible has his request for a cape denied; the drawbacks such as being sucked into a jumbo jet or getting it attached to a rocket by accident are elucidated on.

For characters such as Batman, the costume is also a tool, allowing him to hide in the shadows, contain his weapons, and protect him from the weapons of the villains among other things. The yellow symbol on his chest has been explained as a tool, it supposedly attracts attention to his chest which is protected by Kevlar and away from his more vulnerable head. Villain's costumes, in comparison, are often ridiculous, emphasising negative traits. The Joker, for example, is dressed in a camp fashion, his

makeup and clothing a parody of both a clown and a drag queen. However this style is applied more to DC villains, who are usually monstrous in appearance, to emphasise their villainous nature. Marvels' villains are often visually expressed as monstrous however they also often take the same style of costume and appearance as the heroes especially in series such as *The X-Men*.

So according to Coogan's definition of the superhero genre, a superhero is defined by the fact that he has a codename and a costume, he generally has extraordinary abilities and has a mission to protect and fight against what he sees as morally evil. Add on to that, the super villains and adventures that are often 'mythical and blur the line between science and magic' (Reynolds, 1992, p. 34) and we begin to understand what a superhero is, though the superhero comic genre is constantly shifting and changing, redefining what superheroes are and what they could be.

1.4: Social Change

Comics have always been particularly influenced by issues around them. The changes of the world can be mapped in part through these changes in superhero comics. During World War II, Superman encouraged those still at home to support their soldiers away at war by buying war bonds to lend financial support. The heroes fought Nazi spies and informed soldiers that they would take care of things at home, (explaining why they didn't just go off and win the war). Later Nazis morphed into communists, whether Russian or from a fictional country, reflecting the changes in international politics from an American perspective. Villains soon became mercenaries, gun smugglers and crime lords. Due to the fact that superheroes "tend to inhabit genres that permit a greater degree of fictional flexibility and a lesser degree of realism" (Norton, 2007, p. 263), villains evolved into alien war lords or alien armies. By having aliens as the main enemy in a superhero comic, the publishing company lowered the risk of offending particular cultures. Also aliens were not at the same level as humans and it was therefore more acceptable if they

were killed on panel. There were several other strategies for breaking away from American ideologies such as creating Alternative worlds or universes. This can be seen in works such as *Superman: Red Son* (2003), the series by Mark Millar in which Superman lands in the Ukraine instead of America. Superman is raised as a soviet and fights for socialism and Stalin.

Other than such outside influences, the plotlines of the comics were centred on the villain committing a crime; the superhero solving the crime when the police are unable to, the superhero fights the villain who is subsequently incarcerated. During this the villain is often caught while explaining the devious ingenuity of their plan. This is again parodied in the film *The Incredibles* (2004), in which it is called “monologing”, the villain cannot help but boast of his plan giving the hero a chance to escape. Often romance is a secondary plotline especially between iconic couples such as Superman and Lois Lane or Peter Parker and Mary Jane, which sets the standard for the superhero/ damsel in distress romance. However, after the Comics Code came into effect, these romances became even more secondary to the action as the code banned implied sexual relationships unless the characters were married. Therefore even heterosexual relationships were ignored for most of the first half century of superhero comic existence, except for the occasional marriage.

Comics have often been treated as a form of low culture and have often been overlooked by academic study except for historic accounts of their development as a cultural artefact. Even then many of the histories written on the topic have been written by those who were involved in the industry such as Will Eisner’s *Comics and Sequential Art* (1985). However interest in the topic has picked up especially as several comic texts have been translated into other media such as television and film. These often focus on the characters themselves rather than on the medium which they evolved from as can be seen in Will Brooker’s work *Batman Unmasked* (2001). That is not to say that the medium of comics has been ignored, however it is authors from within in the industry that have created defining works such as Scott McCloud’s *Understanding Comics* (1994). McCloud comments ‘like so many of our revolutions,

comics' forays into academia are still tentative, and far from permanent, but thanks to the work of many friends of comics within the academy, a well-balanced curriculum is beginning to take root' (2000, p. 94).

Then in the early 1990s, more queer characters began to be openly featured within mainstream comics, though generally it was only a small amount of secondary characters such as The Pied Piper from the *Flash* comics, the popular hero Northstar from *Alpha Force* also outed himself in 1992. Today mainstream superhero comics are more open to depicting sexuality, both homosexual and heterosexual, on the panel, though there is still a long way to go for queer characters.

I believe that by definition, a queer superhero does not differ from heteronormative heroes. They retain the costume, the code name, the powers and the ideal hyper-masculinised body. What they differ in is the subtleties, the little differences on panel; and in the dialogue and storyline and of course the personality of the individual character. This may seem like more than a few little differences but it is in fact not when you realize that a superhero comic is driven by the physical body, the action and not the small subtleties. For example Northstar differs in that, while he is physically a stereotypical superhero, he is, in character, a queer stereotype. As Rob Lendrum put it, "he is typified as a catty braggart who is overly concerned with his attire', (2004, p. 70). He also has a close relationship with the female characters of the X-force, isolating him from the male team members.

Until recently queer characters did not really differ from heterosexual characters, in sexual representation. The Comics Code which I will examine in more detail in Chapter Six, allowed little room for any sexual relationships in mainstream comics save for marriage. While Batman and Robin are not 'out' queer characters they are important to a discussion on queerness in comics because of the homoerotic implications often read into the text.

It is not Batman's character that has him singled out as possibly queer, rather it is the close relationship between Batman and Robin that fans believe implicates him. The two live together, Batman constantly rescues Robin and of course there was the incredibly camp 1960s television series. However it is the interpretation of the comic by fans that changes the characters from being a boy and his guardian to possible lovers. By reading the text in a queer context, fans are able to see a relationship that may only exist within their own minds. The Batman/Robin relationship was the first to be publicly denounced as homoerotic, however it has not been the last.

While the sexuality of the hero does not change or affect the attributes that define a superhero as I have explored above, it does create a boundary, a difference that fans love, hate or tolerate. As Joanna Di Mattia (2007) comments in her essay on television series *Queer as Folk*, 'Heroism, let alone super-heroism, is not an identity conventionally associated with gay men, and in the current political climate, the divergence between homosexuality and heroism is writ large in a number of arenas', this divergence includes the ideal of masculinity portrayed by superhero culture (p. 197). But first a description of the two different types of gay superhero that I perceive to be used in superhero comics.

There appear to be two categories of queer superheroes, gay superheroes and superheroes who are gay. While I am concentrating on gay male characters it is possible that lesbian characters would fit within in these categories as well. What separates the two is that a gay superhero is a character that is promoted and used as a gay icon, a symbol for the gay community. These heroes often face issues that are directly related to the gay community such as Aids and coming out. An example of a gay superhero would be Northstar from *Alpha Flight* and the *X-men*. While there were gay characters already in adult and underground comics, Northstar was one of the first mainstream superheroes to come out in the early 90's. The scene in *Alpha Flight #106* (1992), where he came out was controversial not only because of the fact that he was gay but also because of the overly dramatized and explosive way in which it was presented. Previously, Northstar, when knocked into an alley during the

middle of a fight, found a young infant abandoned and rescued her. Unfortunately the child was infected with HIV, however Northstar adopted her anyway. While she was in hospital, Major Mapleleaf, a Canadian superhero from WWII, tried to attack her. His son who was gay had recently died after contracting HIV. Mapleleaf was devastated by his death and furious that so much attention was being paid to the young girl. During his fight with Northstar, he pushes the hero into admitting that he is gay, this can be seen in Figure 1.2. Also notable in the dialogue of the page is Northstar's reference to popular opinion around Aids, which was often seen as a gay disease, this is an example of the way that Northstar's writers often use queer issues as a narrative device in the story lines. Unfortunately, while Northstar was held up as a gay icon, he eventually faded into the background appearing in fewer comics, or as only a secondary character, though recently he has made a bit of a come back, being killed, resurrected and brainwashed, saved and then cured.

'The superhero, who is gay', differs in that while they are often held up as gay icons by fans, their homosexuality is not emphasized or endorsed by the writers of the comics. Rather they are superheroes first and their sexual preference and social life remain unaddressed. They are not often involved in story arcs where gay issues are used as a plot device. For example, Wiccan and Hulkling from *Young Avengers* have only faced one issue with their sexuality which was coming out. However the scene where they came out to Wiccan's parents was accidental and used almost as comic relief. This can be seen in the pages in Figure 1.3, Billy attempts to 'come out' to his parents as a superhero however his parents misunderstand and assume that he is coming out as gay. The boys' relationship is occasionally used as comic relief in the stories, for example, originally Wiccan's codename was Asgardian. However fellow Young Avenger, Kate Bishop suggested that unless he wanted his name to become a national joke when the public found out about their relationship, he might want to



Figure 1.2: Northstar Comes Out Of The Closet In *Alpha Flight #106: The Walking Wounded*, 1992.

change it. In general however their relationship is treated no differently from heterosexual relationships and is normalised without issue.

1.5: Textual poaching

In order to explore the reactions of fans to the introduction of queer characters in mainstream comics it was essential to investigate the ways in which fans sought to appropriate and control the characters. By considering creative output from virtual fan communities, it is possible to examine and compare the difference between fans appropriating heteronormative characters for queer use, to appropriating queer characters for the same reason. The main discourses I will consider within these selected fan bases are in discussion forum, fan fiction and fan art.

By investigating the way that fans use aspects of the text for their own pleasure, I am exploring what Henry Jenkins calls ‘textual poaching’, (1992, p. 24). For many different reasons fans appropriate characters, settings and even events from the text to create their own version of the story or the characters. Kurt Lancaster previously explored this poaching in his work on fandom and *Babylon 5* (2001), commenting ‘fans create their own personal texts in order to perform, enact, share in, and see scenes that the canonical author never created. Fanfic, as these fictional stories written by fans are known, revolves around such issues’, (p. 131). However just because a fan recreates a scene from the text does not always mean that they are dissatisfied with the text, rather it is incessant curiosity to know what is going on behind the scenes that seems to motivate them. In some ways the more ambiguous the character the more the fan seems to enjoy playing with them. Also characters are often more developed within fandom than within the comics themselves as I will explore later through *Young Avengers*.

Textual poaching is perhaps most prominent within fan fiction, also known as fanfic. Fans take aspects that they particularly enjoy from the text such as characters or settings and create fictional stories around them. There are many different forms of

fanfic, from stories that are based on or close to the original text (known as canon), to AU's or alternate universe stories in which the character is placed into a whole new context. The two story categories that are perhaps the most notorious in fanfic are the Mary-sues and slash fiction. The Mary-sue fanfic involves the fan-author putting an idealised version of their own self into the fanfic. The Mary-sue character is often close to perfect, being the most powerful, the most attractive etc.

According to Jenkins 'slash was initially met with considerable resistance from fans who felt such writing was an improper use of program materials and violated the original characterizations' (1992, p.187). However today it is generally accepted as an important, if slightly looked down upon, part of fan culture, especially online. In fact it is claimed that the genre may be fandom's most original contribution to popular literature. One thing that stands out about slash fiction is that, in comparison with the letters in the letter columns which were written mainly by male fans, slash is written mainly by women, with Camille Bacon-Smith estimating that 90 percent of all fan fiction is written by women (Jenkins, 1992, p. 191). While there seems to be more of a male interest in slash fiction today especially with the relative anonymity of the net, in my experience the area still seems to be dominated by female writers. However, the controversy over the gay relationship between characters Billy and Teddy has also attracted interest from gay and lesbian fans, indicating that there are possibly a higher number of male fan fiction writers in *Young Avengers* fan fiction. In general however because of this heavily feminine influence, 'both fan and academic writers characterize slash as a projection of female sexual fantasies, desires, and experiences onto the male bodies of the series characters' (Jenkins, p. 191). The characters are often heavily romanticised with an emphasis on the emotional as well as the sexual side of the relationship.

1.6: The Internet and Fandom

Fandom is the term given to a style of community in which people who enjoy a particular text or subject are able to meet and communicate with others who share

their interests. According to Jenkins, fandom gives fans a ‘community not defined in traditional terms of race, religion, gender, region, politics or profession, but rather a community of consumers defined through their common relationship with shared texts’, (1992, p. 231). Within the multiple types of fan communities that exist, the comic industry is one of the most prolific. It is extremely multilayered with smaller identifiable groups within, such as fans of Marvel comics, fans of DC comics, fans of alternative comics, fans of particular writers, fans of particular characters. For example *The Young Avengers Live Journal* allows fans to write about any of the *Young Avengers* characters whereas *Young Avengers Slash* site allows only stories in which the characters are engaged in homoerotic relationship. Mathew J. Pustz (1999) commented ‘they may be marginalized and ridiculed by mainstream society, but identifying as a fan can also give an individual a certain amount of “collective identity”’, (p. 20). Fans of mainstream superhero comics are often at the forefront of ridicule because of the young audience, pop-culture like genre of superhero comics. The fact that it is the most popular and well known form of comic is often overlooked.

Before the internet the popular media for fans were fanzines (fan produced magazines in which fans were able to contribute opinions, stories and art), and letter pages which were published in the comics. Jenkins (1992) claims that the earliest fanzines were produced by fans from the Star Trek community, which seem to have started their existence around the early fifties. It was through these that fan fiction and art was first published and made available for public access. However from Wertham’s work, *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), it is clear that fans were already creating fantasies around their favourite characters long before fanzines came into production. According to Pustz (1999), ‘By the 1970s, nearly all mainstream comics included letters’, (p. 16). However the letter pages have died away somewhat in recent years, though comics such as *Deadpool* and *Young Avengers* still publish them. Fans also have the opportunity to socialize with each other through conferences and conventions such as the yearly Armageddon Convention here in New Zealand. These often feature comic writers and artists in discussion panels.

The internet has changed fan culture considerably. No longer do fans have to wait for letters to be published in letter columns or fan fiction and fan art to be published in fanzines. The accessibility of the internet has allowed fans to not only publish their own work or opinions quickly but to communicate with other fans with ease. Fans are able to take more liberties with characters, encouraging debate, especially around topics such as sexuality. Fandom via the net is different from what 'offline' fandom is, the open access of the online communities moves away from the 'sacredness' of external fan communities which are often prone to exclusivity, especially because contact between fans within the external fan communities is somewhat limited to fanzines (fan magazines), comic expos and letters. However it has not changed the essence of the relationship of the fan to the media text, rather it has merely opened the window of opportunity to more potential fans. As Susan Clerc comments, 'although cmc has increased the amount of contact between fans and producers, it has not changed the essence of fan activities. Analysis, interpretation, and speculation, building a community through shared texts and playfully appropriating them for their own ends- these are the defining features of fandom both online and off. Fans are fans because they engage in these practices (Hills, 2002, p. 75). Fans on the net are able to stay anonymous if they want to.

The online fan community was used in order to explore the fan bases of comic fans in general. While comic book fandom is not the most extensive on the internet, it does possess a large dedicated fan base of communities. Within these there are opposing communities, DC versus Marvel in general, there are fan fiction and art sites, sites dedicated to slash fiction (fiction in which the characters engage in a homoerotic relationship), fan forum as well as sites for role playing games and cosplay. Cosplay is a form of role playing in which the fan participants create and wear costumes based on their favourite characters. Within the fan forum, discussions are started by participating fans around topics of interest; these topics could be anything from what was the opinion of the latest issue of *Civil War*, to discussions around the sexuality of particular characters. Because the internet is so much more accessible but in many

ways so much more private, the sites are more extensive than offline communities allowing more room for different pairings, less known characters and unusual story lines.

Chapter Two: Queer Theory and Coming Out

2.1: Introduction

There are three main concepts applied within queer theory that resonate with superhero comics that were applied within this thesis. The first concept centres on identity, queer theory itself navigates the evolving terrain of both gender and sexual identity. This thesis investigates how the sexual identity of the superhero is questioned through fan involvement and through the medium that they are represented in. More generally the notion of identity has always been of particular importance to superhero fiction, secret identities often control their actions and it is often impossible to tell which identity could be classed as the real one. A second key element of queer theory that has been relevant to this thesis, is the idea of ‘coming out’. This is relevant to this research as the notion of coming out is significant in two different areas in the superhero comic. The first is ‘coming out’ as a superhero, or revealing their secret identity, whether to family and friends or to the public. The second is ‘coming out’ as a gay superhero. The first will be briefly explored using the example of *Marvel’s Civil War*, in which the entire population of superheroes either expose their secret identity or are forced to by government forces. For the second, the examples of Billy and Teddy from *Young Avengers* and Northstar from *Alpha Flight* will be used to explore the different ways in which gay heroes expose their sexual identity. The third element of queer theory that I will be exploring is the ideal of masculinity, which fits in with the concepts of gender identity which parts of queer theory have evolved around. Discourses of masculinity have also been a central section of the superhero persona, creating an ideal for fans to esteem and emulate. While the masculine identity has been challenged by the involvement of more competent female superheroes and mainstream gay heroes, little seems to have changed to the masculine model of the male superhero, gay superheroes generally fit within the same model of idealism, their sexuality a character quirk like Superman and Spiderman’s geeky alter egos. I will briefly explore the topic, examining the masculine standards that superheroes fulfil and create. As this thesis reflects a

process rather than just a result, I have explored the background of queer theory as new to the subject myself, attempting to understand the constantly evolving area. Therefore to reflect that process Section 2.2 will briefly introduce queer theory.

2.2: Queer theory and Identity

For scholars influenced by queer theory, “queer” names or describes identities and practices that foreground the instability inherent in the supposedly stable relationship between anatomical sex, gender, and sexual desire - Corber, Valocchi (Jagose, 1996, p. 1).

Queer theory is a wide-ranging theoretical approach to exploring sexuality and gender identities that was developed during the 1990s, around the same time that queer superheroes began to appear in mainstream comics. This description is, of course, extremely vague, mainly because queer theory is hard to pin down and define, its meaning is constantly in flux as its meaning and use change and develop each time it is used. According to theorists such as Annamarie Jagose and Judith Butler, to define queer theory would be to compromise what it is intended for, “for part of queer’s semantic clout, part of its political efficacy, depends on its resistance to definition, and the way in which it refuses to stake its claim, since ‘the more it verges on becoming a normative academic discipline, the less queer “queer theory” can plausibly claim to be” (Jagose, 1994, p. 1). Therefore by defining the term and its use, queer theory becomes compromised by a straight or heteronormative reading, making it hard to use in order to break down the barriers of heteronormativity and contest the ‘straight’ reading of a text. However in order to use the ideas proposed by queer theory in this paper, it was necessary to attempt to describe the concepts in order to understand the way in which they were used. Since queer theory is built around identities; I investigated the construction of identities around queer characters, queer comics and the fan in order to understand the way in which the nonheteronormative identities influence and create reactions to the queer characters.

Early work around queer theory explored the way in which sexuality is constructed by language. The terms homosexual and its binary counterpart, heterosexual, exist only because of each other, without homosexuality there would be no concept of heterosexuality. Like homosexuality, queer theory is based around what it is not as much as what it is. As Judith Butler commented on the binary aspect of being queer or “out”, ‘being “out” always depends to some extent on what it means to be “in”; it gains its meaning only within that polarity. Hence, being “out” must produce the closet again and again in order to maintain itself as “out”’, (1991, p 16). Therefore while queer theory attempts to expose these binaries as nothing more than a construction of culture and society, it is also based upon these constructions, needing them as much as it struggles against them.

While some might believe that queer theory is restricted to gay and lesbian theory, in fact it encompasses any identity that is nonheteronormative. These identities include categories such as transgender, bisexuality, intersexuality, prostitution, sadism and masochism. Phelan (1991) remarks that ‘feminist theory and queer theory have pointed to the fundamental indeterminacy of identities – of inside/outside communities, of masculine/feminine, of homo/hetero/bi, of male/female, and of racial and ethnic categories. Ultimately, queer theory’s target is identity itself – the assumption of unity or harmony or transparency within persons or groups’, (Jagose, 1991, p. 2). Identity is one of the major issues in superhero comics, protecting ones secret identity from the public. Therefore the idea of multiple identities that gay heroes face is particularly important. They must protect their identity as a hero but they also have the identity as a gay hero which separates them from other heroes as role models, figures of political contention and targets for discrimination. Then they have their alter ego as a ‘normal’ person such as a businessman/teacher (Northstar) or a student (Wiccan). On top of that, if they are also ‘out’ in their every day identity, they also have a queer identity outside for the heroic personas. While Wiccan may be held up as a role model for gay heroes and the queer community, his alter ego Billy Kaplan faces discrimination and bullying.

2.3: Coming Out

Unlike Apollo and Midnighter, whose superhero identity is the only identity they have, most heroes have secret identities that they guard closely. This can be seen as a similar situation to closeted homosexuals. In her chapter on heroism in *Queer As Folk* (2007), Joanna Di Mattia comments that ‘the metaphor of ‘secret identity’ is also central to the tales of comic book superheroes, and research in this area repeatedly points to the potentially queer subtext of the double lives of Superman, Batman, and Spiderman’ (p. 199). Even today ‘secret identities’ are still prolific in the queer community. Many closeted homosexuals face not only the fear of coming out in a heterosexual society but also the disapproval of the queer community for not disclosing their sexual orientation. In his book, *From Camp to Queer: Re-making the Australian Homosexual* (2002), Robert Reynolds reported that many of the out members of the group CAMP pressured those still in the closet to come out and be proud. An activist of CAMP in the 1950s, Keith Clinton commented ‘if homosexuals do not get a fair deal in our society, it is partly our own fault. Some homosexuals treat their state as if it is, indeed, a dirty little secret. They do this even when they are being gay, and joking about it. They are fearful of being spotted for what they are by straight society’, (Reynolds, p. 54). This attitude was and is still prevalent through out gay society. This can be seen through media such as *Queer as Folk* (2000-2005), the American television show which ran from 2000 to 2005. While there is ambivalence to coming out in the comics examined, the nature of the series *Queer As Folk* explores the debate implicitly through the story line. In the series one of the main characters Brian Kinney, who is out and proud, berates his less confident friend Michael for not being open about his sexuality at his work. In episode 111 (*QAF*, 2001) he even goes as far as outing Michael to a female work colleague who has a crush on him.

However many out homosexuals do not take into account or acknowledge the problems that some closeted homosexuals may face. Michael for instance, was working in a supermarket where being gay would have been held against him, to that

effect, he cites the example of a lesbian at work who is constantly passed over for promotion though she has been there for longer than most. In reality many closeted homosexuals fear not only discrimination from society, possible loss of their job but also alienation from their family. Michael Roguski explained the attitude towards coming out as gay in the 1990s,

A core component of 'coming out' rhetoric is whether the individual in question has demonstrated a willingness to risk social rejection and associated hardships as a result of disclosing his/her sexual identity. 'Risk of loss' appeared to be central to Homeowner's criteria of worthiness. In failing to out myself to my parents I had not undergone the appropriate baptism of fire, hence I had not experienced enough socially administered trauma, or at least risked trauma, and so was not worthy to join the ranks of the properly initiated, (2004, p. 135).

Coming out is a shared risk or trauma that 'out' gay people are able to share and bond over, to the alienation of their closeted counterparts. This separation between gay and hetero, out and closeted can also be seen in superhero comics in several ways. One such way is that the homosexual is separated from heterosexual society because of an aspect of their selves, like superheroes. This can be seen in modern superhero comics such as *X-men* in which the mutants are abused by humans because of their genetic differences. An example of this can be seen in Marvel's *Uncanny X-Men* arc *Holy War* in which the mutant population is abused by human supremacists, often in the guise of religious fervour. As can be seen in Figure 2.1, this hatred of human difference culminated in an attack on many of the younger mutants at the Xavier Institute in which they were crucified on crosses (Austen, 2003).

Another way in which the separation within the gay community over the identity of being 'out' can be seen, is in the recent Marvel series, *Civil War* (2007). This series took most of the major characters within the Marvel universe and set them against each other in a battle over their identities. The character Ironman supports and gets



Figure 2.1: Young Mutants Are Targeted By Religious Fanatics In *Uncanny X-men: Holy War*, 2003.

through a bill on superhuman registration in which all superheroes must register their names, powers and location with the government, this would allow the government to control the amount of heroes in area as well as making them effectively into a government controlled task force. The anti-registration side is led by Captain America; the heroes that follow him disagree with the act because it allows public access to their secret identities and therefore the people that they care about, putting them in danger. Another concern is the fact that they would be controlled by the government. As mentioned earlier in the definition of a superhero, most follow a code of moral justice rather than the law, and many heroes mistrust the government and the law.

By signing up under the registration act, the superheroes hand over control to the government and become answerable to the law for their actions. They will be trained by the government and assigned to missions by the government. They would effectively become powerful weapons that could be used not only on a national scale but on an international level as well. This reflects the way in which the gay community is often controlled by the government through the law and legislation. The civil union reflects the relationship that the government has with the gay community; they are given the same rights as a married couple but are denied the basic ceremony and recognition of their marriage. Of course the discourses in the *Civil War* series can be read and interpreted in different ways; this is just a queer interpretation. The series could also be read as a debate over government control, the fictional government wanting to control every aspect of the superhero. It could also be interpreted in comparison with the apartheid of South Africa in which the white government controlled the natives through registration. Any of these interpretations could be seen by fans as the 'right one', each a conscious act of interpretation which can be observed from a uses and gratification perspective.

The idea of coming out is relevant to this thesis not only because of this intertwining theme of secret identities and the risks of public exposure but also because of the way in which 'coming out' defines the gay superhero's character. Also relevant is the

reactions to this exposure of a characters sexual identity, the way in which the fan communities absorb and resist these ‘outings’ as well as, in comparison, ‘non-outed’ characters and their treatment by the fan community. This will be discussed further on in my thesis (Chapter 6) where I consider the reactions to mainstream superheroes coming out, both negative and positive, in a more in-depth analysis.

2.4: Masculinity

One of the most important aspects of the superhero image is the ideal of masculinity that they supposedly portray. This is predominantly based on the Western discourses of masculinity in which a man is expected to be physically fit, honourable and heroic. ‘In its modern usage the term assumes that one’s behaviour results from the type of person one is. That is to say, an unmasculine person would have behaved differently: being peaceable rather than violent, conciliatory rather than dominating, hardly able to kick a football, uninterested in sexual conquest, and so forth’, (Connell, 1995, p. 67). Masculinity is intricately linked to queer theory in that queer theory is based mainly upon re-examining sexual identity and gender identity. Masculinity is also based around these, especially gender identity. By exploring masculinity we re-examine the dominant discourses around gender differences which constructs ideal forms of masculinity and femininity. Of course ideas of masculinity or “what makes a man a man” differ culturally as R.W. Connell points out in his work *Masculinities* (1995), ‘all societies have cultural accounts of gender, but not all have the concept ‘masculinity’, (p. 67). This needs to be taken into account when exploring the idea of masculinities in relation to superheroes, as it suggests multiple types of masculinity. He examines this through the idea of global masculinities, pointing out that masculinity differs on particular levels as well, such as working class versus middle class, black versus white. He also suggests hegemonic masculinity as the highest level of perceived masculinity which establishes men as dominant and women as subservient. However categories of masculinity or male gender are often similar globally, ‘an unmasculine person would behave differently: being peaceable rather

than violent, conciliatory rather than dominating, hardly able to kick a football, uninterested in sexual conquest and so forth', (p. 67). This sums up the assumption that masculinity is based upon ideal of physical prowess and power, violence and sexual virility and anything that does not fit within these categories is not to be considered masculine.

However masculinity, like homosexuality and heterosexuality, only exists as a half of a binary pair, therefore 'masculinity' does not exist except in contrast with 'femininity', (Connell, p. 68). If something does not fit in within the construction of masculine then it automatically becomes feminine. Therefore if men prefer to have sex with men they are rendered 'not-masculine' and are reduced to a feminine status. Gay men are often stereotyped as effeminate, being portrayed as campy, bitchy and narcissistic. However this stereotype is based on the small yet more publicly visible 'Queens', the more outrageous sector of the gay community. This image is particularly sold by characters such as Jack on the television program *Will and Grace* (1998-2006), and the group from the television series *Queer Eye for a Straight Guy* (2003-2007). The superhero is often portrayed as the perfect example of masculinity, it could be said that the secret identity of the superhero is their less masculine identity or their closet identity. Likewise queer men are often stereotyped as feminized and used as an example of what masculinity is not by dictators of heteronormativity. As Will Brooker suggests: "On the surface, Batman's secret is his alter ego as Bruce Wayne; but it is not hard to imagine that this repeated motif could have acquired a personal resonance for a young man having to hide his sexuality in the early 1950's" (2000, p. 136). However shows such as *Queer as Folk* attempt to re-clarify gay masculinity. Brian Kinney (Gale Harold), one of the main characters in *Queer As Folk* fits the archetypal stereotype of the hypermasculine character, he is violent, powerful, arrogant, penetrative and abrasive, yet is also proudly queer and narcissistic. Similarly, the character of Keith, partner to David, in the HBO series *Six Feet Under* (2000-2005) is not only a police officer in LA, but also has anger issues relating to his abusive childhood. This effeminate version of masculinity is also questioned in comics such as *The Authority*, in which as Geoff Klock points out

‘Along with Ellis’s liberal heroes of enjoyment arises a significant statement of power: the open homosexuality between the two masculine powerhouses of the team, Apollo and the Midnighter’ (2002, p 143). The two characters are openly queer and in a relationship with each other, they are also the strongest, and in Midnighter’s case, the most violent on the team.

Superheroes have always been an over masculinised, hegemonic type of character, a hypermasculine role model for youth. They are strong, violent, powerful, confident, virile, and arrogant; all in the name of justice, a ‘common attribute of hypermasculinity is superhuman strength, a fantasy of masculine bodily omnipotence’, (Middleton, 1992, p. 33). According to Middleton in his work *The Inward Gaze* (1992), ‘hypermasculine action comics are offered to boys as the inside information on men’s lives’, (p. 25). By reading action comics they replace the missing male influence in their lives with an ideal representation of an extreme form of masculine. The superhero not only sets a physical model to live up to but a moral and character model too. Physically the men in superhero comics are generally ‘tall and square-shouldered. Only the foolish or the bad have bodies that do not conform to this stereotype. Roundedness or fatness or any sign of effeminacy are all clear indications of weakness’, (Middleton, p. 31). This is not always true in newer comics; however examining the Batman villains it is easy to see that this comment is not unfounded. The Penguin is over weight, Killer Croc and Two-Face are physically deformed and the Joker is overly effeminate, a homophobic rendition of gay culture.

As can be seen in Figure 1.2, the gay heroes that I am investigating are all physically fit to the extreme, their bodies straining through their skin tight costumes, Northstar’s very veins show through his costume. However while their bodies are often defined to the extreme, their facial expressions are restricted to show only a minimal amount of emotion, ‘heroic men’s faces in the hypermasculine comics are either expressionless, smooth undefined areas or the teeth are bared in anger and the ends of the lips droopy with sadness’, (Middleton, p. 31). This minimal emotion allows the

character to retain his hypermasculinised image while giving him enough emotional expression to give a little depth to the story and the character.



Figure 2.2: Northstar Gossips With His Female Team Mates At Lorna Danes Hen Party. From *Uncanny X-Men* #425: *Sacred Vows*, part 1 of 2,

Superheroes are a distillation of discourses on masculinity, both a simplistic and exaggerated representation of these ideals, and also expressing something of the anxiety about these constructions (so over the top as to be a little desperate). The gay superhero directly challenges the masculine ideal (revealing that it is not compatible with homosexuality) and also articulates the possibilities for its subversion by showing how easily it falls into camp. Physically, the gay superhero is still overly masculine as shown by the images of the gay heroes that I am considering in this thesis, Northstar, Apollo, The Midnighter, Wiccan and Hulkling, with their overly muscled bodies in tight uniforms, which make their bodies a landscape of pleasure to the viewer. Character wise, most gay superheroes are portrayed in the same way as heterosexual male heroes. However, Northstar can often be portrayed as ‘bitchy’ and

overly obsessed with his looks and clothing, a narcissistic trait that is often attributed to femininity. His stereotypical effeminate side can be seen in Figure 2.2, rather attend the bachelor party of character Havok with the male heroes of the X-man team, Northstar attends the hen party of Polaris with the women, swapping gossip and later watching a male stripper. He is also willing, contrary to his usually stern and arrogant image, to discuss love with a young mutant that he is trying to save (see Fig 2.3). Nevertheless, in general, gay superheroes seem to uphold the hypermasculine ideal of the superhero genre being aggressive, powerful and arrogant ready to take the law into their own hands.

By drawing parallels between the superhero secret identity and queer identity, coming out as a superhero and coming out as queer, I attempted to create a possibility of a queer reading and take on the mind frame of a fan. This reflects the way in which fans are able to employ methods of understanding to analyse the texts the way that they wish to understand them. The concepts around masculinity reflect the ideal model of the superhero and the way in which the queer hero disrupts the stereotype of the hypermasculinised superhero. However it is important to acknowledge at this point is the fact that my approach combines several approaches, all of which contribute to this thesis. Along with the three concepts from queer theory (masculinity, identity and coming out), these approaches also include discourse analysis and the uses and gratification approach, as is examined in Chapter Three.



Figure 2.3: Northstar Has A Heart To Heart With A Young Mutant In *Uncanny X-Men #414: Fall Down Go Boom*, 2002.

Chapter Three: Methodology

3.1: Introduction

This chapter addresses two main approaches; the methodological approach of using textual analysis to conduct queer readings of comic book texts and facilitate analysis of fan concerns and discussions, and the method of approach for researching virtual fan culture. The lack of close textual readings of comic books to draw on meant that I had to explore the way one might analyse comics, therefore this chapter explores possible techniques of analysis which allowed me to explore why superhero comics draw queer interpretations from fans. In my research I am using multiple layers of approach using Queer theory, Discourse analysis, Comic analysis and the Uses and Gratification approach. By melding the concepts together, I have endeavoured to get into the mindset of the fan in order to create a queer reading of the comic text and to explore the characters in a queer context.

3.2: Textual Analysis

I am using a form of qualitative textual analysis mixed with audience theory, in particular Uses and Gratification approach, which assumes that the audience participates with the text and concentrates on their own creative responses to cultural commodities such as comics (Berger, 2005) and some Reception theory, which explores the way that the audience interprets the text according to their own particular background (Jensen et al, 1991). I am using Discourse analysis in my research in order to explore discourses created by fans through the internet and the discourses within particular comics which are structured through both imagery and dialogue.

Discourse analysis allows that each story is part of a larger story, it is in how it is told that changes it and therefore the discourse is in the differences between the ways of narrating. It is useful when examining the discourses that the fans have with the text, the producers of the text and with other fans, as Jensen comments “because humans

seem to be constantly telling stories or arguing about something, whether in formal scientific discourse, daily conversation, or public debate, any typology of discourse is of necessity complex” (1991, p. 34). Discourse analysis also examines the way texts are structured, as Bertrand and Hughes (2005) commented ‘all the different uses of this term agree that discourse analysis focuses on the structure of written or spoken texts, attempting to understand how participants constitute a world in the course of their linguistic interaction’, (p. 94). This is particularly relevant when it comes to the world that fans have constructed through the internet and also through their own discourse around the text through forum, fan fiction and art. The main strengths of this approach is that it allows the researcher to understand the deeper structure of any text as well as its surface content; consider interpersonal interaction between speakers; and position discourses within a larger communication (and ultimately social context), (p. 94).

The sample of comics analysed were mainly determined on the fact that 1) they were mainstream, and therefore available and advertised to a general audience, and 2) because they contained known main characters that are presented and represented openly as queer in the text. In addition two further sample texts are included that do not fit these categories, the first, *Batman*, is not written as a queer character and *The Authority* is aimed at adults. These two were selected because, with *Batman* it is possible to explore the ambiguity of superhero comics in general and the common trend of fans queering straight characters within fan art and fiction over appropriating and using defined queer characters. With *The Authority* I wished to examine differences between the representations of queer characters in mainstream comics to those in adult comics. Because in general the amount of available texts that fulfilled the requirements of possessing queer characters were somewhat limited I selected those that were the most popular with comic book fans on the internet, *Young Avengers*, a newer comic that contains a teenage gay couple as main characters. The *Uncanny X-Men* and *Alpha Flight*, which both include the pioneering gay superhero *Northstar*. In order to contrast with these two samples I chose to examine *Batman* and *Robin* from the DC universe as a text which contains homosocial context,

intended or otherwise, that has been picked up on by fans. Also I chose *The Authority* for their married gay superhero duo *Midnighter* and *Apollo*, a queered take on *Batman* and *Superman* but not in a camp style.

I mainly applied the Uses and Gratification approach (Berger, 2005), to my research involving the comic fan community. Uses and Gratifications theory allows that the audience are not passive victims of mass media but rather, they use the media to fulfil their own needs. It not only acknowledges the agency of viewers/readers but concentrates purely on their own productive and creative responses to cultural products such as comics. This framework is particularly appropriate for the small part of the comic fan community that I studied. The fans that are active and visible on the internet and in the letters columns, published in the comics themselves, whose fan involvement whom I have accessed are especially prolific at appropriating the text for their own personal enjoyment. This enjoyment is made into public act and therefore available to analyse through the fans publication of fan fiction, fan art and fan forum published on the internet.

There are two types of characters that the fans seem to appropriate, the first is the way some fans take characters, who are not clearly queer in the text of the comic, and create a queer reading around them. I used the example of the classic homosocial pairing of Batman and Robin to exemplify this. The second type of character that fans are using, or rather elaborating on, is the queer character, who they appropriate and recreate to their own liking rather than to the design of the writer. By using the texts, fans are able to escape reality, put their own ideas upon the text and recreate the story to their own liking. However, as Berger (2005) points out in his work “one problem with the uses and gratification approach is that different critics often see a particular event (in a film, for instance) as being used in different ways or as providing different gratifications. This is because the uses to which people put the media are somewhat ambiguous”, (p. 133).

In addition to the uses and gratification approach, I have also explored reception theory which has left its mark on the research process. Reception theory, like uses

and gratification theory, does not see the audience as passive; rather the audience creates its own meaning from the text. While uses and gratification explores the way that the audience takes from the text, reception theory examines the way that the audience interprets the text based on their individual cultural background and own personal life experiences. Therefore if the writer/creator of the text's cultural background is extremely different from the readers, it is possible that the writer/creators intended message or meaning in the text will be understood differently by the reader. Of course all texts are read and understood independently by the reader, meaning that every reading is different. However, there are general recognizable images, symbols, words and ideas that are interpreted in a particular way by those with similar cultural backgrounds. For example, Japanese manga are read differently to American comics, being read from right to left. American comics are inundated with references to American culture and history. The character Patriot from *Young Avengers* often reflects upon the treatment of African Americans in US history and the way that is has defined the person that he has become. Therefore, though it can be said that comics retain cultural features that in some way define them.

Therefore if two readers cultural and personal background are vastly different, they will not take the same meaning from the text as they will not share the symbolic knowledge set within the text. However, readers with a similar cultural outlook can share a basic cultural understanding from their common discourses and draw upon these discourses to interpret the text and create a common meaning. This is particularly important to my research as the shared cultural discourses of what a comic and comic culture is, is the setting for the way in which fans react and respond to queer characters in superhero comics. While they share a sense of community and understanding because of their background in comics' culture, their reactions and responses still differ because of their individual personal experiences and cultural upbringing

3.3: Comic Framework

This section explores comic theory and a particular approach to analysing comic texts. I created this example of a comic analysis to demonstrate my method of investigating comics. This is an example of a fuller analysis of which I only used elements of the analysis framework to explore images later in the thesis. This particular approach could be added to in further study, as it generally relies on industry based texts such as *Understanding Comics* (1994) and *Visual Storytelling: The Art and Technique* (2002) which generally use the author industry based background to teach others how to use particular techniques or why such techniques are used. In future research, this could be combined by a more general academic based analysis of visual material in order to round the subject out.

Comic theory is a somewhat obscure branch of academic study, while there are many texts on the history of comics and their characters, there are few that deconstruct the actual comic text themselves. Perhaps the most influential work that does exist in this area, or at least the one that I found most informative on the structure of the comic, is Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1994). However an important aspect to note about the literature that I have perused in my research on comics is that much of it is written by former comic writers, artists or those who have worked within the industry. While this has not been a bad thing; in fact it has given me more insight into production values of comics, it does tend to only give an insiders point of view, that differs in tone and approach from an academic approach relating to interpretation. Since a particular framework or method for analyzing comics does not seem to exist, I have constructed a framework to analyze the comics when exploring a panel or dialogue. This is outlined using examples from *Batman* texts which I will explore from a queer approach.

In order to analyse these two images I will examine three different features of the medium: colour, positioning and dialogue. There are other areas that I could explore such as drawing style of the individual artists and the frame itself, but for the sake of

both time and space I will limit myself to these three as well as briefly exploring Scott McCloud's *Chart* (1994), which can be seen in Figure 3.1 (pp. 52-3).

The use of colour is important because it gives a sense of the era in comic's history, it also shows the budget available to the creator and therefore perhaps the popularity of his or her works at the time. I will also examine how objects within the frame are positioned in relation to others in order to show the prominence of the main characters, the focus of the image and the relationships each object or character has to another. The writing in a frame is unique because it is both part of the image and separated in its own frame. As an image it can be used to show whether the character is thinking or speaking, whether they are shouting or whispering and even the emotion that the character is experiencing. As dialogue it explains situations, asks questions for the audience, moves the story along, gives meaning to the image and expresses the thoughts of the characters. It can also hold implications or traces of the creator's ideas and beliefs and other ideas that may not have been intended such as sexual implication.

The first image is the cover from the 1953 *Batman #79: The Bride of Batman* (Kane, 1953). This image (Figure 3.2) is of interest for several reasons, the first being that it was produced before the work of Fredric Wertham (1954) it is also an excellent example of the homosexual undertone that Wertham went on to detect in the *Batman* comics both in dialogue as well as in the art of the image itself. It was also drawn by popular artist of the time, Dick Sprang.

Originally because of the cost of printing, colour was restricted to the standard 'four colour' process restricting the intensity of the three primary colours to 100%, 50% and 20% using black ink for the line work. To stand out, costumed heroes wore bright primary colours while their background was a bright primary. Batman's costume was originally blue and grey with the yellow utility belt, while Robin wore red, green and yellow. According to Scott McCloud (1994), 'another property of flat colours is their tendency to emphasize the shape of objects, both animate and

inanimate' (p. 188). This can be seen in the *Bride of Batman (BoB)* image. The two heroes stand out in their bright costumes against the yellow of the church and dull peachy/grey of the audience. Even the bride who stands out in her white dress and red hair does not really draw attention away from the dynamic duo, who contrast yet are similar, obviously belonging together. The ring is outlined in white against the bright red of Robin's costume right over his heart. Taking a queer reading I could say that this could indicate that the ring is symbolic of the bride in white taking what he loves. On the opposite side, the bride clutches at the yellow box with fingers that are outlined in red as if to say that she has blood on her hands. The yellow dialogue box itself contains the words "Bride of Batman" in large bright red letters, the red overlaps the black lines of the letters giving an impression of smeared blood making the words seem horrific and synonymous with the infamous *Bride of Frankenstein* (Whale, 1935). Overall the colour of the image focuses the reader's attention on the main characters while emphasizing the horror of the situation.

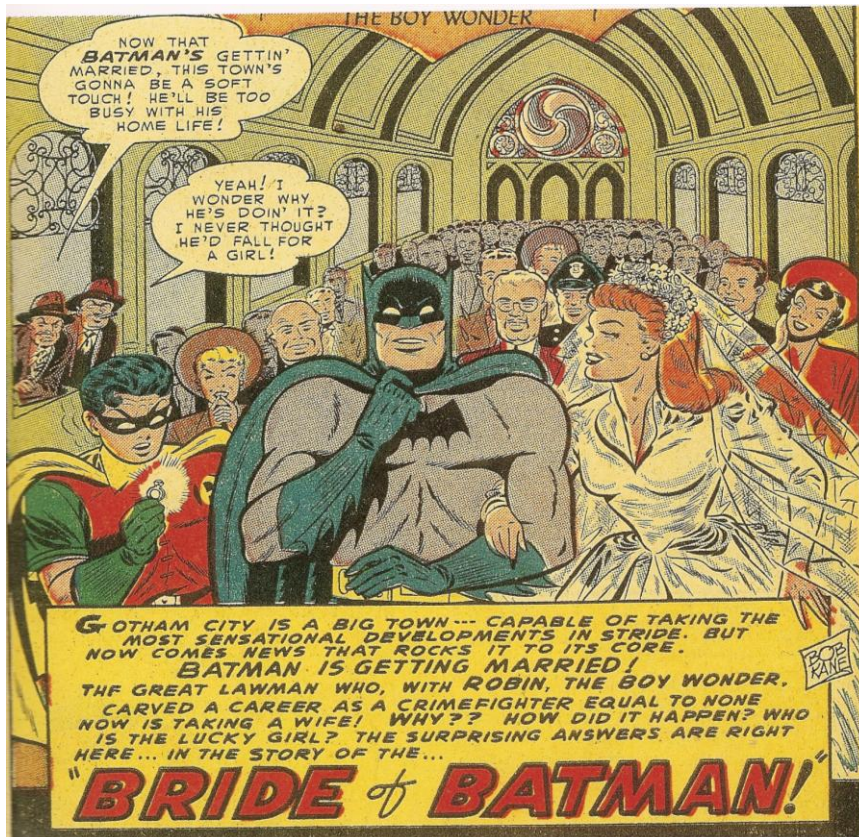


Figure 3.2: Batman At The Wedding Altar, To Many Peoples Surprise In *Batman #79: Bride Of Batman*, 1953.

The *BoB* image that I am using is actually to cover page which could differ in style of positioning in the actual comic. Using the one image I can not compare the way that *The Dark Knight Strikes Again* (2002), has many dialogue centred frames, however it does indicate the style that is used in the comic. Tony C. Caputo (2002) refers to the 'eye path' in his book *Visual Storytelling*, according to him the eye moves from left to right, top to bottom. Therefore the fact that the only two speech balloons are in the upper left corner indicates their importance to the image. They also lead down to the main figure, Batman, who is the centre of the frame and also the biggest image, emphasizing his importance. On either side of batman are his two 'love interests' who balance him out. However if you examine the whole of the frame, Batman and the bride are balanced by Commissioner Gordon between and behind them and the women with hats either side of the two. Even the curve of the roof and windows of the church centre the two. In comparison Robin and the two crooks leaning in the window are separated from the domesticity of the scene even though Robin is right beside Batman. This could be seen as emphasizing the point that the first criminal made about Batman becoming a 'soft touch' now that he is getting married. Frederic Wertham would no doubt have seen this as an example of the emphasis on encouraging young boys to fear women and marriage.

The dialogue of the scene could easily have been used by Wertham as evidence of the homosexual relationship between Batman and Robin. While the first makes comments on how Batman will become soft now that he is married the other comments that he 'never thought he'd fall for a girl'! It seems even the villains knew that Batman and Robin had something between them.

As I commented earlier, the position of the speech balloons indicate their importance and as this is the cover page I believe that it is safe to assume that the words indicate a point about the story itself. Batman is getting trapped into marriage somehow! The prominence of the yellow dialogue box at the bottom of the page stands out because it introduces the story, the questions that the reader should take with them as they read as well as capture a potential reader's attention.

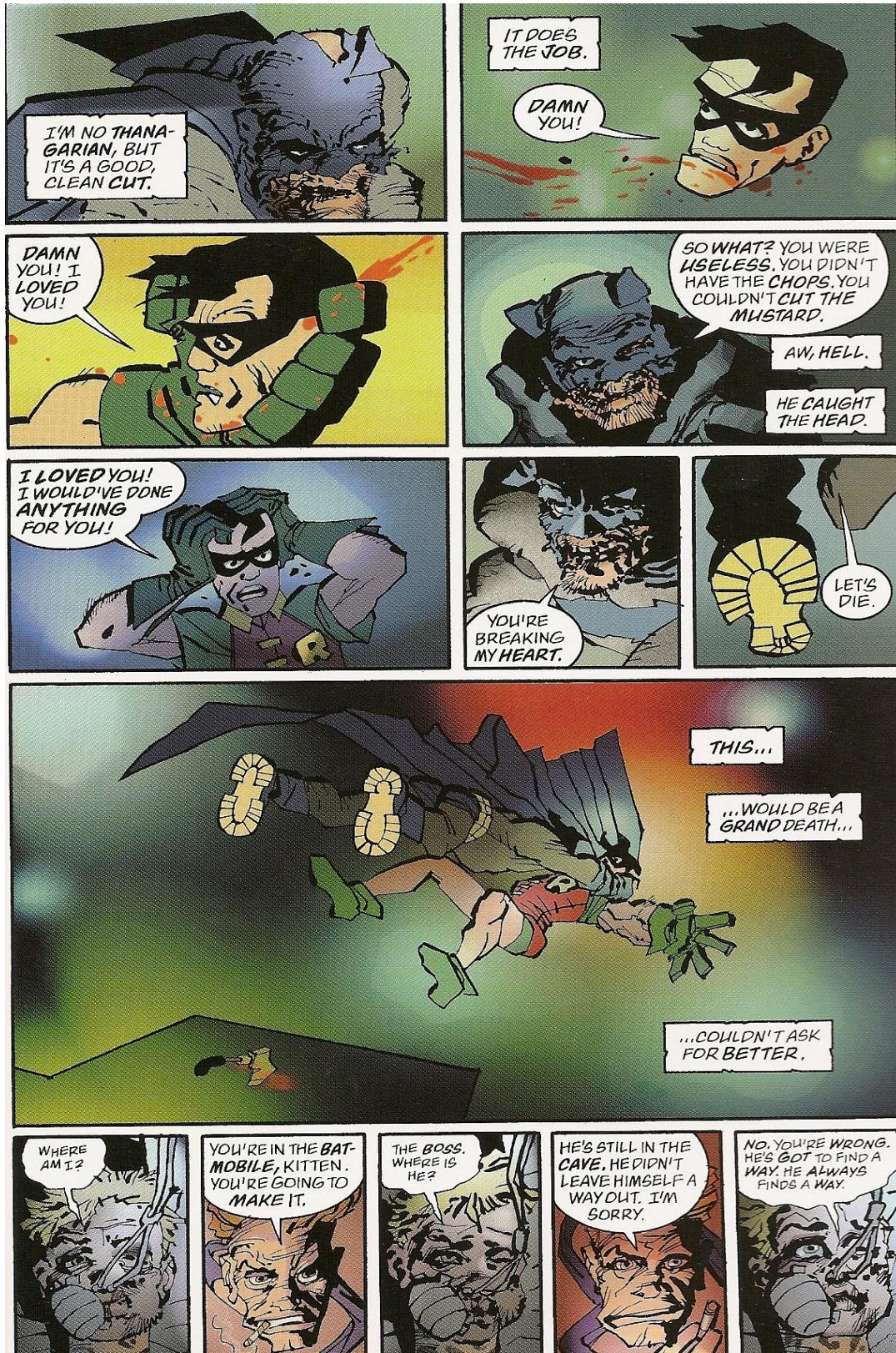


Figure 3.3: Batman Takes Down His Former Sidekick In Frank Miller's *Batman: The Dark Knight Strikes Again*, 2002.

Figure 3.3, was created by Frank Miller and contributes part of *Batman: The Dark Knight Strikes Again (DKSA)* (2002). This particular work presents a different version of Dick Grayson (formerly Robin) than other comics. The book also features a female sidekick for Batman, Carrie Kelley. However when analysing these images it is important to remember that each artist and writer is expected to bring their own personal style to Batman whilst retaining its core element. Miller's Batman is also outside DC universe continuity (the fictional timeline and worlds of DC comics), therefore it is possible that anything could happen or at least be implied.

The Frank Miller image is actually a set of frames on one page of his graphic novel *The Dark Knight Strikes Again*. In contrast to the one colour background of *BoB*, the background in these frames is a blurred kaleidoscope of colours, hinting at ideas and objects. For example in the previous pages Batman had triggered a self destruct countdown which was rapidly bringing molten lava to the cave where he and Robin are battling. Note the blurred colours of blue and green could represent the colours of an underground cavern while the red represents the lava. Unlike the background of *BoB* which was flat, the colours in this page blend with the characters shadowing them as much as they emphasizes them, this can especially be seen in frame five.

Unlike *BoB*, the characters costumes do not stand out as much; rather one thing in each frame is highlighted such as the yellow of the R on Robin's costume, the blue of Batman's mask or the yellow of the bottom of his boots. The colour is used to emphasize particular details that are important to the storyline such as the boots or the bright blood. In my own opinion the use of colour has improved over time as it became more affordable. The colour of *BoB* seems garish and cheap compared to darker but deeper colours of *DKSA*.

Like colour, the positioning of objects within the frame or grammar of the image, is used to emphasize narrative points as well as important objects. *DKSA* for example tends to centre around the head of the character if there is dialogue, though this isn't always the case. This places emphasis on the narrative and written part of the story

rather than on the character action or expression. However that's not to say that action is not emphasized. This can be seen in the largest frame on the page, which centres Batman and Robins fight in a wide shot. The platform off which they obviously fell/jumped off is angled to point at them emphasizing them as the main objects of attention in the image. Batman's cloak is positioned to draw attention from the left corner to the two figures. The two characters are positioned like lovers as they fall. Robin's body language is open and accepting, his legs and arms open. Batman is in a position of dominance over top of the younger character as he forces him back.

The page from *DKSA* contains much more dialogue than the cover page of *BoB* of course. Miller in particular places great emphasis on dialogue in his work. He tends to establish the characters with dialogue as much as with art. For example in this page Batman comes across as cold, rough and old when talking, 'you were useless, you didn't have the chops. You couldn't cut the mustard.' His thought boxes are chipped around the edges giving them a rough look that matches the image of Batman. His thoughts are practical and centred on his plan. Robin on the other hand is emotional and angry, matching the youthful impression of his image. His words, 'I loved you! I would've done anything for you', also indicate the relationship between the two; Robin is resentful that Batman dropped him. Batman may or may not have been sarcastic when he replies 'you're breaking my heart.' He seems happy enough, on this page, to have a 'grand death' with his ex-partner. Like the large red letters on *BoB*, the size of words indicate certain attributes for example in the bottom images, the blond, Cassie's words are smaller showing that she has been injured and is weak.

Though the characters may be the same at least by name, it is obvious from the images of Batman and Robin in both examples that they have few similarities image wise. The Batman in *DKSA* is stocky, older, bald and missing teeth, he is also confident and cocky. Compare this to the Batman of *BoB* who is young, tall, well built with no obviously missing teeth and extremely nervous looking. The difference is not just an evolution over time but the influence of different artists. Miller has a

style of his own when it comes to Batman that is unlike the dark, sleek vigilante of other modern takes of the character. Dick Sprang on the other hand, according to Les Daniels (2004), 'would become perhaps the supreme stylist among those delineated Batman's deeds during the characters early years' (p. 47). He drew Batman as a tall, muscular ideal of masculinity, much like the other superheroes of the era. The lines of his Batman and Robin are curvier, emphasizing the muscle; he uses less sharp angles and planes than Miller. Miller's characters are drawn with sharper lines and planes giving them a rough but detailed look.

Of course, the history of long standing characters such as Batman creates a complicated yet rich record that is difficult to decipher as a whole. However, such long lasting characters have proven to be adaptable to the huge variety of concerns brought in by the different writer/artist collaborations. This creates an immense wealth of character on which aspiring writers and artists might base their work as well as a network of fans who are willing to give their work a go merely because of the character. The different interpretations of the character over the history of Batman's publication means that there is at least one Batman for fans to enjoy, for example, those who enjoyed the campy style of Batman would enjoy the early comics from the 1960s in which emphasis was often on situational comedy. Others preferring the darker Batman would prefer Frank Miller's work of the 1980s.

Examining Scott McCloud's Chart (1994) in Figure 3.1, Frank Miller's Batman is placed just under halfway up the triangle and more to the left. The left side of the triangle is what McCloud terms "reality" which is where images are closer to photographs the closer they get to the bottom left corner. The closer they get the more detail the image has. Opposite to this in the right corner is "meaning" which according to McCloud is where the images become words, the image becomes more about the meaning than the image. At the top of the top point of the pyramid is the "picture plane" where the image is just shapes, 'where shapes, lines and colours can be themselves and not pretend otherwise' (p. 51). Sprang's Batman, I would place closer to the bottom and around the middle. However no matter what the style of the

artist, the characters Batman and Robin have an undeniable chemistry whether they are fighting or attending weddings.

While I have neither proven that Batman and Robin are gay or even could be, I have tried to show a little of the history of their possible relationship as well as the way that it is possible to make a queer reading of a Batman comic. To the question of whether Batman is gay and whether people should be imposing their own reading on the text, most of the industry workers on The Panel (a group of artists and writers that have worked in the industry and answer questions online) answered that they believed Batman was not gay, however it was up to the fans to interpret the text as they see fit. As Bill Rosemann remarked, ‘While fictional characters are the creation of their authors, once the work reaches public hands, the audience is free to interpret as they see fit. And while authors may disagree with certain interpretations, ultimately art--like beauty--is in the eye of the beholder’ (The Panel, 2003).

What I have attempted to show through this analysis is not only how I am constructing my own particular framework of analysis but how a queer reading of a comic page may in fact work. By reading a particular meaning within these examples I am able to construct a reading from the texts that may not have been intended by the writer. However it must be kept in mind that there are always multiple meanings inherent in the text. These would be elicited by different audiences, for example Figure 3.2 could be explored from a feminist perspective, interpreting the entrapment of marriage as de-masculinising of superheroes. Also the fact that these images are viewed apart from their original context sets them up for a different reading than what would be created if they were viewed in their original context, in a comic book.

3.4: Virtual Communities

On the basis that audiences are not a passive element in their relationship to the text, I decided to search the internet for active audience involvement. The only gay characters that I was aware of at the beginning of my research were the *Young*

Avengers' Wiccan and Hulkling, the discovery of which had been a basis of my choice of research topic. Having little experience with fandom on the internet, I began my research the easy way, by using the internet search engine *Google*. Unfortunately because *Young Avengers* is a relatively new series, there were few sites with large amounts of interaction. The sites which featured fan art or fan fiction of the series were generally personal sites, or journals which featured only a few posts on the subject. The two most notable exceptions to this were *Young Avengers Live Journal* and *Fanfiction.net*. Also, through these sites I found the sites *Scans_Daily*, a site dedicated to downloading scans from comics which feature homoerotic elements, and *The Dorkside*, the fan fiction site for FullMetal_Cute, one of the most popular fan fiction writers for the *Young Avengers*.

Through my initial search I virtually stumbled across the website *Young Avengers Live Journal*, the first unofficial site dedicated to the series, according to the site. The web journal opened in early 2005, not long after the series began and remains one of the most popular sites dedicated to the *Young Avengers*. It contains fan fiction, fan art, discussion posts and current news on the series and its creators. It currently has three hundred and thirty-four members and is watched by a further three hundred and fifteen (16 March 2008). The second site that I discovered in my original web search was *Fanfiction.net*, an archive of fan fiction of all genres. At the start of my research there were only twenty-nine stories under the *Young Avengers* section. By the end there were fifty-six, still a minimal amount when compared to more popular texts such as *Harry Potter* which has three hundred and forty-seven thousand, three hundred and sixty-five stories (on 16 March 2008).

Using *Fanfiction.net* as a base I also began to explore slash fiction around Batman and Robin. With such a vast and rich history, there tended to be more available on the pair than on the *Young Avengers*. While searching for more sites, I also began to explore the fan forum. Originally I searched for comic fan forum in general, however with many sites each with multiple topic threads, sifting through the discussions became a mammoth task. Refining my search to 'are Hulkling and Wiccan gay?' I

was able to find several discussions on the topic. Many of these lead on to discussion around other gay characters or queer characters in general. The sites that I chose to concentrate on were those that seemed to have the most traffic and the discussions that seemed to centre the most on the queer topic.

Aware of the fact that I would need more examples of queer heroes with which to explore fandom, I also sought to establish how many gay heroes were present in the various comic book universes. Through this search I found two sites with comprehensive lists of queer superheroes, the *Gay League*, which also gave short overviews of the characters, and the site *Wikipedia*, the open source encyclopaedia which also contained details on each queer hero. However, while *Wikipedia* is an excellent source from which to begin searching for a basic understanding of a topic, the fact that it is open source (anybody is able to contribute to or change an article) makes it unreliable as a source for an academic research project, therefore I turned to the *Gay League*. Through this list I came across Northstar, originally from *Alpha Flight* and currently with *Uncanny X-men*. Northstar was the first mainstream major superhero to officially come out on the panel of the comic. I also came across the superheroes The Midnighter and Apollo, but at the time, dismissed them as *The Authority*, the comic series they appear in, was intended for a mature audience whereas I intended to use more mainstream series that are aimed at a general audience.

So out of a list of eighty-nine 'out' queer heroes, I decided to stick with Wiccan, Hulkling and Northstar, while simultaneously researching queer interpretation of Batman. The reasons why I dismissed most of the other heroes on the list were because they were rated for mature audiences or they were secondary characters and only had small parts. I preferred to use characters who were main characters as they had more text for me to interpret, and are generally better known, and therefore popular, on the internet. However the characters Apollo and Midnighter continued to appear in the discussion forum, and after buying and reading several TPB (trade paperback) of the series I decided to use Apollo and the Midnighter as subjects.

Mainly this was because of the way they kept appearing in the forum and also the way in which the couple were portrayed, their sexuality merely a small but natural part of their character.

A question that came up during my investigation was, why do fans like queer characters? There seem to be four possible conclusions to this question: 1) they are gay and therefore support and like the character based on the fact that they share a particular identity. 2) They are not gay but enjoy gay characters as a form of canon slash, usually these fans are female. 3) They support gay characters because they support diversity in comics, or 4) they are comic fans who genuinely just like the characters, art or the writing rather than being attracted by the element of homosexuality. This first category of fans can be seen through the fan discussions and fan letter columns in which they proclaim their sexuality and their support for the characters based on that particular perception. The second category of fans can often be seen through sites such as *FanFiction.net*, the readers and writers, who concentrate on slash fiction, generally prefer queer or potentially queer characters. These slash fans will be discussed further in section seven. The third and fourth category of fan, like the first, is more easily recognised through fan forum in which they can express their views and beliefs.

In order to explore the way that fan fiction works, I decided to create a piece of fan fiction and post it on *FanFiction.net* to see the volume of views and responses it received. The piece of work was a short pre-slash story around Hulkling and Wiccan from *The Young Avengers*, it was posted under the alias Confidenceiskey on 18 October, 2007. Between that time and 15 March, 2008, only four fans have posted reviews. However the story has been viewed three hundred and eighty-two times. Only one percent of the fans viewing the piece of fiction actually reviewed. This is perhaps indicative of the actual amount of fans who actively participate in virtual fandom, compared to the 'lurkers', or fans who take a more passive role in the community, preferring to read the fanfics with out engaging with the community by commenting or discussing the work.

Because of the nature of the internet, problems occur around verifying viable material and specialised ethics are still being established. Attempts were made to verify documents on the World Wide Web by verifying claims and opinions in other forms of texts such as peer reviewed journals and scholarly/industry publications. Also I have noted where the documents are from and the fact that, because they are from the web, they may not be the most valid and objective resources, but I am using them anyway to explore particular points and perspectives. As I am also investigating and using peoples work or comments from fan pages I have tried to be aware of their ethical requirements. However as all the work or comments that I have used are published in public forum rather than in friend-locked pages, I believe that as long as I have properly acknowledged the author and where and when I accessed the work, as well as making sure that I treat the work with respect, then I am satisfied that I have fulfilled ethical requirements to the best of my abilities. In addition I also asked for and received permission from the authors of all the works that appear in this thesis. I have tried my best to treat the works with respect and am grateful for their permission to use their work within my research.

The three different types of sites that I explored were fan fiction sites, fan art sites and fan forum, all around comics in general but involving *Young Avengers*, *The Authority*, *Batman* and the character Northstar in particular. For the fan fiction and fan art, I will be using the sites:

- *Fanfiction.net*, www.fanfiction.net, a site for fan fiction of every genre, it was created by Los Angeles computer programmer Xing Li and has nearly 1.3 million users. The fan fiction is available to anybody to read, however to post a story one must register and create an account.
- Tales from the Dorkside, <http://dorksidefiker.livejournal.com/>, this site is an archive of the fan fiction by one fan, FullMetal_Cute. Since the domain is part of Live Journal, content is moderated in part by the founders of Live

Journal. Her site is not locked and is accessible to public viewing, it contains a variety of fan fiction on several different media.

- *Young Avengers Live Journal*.
<http://community.livejournal.com/youngavengers/>, this site is created by and for *Young Avengers* fans. Its content is moderated, mainly to check that all content is based around *Young Avengers* and that flammers (reviewers who make cruel remarks about the topic or fan work) are not hitting the site. It is open to public access, though some entries are friend locked as they are linked to other fan pages.
- *DeviantArt*, <http://www.deviantart.com/>, this site was created and run by Scott Jarkoff, Matthew Stephens and Angelo Sotira, amongst others. The site provides a place for any artist to exhibit and discuss his or her works; it also provides downloadable resources such as tutorials and stock photography.

The fan forums I have used are:

- *Comic Book Resources*, (<http://www.comixfan.com/xfan/forums/>) is a website dedicated to the coverage of comic book-related news and discussion. It was founded in 1996 by Jonah Weiland. While it is not an official source it does include weekly columns written by writers from comic industry such as Warren Ellis and Mark Millar (both worked on *The Authority*). In order to make comments you must be registered.
- *DC Universe Message Board*, (<http://dcboards.warnerbros.com>), is a site affiliated with the official DC website and is dedicated to discussion around any DC comics, including associated comic lines such as Wildstorm and Vertigo. All guests are welcome.

The reason I selected these sites was because of the content of the discussions. The *Comic Book Resources Forum* has several different threads of discussion around gay characters in general and *Young Avengers* in particular, dating back to early 2005, just after the first issue came out. There is not a huge range between them, only *DC Universe Message Board* is affiliated with the official website of DC comics. The rest were created by fans or in the case of *Deviant Art*, by artists.

Overall the constantly evolving and expanding nature of virtual fandom meant that I spent an immense amount of time trawling through the information available. This continued right until I began to write up this report, as new information, stories and art are constantly being posted, opening new ideas and possibilities for my research.

Chapter Four: Batman: Queer Readings

4.1: Ambiguity

The most interesting thing about superhero comics and their queer fans (that's fans who take a queer reading of the text not just gay fans) is that the straight characters are generally more popular than the ready made queer characters. While queer characters have overwhelming support from fans in most cases, they are relatively less well known and less used by fans than many of the heteronormative characters. Of course there could be many different factors behind this; there are a huge amount of superhero characters in the two largest mainstream comic worlds, generally known as the DC Universe and the Marvel family. It is difficult to get every character publicity, especially if the comic series the queer characters appear in is new, or less popular. It is also possible that, though there is more written around straight heroes, the amount of slash fiction and art created for a heteronormative character, is comparable to the amount of 'fanfics' written around queer characters. Slash fiction as discussed earlier (Section 1.5), is written by a minority of 'fanfic' writers, most of whom are female. Therefore fans writing about queer characters seem to fall within this minority as it is extremely similar, only differing in the fact that it is canon (adheres to the continuity of the actual text).

Perhaps one of the main reasons why fans prefer to use 'straight' characters is because of the mysterious ambiguity of their lives. Superhero comics have always been extremely ambiguous around the characters; instead they tend to concentrate on the action. By ambiguous I mean that there is a lack of depth to the characters background and personal life. Many of the older characters such as Batman and Superman have immense amounts of work and information on their background. However, it lacks emotional depth and since the writers of the characters change so often over time, the characters and their backgrounds also change, even though it is often not much, meaning that they are different interpretations and a messy but rich history that can be hard for both fans and non-fans to work out. The lack of

ambiguity may also come from the fact that, as a text, comics need to be read two different ways. The first is through the dialogue, though certain emotions are indicated through the text from stuttering or thought bubbles, they are basic and therefore the reader of the text is left to interpret them through their own imagination. The reader needs to interpret the images from their own world-view and personal experiences. For example in Figure 4.1, some fans would interpret Iceman's posture as annoyed and sarcastic, mockingly bowing down behind Northstar because he is angry at Northstar's arrogance and superior behaviour. He could also be angry at the fact that the professor sent Northstar to help, believing it to be a slight on his capability. On the other hand a fan that is gay or enjoys reading queer texts, or even just wants to see Northstar in a better light, might see Iceman's behaviour as flirtatious banter. Iceman's body, bent at the waist, points towards the other man making his comment slightly less angry. Of course the writer may have intended there to simply be a friendly banter between former acquaintances.

This inherent ambiguity allows superhero texts to be easily intertextualised as you do not need an in-depth explanation of the character to create a filmic, animated or gaming translation. Batman dresses in a black costume, has lots of gadgets, and is smart, rich and mysterious. He has a strict moral code, is obsessed with righting injustice because of his parent's death and has a cool car. That is all that a non-comic Batman watcher needs to know really a superhero film is a super-powered action with weird costumes.

The animated comedy sketch *The Ambiguously Gay Duo*, which was produced by Robert Smigel and J.J. Sedelmaier Productions for *Saturday Night Live* on NBC, parodies the relationship between Batman and Robin, as well as the ambiguity of the superhero text and its indefinableness. The series is comprised of eleven short episodes so far, each being only a few minutes long. In each episode the two heroes, Ace and Gary, save the day as superheroes tend to do, but not before bringing attention to themselves with shockingly homoerotic behaviour and innuendo. The episodes usually end with a particular gag as the villain and victims look on in shock



Figure 4.1: Northstar And Iceman Share A Friendly Banter In *Uncanny X-Men #141: Fall Down Go Boom*.

at the actions of the heroes, who are completely oblivious to their own behaviour, but are finally aware of the looks they are receiving from the crowd. The two heroes ask “what’s everybody looking at?” to which the crowd quickly replies “nothing”. Figure 4.2 shows one of an example of the exaggerated homoerotic behaviour of the heroes, where the two of them are flying to the rescue, Ace carrying Gary on his back.

The ambiguous nature of comics was encouraged by the Comics Code, which was introduced in 1954. It was the controversial book *Seduction of the Innocent* (1954), by Fredric Wertham that led to the code being put into place.



Figure 4.2: The Ambiguously Gay Duo Parodies The Homoerotic Nature Of Superhero Comics, In This Image Ace And Gary Fly To The Rescue.

4.2: Wertham and the Comics Code

In 1954 Fredric Wertham conducted one of the first queer readings of the Batman/Robin relationship in his work *Seduction of the Innocent* and it was far from flattering. As Les Daniels points out:

Batman's creators were evidently heterosexuals, and it would never have occurred to them that homosexual undertones could have been read into the stories that they created. It's highly probable that they were focused instead on the objections that would have been raised if Bruce Wayne were living with an adolescent girl, and they were bending over backwards to avoid even the suggestion of sex (2004, p. 85).

In his book Wertham claimed that comics were a major cause of juvenile delinquency, he also spent four pages of his work, according to Daniels, 'persuading his repressed 1950s audience that Batman and Robin were gay and that exposure to their adventures would send young readers down the same path to perdition' (p. 84). Wertham also argued that Batman and Robin's lifestyle was rather suspect, 'they live in sumptuous quarters, with beautiful flowers in large vases, and have a butler... it is like a wish dream of two homosexuals living together' though he seemed to have a very stereotypical view of gays as I am sure that most straight couples would not complain about living in such a style (Lendrum, 2004, p. 70). While Wertham's research and assumptions might be suspect now as his evidence for these claims came from Wertham's Readjustment Centre, his clinic devoted to the psychotherapy of sexual difficulties, they had a huge impact on the comic industry at the time. Many of the smaller publishers were driven out of business, while the handful that survived adopted the stringent Comics Code which regulated the content released within the industry.

The Comic's Code was adopted October 26, 1954 by the Comics Code Authority (CCA) which was set up by the Comics Magazine Association of America (CMAA).

It was modelled on a largely un-enforced code that had been drafted in 1948 which was loosely based on the Hollywood Production Code of 1930. It was made up of several parts including what costume, dialogue and advertising were allowed as well as guidelines on religion, sex and marriage. Many items and characters were banned completely for example scenes dealing with vampires, zombies, werewolves, ghosts and other things associated with horror stories. The surviving publishers adhered to the code in order to survive. The code was changed and adjusted over time for example in 1989 it was changed to allow non-stereotypical portrayals of gays and lesbians. Eventually however artists and then publishers began to ignore the restricting rules of the Code which, being voluntary was unable to do anything. In 2001 Marvel withdrew from the CCA and created its own rating system, as of 2005 only DC and Archie comics are still submitting comics to the CCA, with DC only submitting stories from several of their different lines.

Most importantly for the subject of sexuality in comics was, under the sex and marriage section, “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 sanctity of marriage. 7. Sex perversion or any inference [sic] to same is strictly forbidden (Lendrum, 2004, p. 70). According to Lendrum, this act actually encouraged the possibility of a queer reading of characters such as Batman and Robin. The fact that heteronormative relationships could not be confirmed except through marriage left the text wide open for slash fans. Batman was reinterpreted in a queer context over and over again. This was not helped by the 1960’s campy television show.

After the accusations levelled by Wertham, it was felt that Batman had to be tamed down in order to comply with the new Comics Code. Like many of the other publishers and individual comics of the time, this almost destroyed *Batman*. According to Daniels (2004), writers seeking to pull attention away from the potential relationship between the ‘dynamic duo’ resorted to some of the strangest plots in *Batman* comic history in order to maintain interest, these generally included *Batman*

changing into something such as an alien or '*The Zebra Batman*' (p. 91). This was what I shall term 'phase one' of the re-heterosexualising of Batman and Robin. 'Phase two' was to bring in potential love interests in the form of Batwoman and Batgirl, however while they were seen as love interests, both Robin and Batman resisted their feminine charm with Robin commenting that like Batman he was renouncing "'romance"' while he was a crime fighter' (Daniels, p. 94). Rather ironically Batwoman has recently re-emerged as a lesbian character, however at the time she served to distract readers from the Batman/Robin relationship and also led into 'phase three' of the re-heterosexualising of Batman and Robin plan which was to give Batman a family (see fig 4.3). This family included Batwoman, Batgirl, Commissioner Gordon, Alfred the butler, Robin, Bat-hound, Bat-imp and even at one point Mogo the Bat-ape which did not meet with universal critical favour. By 1964, as Daniels puts it, 'Batman was in big trouble... there was no core character left, just a hollow man being battered from place to place by whatever gimmick could be concocted' (p. 95). There was talk of Batman being put to rest however he was given to a new editor just in time for the new pop art and camp era.

4.3: Camp and Reheterosexualisation

According to Susan Sontag "'camp" is a style or a sensibility' (1966, p. 275). More recent queer accounts of camp see it as an oppositional critique (of gender and sexuality) embodied in a "queer" performative identity (Butler, 1993). But as Andy Medhurst commented, 'trying to define Camp is like trying to sit in the corner of a circular room', it just can't be done (1991, p. 154). While both the 1960s television series and the early comics could be called camp, I would argue that one is generally self-consciously camp whereas the other is unconsciously camp. The television show fits well into Medhurst's working definition of camp as 'playful, knowing, self-reflexive theatricality' (p. 155). According to Medhurst '*Batman* the sixties' TV series was nothing if not knowing. It employed the codes of camp in an unusually public and heavily signalled way' (p. 155). The comics on the other hand fit more with Sontag's comment 'The whole point of Camp is to dethrone the serious... more

precisely, Camp involves a new, more complex relation to ‘the serious’ (p. 156). One can be serious about the frivolous, frivolous about the serious’. As Medhurst points out the *Batman* comics is serious (for example the moral discourses and the serious story lines), about the frivolous (two men dressed up in tights and masks) (p. 156). While contemporary *Batman* comics could be considered camp under this particular definition, the playful theatricality does not really seem to play a part very often with *Batman* stories tending to take a more grim view.

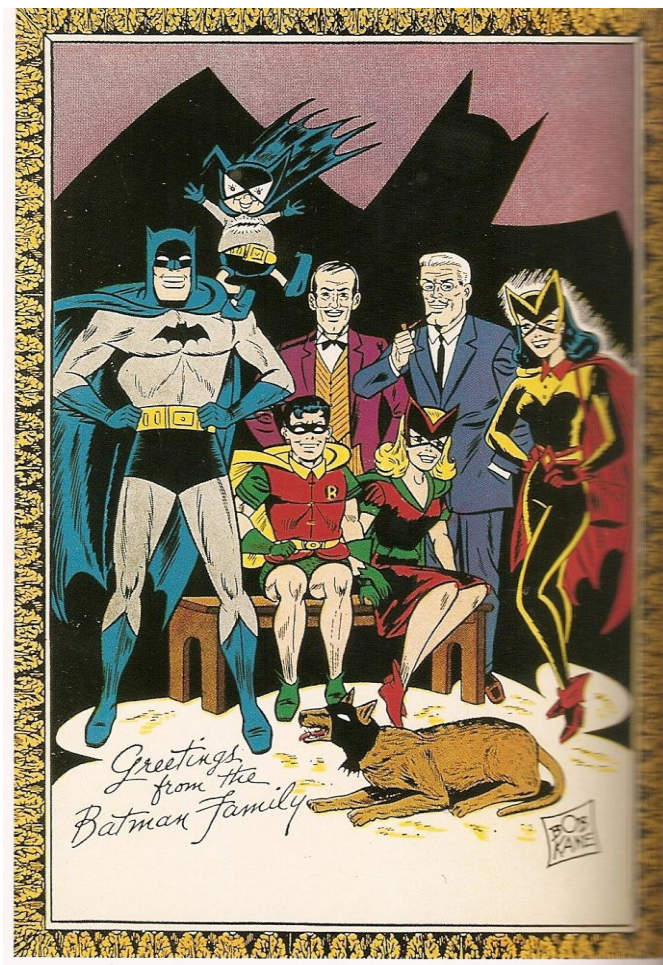


Figure 4.3: The Bat-family From Les Daniels' *Batman: The Complete History*.

Within the show Adam West's Batman and Burt Ward's Robin in the series, played with the camp style, often leaping into seemingly sexual poses and using double entendres. George Melly (1970) commented that 'the real *Batman* series were beautiful because of their unselfconscious absurdity. The remarks, too, at first worked on a double level. 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 that Batman had it off with Robin' (p. 193). This comment shows that it was not the absurd over-acting of the characters that older audiences found amusing, but the implication that the great Batman, model of masculinity was queer for Robin. That and the shared sense of amusement, of knowing is something that in a way drives slash fans.

However the show lasted only two years before being cut due to a major drop in ratings. The comics also began to suffer as the silliness of the camp style began to wear thin, as Julius Schwartz, the Batman editor at the time, commented 'when the television show was a success, I was asked to be campy, and of course when the show faded, so did the comic books' (Daniels, 2004, p. 115). At the time the camp style had not become tantamount with gay culture as it would later on. However later the shows style would become associated with the queer accounts of camp. As Ray Tate commented on The Panel 'since the Batman television show became synonymous with camp, and flamboyantly gay behaviour later became described as campy, the association perpetuated' (*Silver Bullet Comic Books*, 2003). The Panel is part of the *Silver Bullet Comic Books* site where fans ask a question which is then answered by several well known comic artists, writers and others involved in the industry.

An example of this campy style can be seen in *Justice League of America #44*, published in 1966 (see fig 4.4). In one of the frames the villain tells the heroes, Batman, The Atom, The Flash and the Green Lantern that not only are they doomed but also everyone else that they have touched. Ironically, while all the other heroes reply to the villain's threat by expressing their guilt at putting their female love

interests in danger, Batman's thoughts go to Robin instead. If the frame followed the same narrative line then Batman should be thinking of the person who is his love interest as well, it is especially interesting as the villain said 'everyone else you have touched'. However it is also possible to see their thoughts as being about the characters that hold the greatest weakness for them and since Batman is generally without a love interest his ward would be his most vulnerable point.



Figure 4.4: The Loved Ones of the Heroes, The Atom, Flash, Green Lantern And Batman, Are Threatened. From *Justice League of America* #44.

Taking the character of Batman for example, except for the camp period of the 1960's which many fans of the comic would prefer to forget about, Batman has generally been a serious and grim character. This was especially so after the Frank Miller's take on Gotham's Dark Knight in *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*, which was released in 1986, on which the Batman character in Tim Burton's 1989 *Batman* film was

based. This dark uncompromising figure has become the Batman stereotype in the mainstream comics. This makes him so interesting to fanfic writers because his ambiguous façade can be delved into, his emotions, so well hidden can be displayed through a fanfic and the nature of his relationship with Robin can be displayed and explored. His lack of a relationship with a female character, even once the Comics Code had been more or less dropped is particularly interesting, as is the fact that the only people who he is close to are males, Alfred, Robin, Superman etc. After all Batman and other superheroes exist mainly in the minds of the fans and of course the writers and artists, it is perhaps possible to say that many of the newer comics, based around the older original text is a form of official fan writing as all of them are basing their work on a constructed character from a previous work. As Andy Medhurst states, “if I want Batman to be gay, then, for me he is. After all outside of the minds of his writers and readers, he doesn’t really exist” (p. 162).

However there have been many attempts to re-heterosexualise Batman by his editors and writers. The most obvious sign of an attempt to return to heteronormativity was when Dick Grayson aka Robin was sent off to college in 1969. Medhurst’s comments, “This was a shrewd move. It’s impossible to conceive of the recent, obsessive, sturm-und-drang Batman with a chirpy little Robin getting in the way”, (p. 159). Without Robin, Batman was able to engage in more serious endeavours such as the grim masterpiece *The Killing Joke* (1988). However fans genuinely missed Robin, and so in 1987 a new Robin was introduced, Jason Todd. Unfortunately the new Robin never really seemed to fit in and in a poll in 1988 fans voted for his death at the hands of the joker. A third Robin appeared in 1989, Tim Drake, he is still the current Robin and has his own series. However the new Robin lost his pant-less costume, going for full length tights to lessen the homoeroticism of his appearance. He also did not live with Bruce Wayne, residing instead at home with his father. In another attempt to lessen the homoerotic interpretations of the Batman text, several love interests were introduced at one point or another, including a Batwoman and a Batgirl. Interestingly Batwoman has recently been re-introduced as a lesbian character. Frank Miller, who took Batman back to his dark roots, introduced a female

Robin as a sidekick for the Dark Knight in his series, called Cassie Kelley. All traces of the campy style of the sixties were wiped away

4.4: Queer Readings

Fans have been demonstrating and reconstructing the Batman texts since the comic first hit the stands. And it is clear that the queer interpretations of the duo have been occurring since Robin was first introduced into comics. Dick Grayson known as Robin was introduced in 1940 order to make to make the comic more attractive to younger audiences (Daniels, 2004, p. 85). In comparison to Batman's dark mysterious demeanour and costume, Robin was adorned in bright colours and pixie boots. It has been argued that Robin was an instant hit; he worked as Batman's companion, his sounding board and his 'damsel in distress'. Whereas Batman's sharp angles and square build represented masculinity and strength, Robin is portrayed as softer and curvier, almost feminine in answer to Batman's almost overwhelming masculinity. Robin offered the perfect damsel in distress, not only was he feminine in appearance, and attractive in his tiny green shorts but he also allowed Batman to escape from the expectations that a female love interest would demand. According to Best (2005), female characters have the power to effeminize the power and masculinity of the male superhero (pp.4-5). He points out that 'homosociality took two dominant forms: the representation of women as threatening male power and freedom, especially via marriage and domesticity (most profoundly expressed in the potential revelation of the secret identity), and male camaraderie and shared knowledge as a means of containing these feminine, emasculating threats' (pp. 4-5). Therefore Robin made the perfect sidekick, Batman could explain his actions for 'Robins benefit' and have someone to rescue without becoming entangled in an effeminizing love affair.

Interestingly it is the source of Batman's temporary fall from grace that pointed out the queer readings that gay fans of Batman were conducting. As outlined earlier, Fredric Wertham conducted one of the first queer readings of the Batman text;

however he claims he was not the first to interpret it in this way. During a course of psychotherapy, one young homosexual brought in a copy of Detective Comic, which depicted a beautifully landscaped scene, warmly lighted and showing the pair side by side, looking out a picture window. When he was eight this boy had realized from fantasizes about comic book pictures that he was attracted to men. At the age of ten or eleven, “I found my liking, my sexual desire, in comic books. I think I put myself in the position of Robin. I did want to have relations with Batman... I remember the first time I came across the page mentioning the “secret batcave”. The thought of Batman and Robin living together and possibly having sex relations came to my mind”, (p. 192). It is easy to see why the Bruce/Dick set up would be attractive to a gay fan, or even a straight fan, who does not want to live in a luxurious mansion? The queer implications of early Batman works are also easy to see; in Figure 1.1 Bruce and Dick are seen waking up side by side. The two beds seem to be joined together as if they were sleeping in just the one big bed. The circular frame of the image indicates naturalness in the image, as if it is completely natural for the two to wake up side by side. Their happy expressions also indicate a close relationship, as does the way that they are leaning towards each other, the angle of Bruce Wayne’s knees creating a connection between the two. The colouration of the image indicates its age as it uses the standard four colour process, linking the image to the more camp period of Batman history.

This example shows that even some younger fans were creating a queer reading of the text though obviously Wertham intended this to be met with shock and horror, therefore it may be slightly exaggerated to emphasize a negative point of view. The example also shows a gay fans’ point-of-view which differs from heterosexual readers and even the majority of the slash fiction writers who are in fact female. As Medhurst (1991) points out “denied even the remotest possibility of supportive images of homosexuality within the dominant heterosexual culture, gay people have had to fashion what we could out of the imaginaries of dominance, to snatch illicit meanings from the fabric of normality, to undertake a corrupt decoding for the purpose of satisfying marginalized desires, (p. 153). In saying that, we could presume

that gay characters would therefore be readily welcomed, which they are with many positive responses, however as discussed earlier fans find it easier to use more ambiguous characters like Batman in order to project their own ideal of the character and masculinity, than to use a slightly less ambiguous character who has had their sexuality confirmed, taking the mystery and the ‘is he or isn’t he’ aspect of the text away. That said the relative lack of sexual behaviour on the panel by gay superheroes like Northstar and *The Young Avenger*’s Billy and Teddy leaves a lot of space for fan interpretation which can be seen through fan interaction in Chapter Six and fan participation in Chapter Seven.

By using *Batman* I hoped to show that queer interpretation has been used since practically the beginning of superhero comic history, even if it was not expressed through fan fiction and art at the time, but rather through negative reports like Wertham’s or shared fantasies like those that watched and interpreted the camp *Batman* show of the 1960s. Though writers, artists and the Comics Code Authority have tried to reclaim comics in general as a heteronormative text, fans have continued to interpret and appropriate the characters for their own purposes. Even now that there are queer characters being represented in the text, heteronormative characters like Batman, are still popular in fan appropriation, showing that the ambiguity inherent in the medium is perhaps more popular than confirmed characters.

Chapter Five: The Authority and Sexual Representation in the Text

5.1: The Authority

While most mainstream superhero comics employ the presence/absence concept in regards to sexuality on the panel, the more adult versions have the freedom to portray it more openly. The reason that I have explored a more adult text such as *The Authority*, which is recommended for mature audiences, is to underline what is potentially not shown in mainstream superhero texts. To do this, in this chapter, I compare sexual representation in *The Authority* to mainstream comics in particular the character Northstar. As pointed out earlier in Chapter Two, section 2.2, in order to understand being ‘out’, it is important to understand what it is to be ‘in’. While Northstar and other mainstream comic superheroes are ‘out’, they are also ‘in’ to an extent as they strive to fit in with heteronormative mainstream superheroes, their sexuality rarely present on the panel unless to obscurely address an issue such as Aids. Midnighter and Apollo on the other hand are ‘out’, they do not attempt to hide their sexuality or their relationship in any way, as will be seen in this chapter.

But first, what is *The Authority*? *The Authority* is a comic book series that was first published in 1999. The series, which is rated for mature audiences, is a take on the mainstream superhero DC world which includes figures such as Batman and Superman. Geoff Klock aptly comments that ‘*The Authority* gleefully embraces the questionable politics entailed by the terms of the superhero narrative’ (2002, p. 136). In other words, *The Authority* takes the idea that, rather than struggling to keep the bad guys down on a small scale, why not just do it large scale and impose a worldwide justice system. The series explores the darker side of superhuman power and responsibility in a light-hearted approach. For all the incredibly harsh punishments this team hands out, never mind the fact that they effectively take over the world, they are still the good guys and are rarely held accountable for their actions.

The team itself is made of seven main members, The Midnighter, Apollo, Jenny Sparks, Jack Hawksmoor, Swift, The Engineer and The Doctor. Over the series Jenny Sparks, the spirit of the 20th century dies as her century closes and is reborn as Jenny Quantum, the spirit of the 21st century, and is adopted by The Midnighter and Apollo. Also the Doctor is murdered with an overdose administered through his blood stream and his position was taken up by a new Doctor.

The two main characters from the series that I examined are Apollo and The Midnighter, two of the most violently powerful members of the team who are involved in a relationship. The two characters first appeared in the series *Stormwatch* vol. 2 #4-6 (1998). Both were created by the Weatherman Henry Bendix who was at one point, head of Stormwatch, a guardian like force which kept earth safe. Bendix was the only one aware of the existence of the two and the rest of their team-mates. When the team donned their costumes for the first time and spoke their code names, their memories of their previous identities were erased. Unfortunately on their first mission the team was destroyed leaving only Apollo and The Midnighter as survivors. The two went rogue and spent five years fighting for a finer world in the streets of America. It was probably during this period of living on the streets that the two entered into a relationship. They were eventually discovered by the new Weatherman Jackson King. After helping him, out he gave the two new lives away from Stormwatch.

When Stormwatch was destroyed, Jenny Sparks, the spirit of the 20th century, approached the pair and convinced them to come out of retirement. The two then joined the *Authority* team. Their relationship was officially revealed in issue #8 as can be seen in Figure 5.1. However their attachment was hinted at in the first seven issues. Later in the story arc *The Nativity*, the pair marries on panel (see fig. 5.2); making them possibly the only gay married super couple. They also adopted a child, Jenny Quantum.



Figure 5.1: The First Indication Of Apollo And Midnighter's Relationship, From *The Authority: Relentless*.

Of the pair, Apollo is more in line with gay stereotypes than the hypermasculine Midnigher. He is almost feminine in appearance with long, white blond hair; however as can be seen in Figure 5.3, his female counterpart from an alternative universe is extremely masculine in appearance, perhaps indicating a certain androgyny on the characters part. Apollo is modelled on the DC superhero Superman while Midnigher is modelled on Batman. Their relationship is a queer reading of the Superman and Batman text, though it is not in a camp style and does not parody the pair, being instead a serious take on what if Batman and Superman were together.

Like Superman, Apollo gets his energy from the suns solar energy. This provides him with near invulnerability, super strength and flight, though he becomes vulnerable when his solar energy is running low. He is able to circle the globe in just under 30 seconds and is able to release his solar energy in blast though this is taxing on his energy. From sheer exhaustion he can regain enough energy to fly in twenty seconds exposure to the sun and become fully recharged in two hours. While he is the more laid back, and kinder character in the relationship this does not stop him from killing his opponents if he needs or wants to.

The Midnigher, being based on the character Batman, is far less friendly and forgiving than Apollo, and like Batman is constantly on edge and suspicious. However in Midnigher's case this connected to the fact that he has a computer stored in his brain allowing him to run through millions of possible scenarios in an instant, allowing him to counteract any move an opponent makes. This is not his only enhancement; he also has a second heart as backup, enhanced strength, speed, senses, reflexes, immune system and many others. His muscles are fibre-lined allowing him to dismember his opponents with his bare hands and he can move faster than the superhuman eye in short burst. Along with the computer in his brain he also has survival oriented implants such as pain receptors, which he can turn on and off, as well as an increased healing factor which allows him to continue fighting no matter how much damage his body has taken. Midnigher is often described within the text of the comic as the most dangerous man in the world even though other characters are



Figure 5.2: The Marriage Of Apollo And Midnighter From *The Authority: Transfer Of Power*.



Figure 5.3: Apollo's Female Counterpart, From *The Authority: Earth Inferno And Other Stories*.

more powerful than he is. The only people he willingly shows emotion for are his husband Apollo and his daughter Jenny Quantum.

5.2: Sexuality in Text

As expected from the warning on the comics, ‘for mature audiences’, *The Authority* is far more explicit in the representation of violence and sexuality. Apollo and Midnigher relationship is hinted at in the first seven issues of the series, but it is not made explicit until #8 as can be seen by Figure 5.1. Unlike Northstar, however, once their relationship is known it is not sent to the background of the series. As Klock comments ‘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’. Unlike Northstar’s castrated status, or any mainstream gay superhero, Apollo and Midnigher are seen embracing and kissing several times through out the series. This can be seen in Figure 5.2 and 5.4. Figure 5.2 features the two characters at their wedding, embracing as the chaplain confirms their marriage. Figure 5.4, shows a provocative image of the two kissing in the carrier (the ship that is home to the authority), the Earth can be seen behind them while a deck of cards flutter around them. The card most clearly seen ironically features the Queen of Hearts, the heart as a symbol of their love for each other, while the image of the queen refers to their sexual status. While these are obviously not incredibly graphic, they are provocative for a superhero comic. The only comics include truly graphic sexual imagery are things like adult manga (Japanese comics) especially Yaoi which contains graphic scenes of men having sex with other male characters. There are also underground comics and erotic adult comics which feature more queer nudity and sexual imagery. However Marvel and DC’s adult comics involving homosexuality are extremely conservative by comparison. For example, *The Rawhide Kid* (2003), a more mature version of an earlier series of the same title, while classes as adult and published in Marvel’s adult range Max, contained little explicit material. It was seemingly rated so high merely because of the fact that the main character was homosexual and constantly made



Figure 5.4: Apollo And Midnighter Embracing In *Midnighter #7: Frack To Bunt*.

blatant jokes and innuendo around his sexuality which the other characters never seemed to understand.

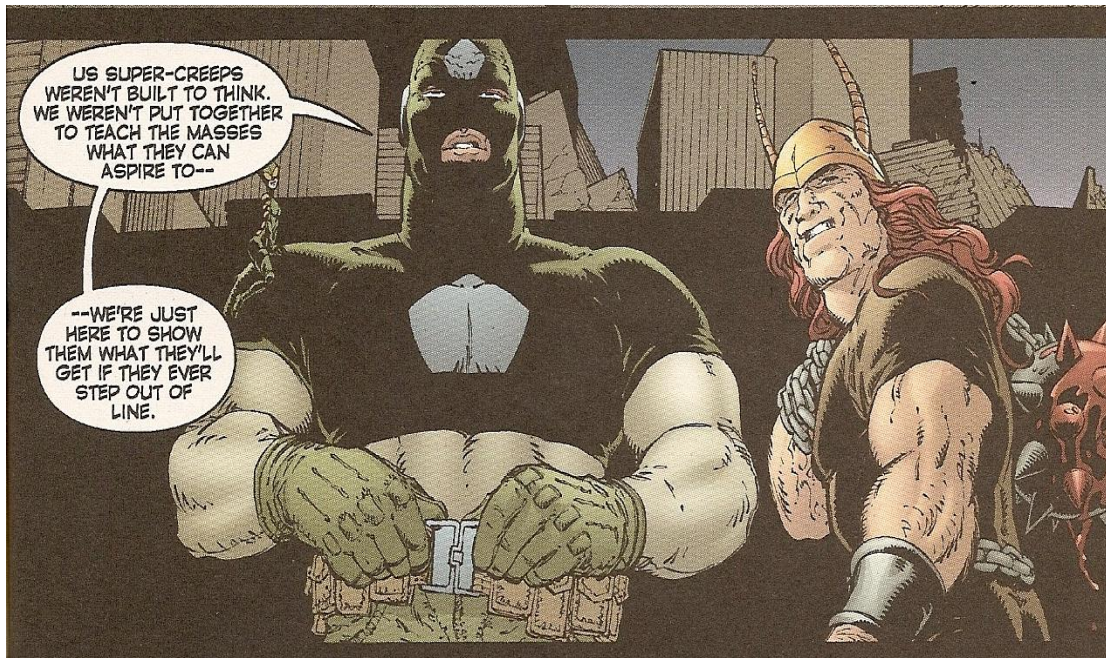


Figure 5.5: The Commander Prepares To Rape Apollo Off Panel. From *The Authority: Under New Management*.

Perhaps one of the most notorious incidents within *The Authority* involving their sexuality was the presumed rape of Apollo. While searching for the reincarnated form of Jenny Sparks, the *Authority* team come up against a super powered team known as the Americans. In his review on the issue Kevin Mathews calls them ‘a thinly disguised knock off of the *Avengers*, Marvel Comics equivalent of the Justice League of America’, (Mathews,). During the battle Apollo is supposedly raped by The Commander, a take off of Captain America. This is illustrated in Figure 5.5, in which The Commander can be seen taking off his belt. The idea of rape being portrayed in comics is not truly rare; Hawkeye from *The Young Avengers* indicated that she was raped at one point, (YA Special #1, 2006). What is remarkable about it is the fact that the victim was a man, not just any man but a super-powered, invulnerable superhero, the very image of masculinity. While not portrayed on panel, the mere indication of takes ideals of masculine power and turns them on their head,



Figure 5.6: Midnighter, Unmasked, Attempts To Reason With A Homophobic Kev In *The Authority: Kev*.

the terms of masculinity are destroyed leaving the hyper-masculine figure vulnerable. Perhaps the editors/writers see this reversal of masculine power as explainable because of Apollo's sexual identity, however that is just conjecture and Apollo reverts back to his normal cheerful self fairly quickly, perhaps satisfied by the gruesome revenge that Midnigher extracted. After Apollo paralyzes The Commander and leaves, Midnigher is seen bearing down on the Commander with a jackhammer and the comment, 'a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance', (*Authority: Under New Management*, 2000). It is to be presumed from this that Midnigher rapes the villain with the Jackhammer, though, like the initial rape this takes place off screen. Like the rape seen, the very fact that the two most violent and powerful members of the team are involved in a homosexual relationship contradicts ideas around masculinity, disrupting the discourses of the superior power of the male-heterosexual. .

5.3: Homophobia in Panel

Among the challenges that they do face over the series is the issue of homophobia. Within the series, the two face two types of homophobia, explicit and non-explicit. The main source of the latter is the anti-hero Kev Hawkins. Kev, a former soldier with both the British Army and the SAS, is described as having the worst luck in the world. Kicked out of the SAS for accidentally allowing a visiting diplomat to be eaten by a friend's tiger, he was given to MI5 to do the jobs that no one else would take. He is sent by his boss to kill the *Authority* with a specially designed gun. The *Authority* thought that it was a joke, allowing him to take them by surprise killing them all within 12 seconds. Unfortunately, it turns out that an alien was masquerading as his boss, and by killing the *Authority* he cleared the way for an invasion. He was able to convince The Carrier, the sentient ship on which the *Authority* makes their headquarters, to reverse time within itself, resurrecting the heroes in time for them to take care of the situation. While the team decides to let Kev go free despite finding out that he killed them, his bad luck kicks in and he



Figure 5.7: Last Call Attempts To Assert His Heterosexuality In *The Authority: Transfer Of Power*.

makes a ill timed remark, “What, are they a couple of poofs or something?”, (*Authority: Kev*, 2005). Neither Apollo nor Midnighter is willing to accept derogatory comments on their relationship, and his words earn Kev a severe beating leaving him in hospital.

Throughout his appearances in *The Authority*, Kev continuously makes homophobic comments or goes on gay-bashing rants. These are usually followed by him finding out that a friend of his is gay. However while Kev is portrayed as one of life’s losers and homophobic, he is still a protagonist and is generally portrayed as being ignorant rather than a bad guy. After the second time in which Midnighter and Kev are forced to work together, Midnighter tells Kev that the real reason ne was a homophobe was because that’s what he thought ‘tough guys’ were like and that he had let others tell him what to do his entire life, (Figure 5.6). However the fact that Midnighter is gay should be enough to change Kev’s outlook. Midnighter fulfils the archetypal vision of masculinity; he is aggressive, powerful, conceals his emotions and lives by his own moral code. While Kev is a protagonist, *The Authority* does not show his homophobia in a positive light. Instead, Kev is often beaten for his attitude, by Midnighter, or embarrassed when he finds out that one of his friends is gay after a long homophobic rant. He is shown more positively as he begins to change his ways slightly, especially after discovering one of his close friends, Danny, is gay. When Danny is killed, he gets revenge on the murderer, and is shown to at least semi-accept homosexuality. For this he is rewarded with a, for Kev at least, happy ending growing cannabis with his new girlfriend, the sister of Danny’s lover, and looking after Danny’s tiger.

While Kev is able to redeem himself, there are several characters through the series who are far more explicit in their homophobia. In particular is the character, Last Call, the puppet substitute who was installed temporarily by the government after seemingly destroying the Authority team. As can be seen in Figure 5.7, he goes to great pains to disassociate himself from being gay. His homophobia seems to stem from his fear that he could be either seen as gay, or that he might actually be gay. In



Figure 5.8: Last Call Asserts His Heterosexuality In A More Extreme Way.
From *The Authority: Transfer Of Power*.

a way he seems like a negative take of the reheterosexualisation of Batman that occurred from the seventies and eighties. Batman writers took every step possible in order establish Batman as straight, and Last Call's fear of being seen as gay seems to be a negative reflection of these writers and editors. Last Call seems to enjoy torturing Apollo mockingly calling his 'twinkle-toes', (*The Authority: Transfer of Power*, 2001) his extreme homophobia can be seen in the panels of Figure 5.8, a supporter of the original Authority attempts to warp the replacements into the old crew, however when fake Apollo attempts to kiss him, Last Call's homophobia kicks in and he breaks free of the control, killing the character in an incredibly gory scene, while proclaiming his heterosexuality.

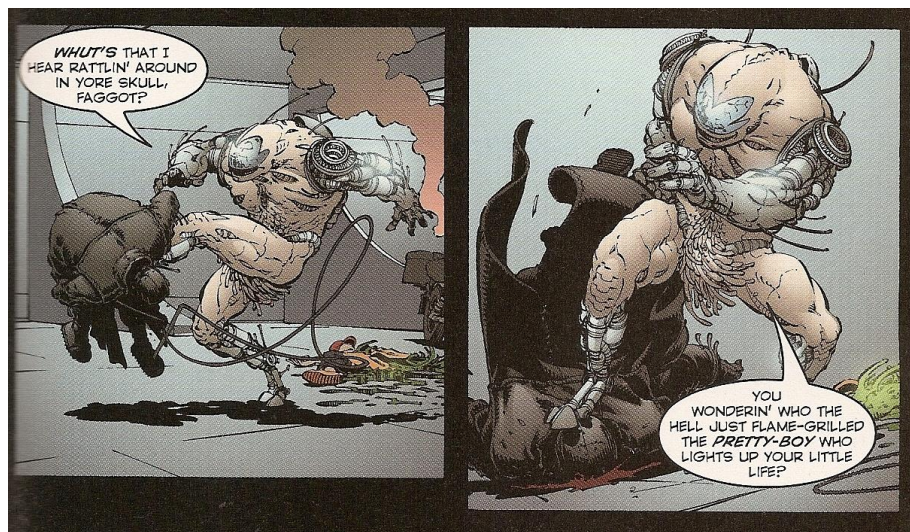


Figure 5.9: Seth Uses Homophobic Insults While Attacking Apollo And The Midnighter In *The Authority: Transfer Of Power*.

Most of the villains that Apollo and Midnighter face tend to make homophobic comments, such as Last Call. These include the villains Seth and The Doctor (evil previous Doctor); example of their homophobia can be seen in Figure 5.9 and 5.10. The Doctor calls them poofs and fat queens, blaming the degeneracy of youth on their example. Seth addresses them as 'faggot', 'fairy lights' and 'pretty boy', (*The Authority: Transfer of Power*, 2001). It is almost as if the villains must have homophobia as a trait to take on the duo. Of course by the end of the arc the homophobic villains come to gory endings. Last Call's head is blasted off by Apollo,

The Doctor is burnt to a crisp and then has his head kicked off. Seth on the other hand suffers a more disturbing fate; he is turned into several chickens and left in front of his hillbilly relations. It is indicated that he will suffer being eaten by his family not just once but several times over. The comic therefore gives the message that homophobia is a villainous trait and something to look down on. It is always punished in series; even Kev is beaten or humiliated.

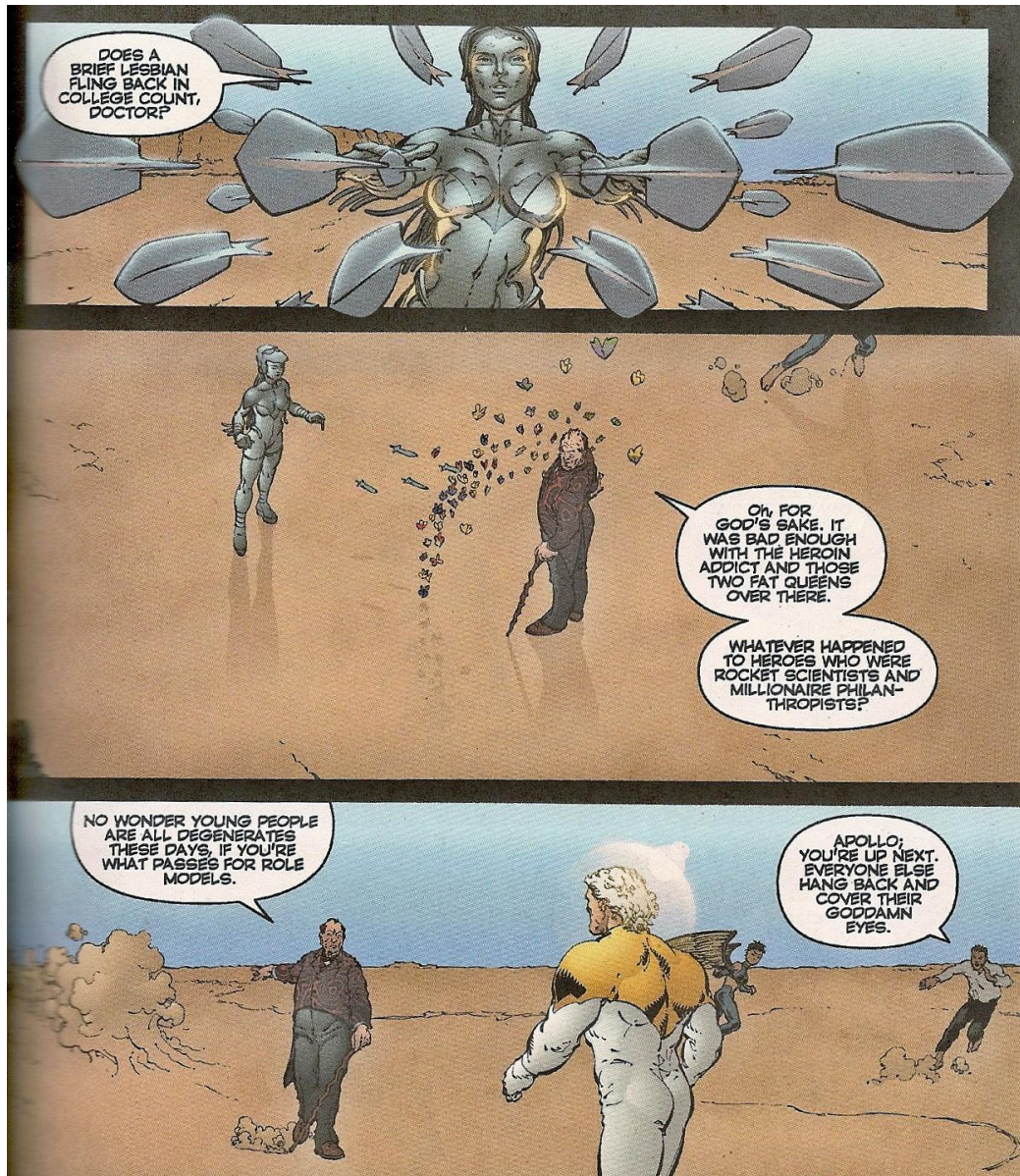


Figure 5.10: The Ex-doctor Uses Homophobic Insults When Fighting The Authority Team In *The Authority: Earth Inferno And Other Stories*.



Figure 5.11: Northstar Reacts To An Off The Screen Homophobic Insult In *Uncanny X-Men* #392.

In comparison, homophobia is rarely shown in mainstream superhero comics. However there are several instances in Northstar's history in which he faces homophobia. In Figure 5.11, Northstar is seen getting into conflict with another hero who is homophobic, Paulie. Though the mutant is supposedly near invulnerable, Northstar is still able to knock him down. In comparison with Kev, the actual insult to Northstar is left off the panel, as fits in with the presence/absence approach examined in chapter 6. In another non-explicit homophobic moment, the insults to Northstar are printed on the page. The young mutant boy, who he is trying to save, responds badly upon finding out that Northstar is queer. He struggles with the hero and calls him a 'fruit', (UXM #414, 2002). However unlike *The Authority*, this homophobia is not punished and it is shown through further dialogue that the boy is merely 'ignorant' or confused.

Boy: 'I'm not a queer and you can't make me!'

Northstar: 'I'm not trying to make you into anything, you little fool. I'm trying to save your life! For what lunatic reason at the moment I cannot recall and...'

[The boy explodes; Northstar catches him and carries on (see Figure 5.12)]

Boy: 'I'm not gay, you know'.

Northstar: 'And I'm not into little boys. I prefer men with hair in their chests'.

Boy: 'Aheh. That's pretty funny'. (Figure 5.13, UXM # 414).

As can be seen by this, the homophobic protagonist changes by the end of the segment much like Kev did in *The Authority*. He laughs at Northstar's comment and later has a conversation with him about unrequited love. Likewise Paulie and Northstar manage to put aside their differences and work together. Generally however, like Midnighter, Northstar does not stand homophobic comments.



Figure 5.12: The Young Mutant Struggles With Northstar After Discovering He Is Gay. From *Uncanny X-Men #414: Fall Down Go Boom*.

Recently, while brain washed, he also went on a cross country rampage killing homophobes and criminals until stopped by the X-Man, Wolverine.

Examining the examples of homophobia in both *The Authority* and *Uncanny X-Men*, it is plain to see that homophobia is a negative trait in the villains and heroes that display it. The main difference between the two is that most homophobic comments in *Uncanny X-Men* are hinted at or said off panel whereas in *The Authority* they are printed on the page. While Northstar does kill several homophobic characters, it is while he is possessed; he is therefore redeemed when he is released from the brain washing. By comparing the characters Apollo and Midnigher to a mainstream hero such as Northstar, the differences between the representations of their sexuality on panel are clearly indicated. While Northstar's sexuality is used in order to face queer issues such as Aids and homophobia, it used for the purpose only, rather than being a part of whom he is as a character. In comparison, Apollo and Midnigher's interaction is more natural and at times provocative, their sexuality is part of their characters, and the issues they face such as homophobia, are minor annoyances to them that are dealt with easily. While the difference between the levels of sexual interaction on panel between the characters is clear, it is important to remember that Northstar, as a more mainstream character, is directed at younger audiences; therefore sexuality on the panel is limited to a degree anyway.



Figure 5.13: Northstar And The Young Mutant Come To An Understanding. From *Uncanny X-Men #414: Fall Down Go Boom*.

Chapter Six: Northstar: Presence, Absence, and Fan Letters.

6.1: Character Biography

Quebecois Jean-Paul Beaubier, also known by the codename Northstar, is a superhero character originally from the Marvel *Alpha Flight* series. The team first appeared in *Uncanny X-Men #120* in 1979, where they were mainly used to flesh out the background of the Canadian superhero Wolverine. However the team was eventually given its own series which was released in 1983 which continued until 1994, there have been several attempted revivals of the team with new characters since, the last being in April 2007. The series was rare in the fact that it was about a Canadian superhero team, but was popular with fans.

Jean-Paul has the ability to ‘direct the kinetic energy in his molecules to propel himself through the air at superhuman speeds, generate blinding and concussive photon discharges when touching his sister’, (*uncannyxmen.net*). Basically this means that he has super speed, some invulnerability and when he touches his twin sister they produce a bright flash of light. Later Jean-Paul is able to generate this light at a lower intensity by himself.

Northstar and his twin sister, Jeanne-Marie, were both original members of the team; in fact as they were separated after their parent’s death during their early childhood, the first time they were reunited was when they joined the team. Jean-Paul was adopted by his mother’s cousins the Martins while Jeanne-Marie was sent to a Catholic boarding school. However the Martins died not long after and Jean-Paul was sent to an orphanage, both twins forgetting that the other existed.

Jean-Paul eventually fell under the mentorship of Raymonde Belmonde after the man caught him stealing. Belmonde taught him how to control his powers through skiing; later Jean-Paul went professional and won several gold medals, becoming famous through the sport. He also at one point joined a terrorist sect called Front de

Liberation du Quebec, which he left after discovering the group was responsible for several deaths. At some point he also joined the circus as a trapeze artist, becoming fairly well known. His fame through skiing eventually led to an offer from James MacDonald Hudson to join the superhero team Alpha Flight, which he reluctantly took because of the presence of his sister Jeanne-Marie with whom he reunites.

However the two did not always get along especially as Jeanne-Marie, known as Aurora, was schizophrenic and suffered from an extreme case of dissociative identity disorder. One of her personalities was a strong, flirtatious woman with whom Northstar had many arguments with. The other personality was a strict catholic nun/teacher who was also homophobic. Jean-Paul cared for his sister but because of her mental instability she cut off all contact from him for a period. The two were eventually reunited through the death of another team member, Sasquatch, with who they were both in love. The fact that Jean-Paul was gay was merely hinted at through most of the series though it was indicated that he was in love with Walter Langowski (Sasquatch), though his feelings were never returned. However, not long after being forced to give up skiing because of the edge his powers give him, he came down with a mysterious illness that affected his immunity. This was indicated as being Aids and Jean-Paul was supposed to die, though the conservative powers at Marvel vetoed any clear indication of homosexuality at this point and the character was mystically saved.

In 1993, not long after his near fatality that Jean-Paul discovered a baby girl in amongst some rubbish whom he saved and decided to adopt. Unfortunately the young child was suffering from Aids and was, unlike Jean-Paul, unable to be saved. This, as well as being attacked by a former superhero grieving the recent death of his son to the virus, prompted Northstar to come out to his team mates and the public. Not long after this Jean-Paul left the team to write his memoirs, entitled *Born Normal*, and to pursue his business dealings from which he apparently became reasonably wealthy.

Northstar officially joins the X-Men team in *Uncanny X-Men* #414 (2002) after Professor Xavier asks him to join the teaching staff at the school. Initially he was uninterested in the position until the Professor mentioned that he was asking him because of his sexuality. Xavier wanted him to be a role model and advisor for young gay students at the private school. Jean-Paul agreed and became a seemingly unpopular teacher because of his strict requirements. However many of the students seem to have looked up to him, particularly those on the team he led, Alpha Squadron, and especially gay student Anole. He was eventually killed by a possessed Wolverine, then revived and brain-washed by the sect The Hand. He was then recovered by an un-possessed Wolverine, brain-washed again by another sect and eventually returned to sanity by his fellow X-men.

As can be seen by the above, the character has a long and involved history in the Marvel universe, however it is his sexuality that has made Jean-Paul one of the most controversial and important characters in mainstream superhero comics.

6.2: Political Strategies in Representing Queer Characters

In order to examine Northstar I used Kirk Fuoss' four 'recurrent political strategies' that relate to the representation of queer sexuality in Young Adult fiction. Those four strategies are presence/absence, containment, unhappy endings and transcendence. I believe that all four of these strategies are relevant to gay characters in superhero comics, especially since Fuoss was examining young adult literature of which mainstream superhero comics could be considered a part of.

The first strategy is presence/absence which explores the way in which homosexuality is conspicuously present in a text yet can be conspicuously absent at the same time. Fuoss (1994) commented that 'what a text means depends not only on what the text says, but what the text does not say', (p. 163). This is particularly relevant to superhero comics, which because of their visual narrative style; do not have a large amount of in-depth writing. He also identifies two ways in which the

presence/absence theory is noticeable ‘first, physical acts of male homosexuality (including kissing, hugging, and holding hands) are more often than not presented as occurring off-stage and out of sight. Second, homosexuals are more often than not presented as characters in someone else’s story than narrators of their own life stories’, (p. 163).

The first of these resonates with the representation of queer superheroes like Northstar. While the political aspects of his sexual identity are often predominant within the text, such as his struggle with Aids and coming out, he has never been seen to interact with another male character in a sexual manner. The closest that he seems to come can be seen in Figure 6.1, in which he holds Iceman in his arms after saving his life, however Iceman does not reciprocate his feelings within the text. Even queer couples like *Young Avengers* team mates Wiccan and Hulkling are rarely seen exchanging any relevant intimacies such as kissing or holding hands. However, it is important to remember that even heteronormative relationships are rarely represented through more than a kiss in mainstream superhero comics. Sexual intimacies are hinted at happening off the comic panel, Scott McCloud refers to this as the mental process of closure (1994, p. 63). Closure happens as readers fill in the gaps between the panels of the comics, this can be something as simple as a glass starting to fall off a table in one panel, and smashing on the floor on the next panel. Or it could be the relationship between two characters that happens between pages or even issues of the comic. It is this process that allows fans to constantly reinterpret Batman as gay, or to create fanfics around particular characters. For all that the creators of the comics might try to suppress particular tones in their work; it is the readers who in the end have control over the discourses within the text.

The second point, that queer characters do not usually narrate their own story but are part of someone else’s, is not quite as relevant, though still worth investigating. The comic is occasionally narrated by a character, for example the Marvel characters She-Hulk and Deadpool often narrate their comics and also break the fourth wall by addressing the audience and the writer directly. However this is quite rare, perhaps



Figure 6.1: Northstar Holds Iceman In His Arms After Saving Him From The Mud Mutant. From *Uncanny X-Men #415: Secrets*.

an equivalent within superhero comics would be one-shots and mini series that are character driven. Northstar starred in his own four issue miniseries in 1994. However, though he was already out, his sexual identity was skirted around within the series, being merely hinted at in the dialogue. Because of the fact that there are so many superheroes within the X-Men team, it would be hard to say that one character is completely driving the storyline, though occasionally it does happen.

The strategy of containment on the other hand, does not seek to hide visual aspects of homosexuality off the page. Instead it identifies homosexuality as a particular behaviour or act. This is in order to allow readers a way to police the act, 'as long as homosexuality remains an exteriorized behaviour rather an interiorized dimension of self identity, it is still manageable, controllable, reversible', (Fuoss, p. 166).

This is the strategy that seems the least relevant to the mainstream superheroes examined in this thesis. Because of the absence of a physical relationship in the pages of the comic, there are no acts of homosexuality to police, as they have already been policed or controlled by conservative editors and writers. The only area that this would change would be in comics aimed at a more mature audience and in fanfics and fan art. Also since the relationships between characters like Wiccan and Hulkling are shoved into the far off background and there is no indication of a 'behaviour', it leaves the reader to assume that they are in a stable, long term relationship which can not simply be blamed on a mistake or being possessed. Instead this allows fans not comfortable with the sexual identity of the characters to simply ignore it as it absent except in name only from the text.

The third strategy is the unhappy ending. This strategy takes the idea that by providing the queer character with a tragic ending or an unhappy ending, the story does not then promote homosexuality to young readers. Lynn Hall, the author of a young adult novel, admitted that she was pressured into changing the ending by her editor. 'I wanted Tom and Ward to love each other, to live happily ever after, and that was the way I ended it. But the publishers would not let me do this. In their

words, this would be showing a homosexual relationship as a happy ending and this might be dangerous to young people teetering in the brink', (Fuoss, 1994, p. 67). While she did not kill her characters off in the end, she was forced to leave them as mere friends.

In context with superhero comics that I have explored, this strategy is relevant to most of the queer characters and those who are constructed as queer by fans. Of the characters that I have investigated in particular in this paper, only two, Wiccan and Hulkling have not been killed, separated or tied to a lonely and rocky life. This may be more because of the fact that the series is relatively new, with only twelve issues and one special and therefore not enough time to give the two an unhappy ending. They have been threatened with separation but overcame this with ease as they did the issue of coming out which was handled with comical ease (Figure 1.3). While Wiccan was bullied at school over his sexuality this is mentioned only in the *Young Avengers Special* (2006). In comparison *The Authority* heroes, Apollo and The Midnighter, have faced homophobic opponents in the text of the comic, they have also been separated for several years and had a serious physical fight which was shown in the comic. On the other hand, *The Authority* is classed for mature audiences and therefore it is understandable that it violates at least three of the strategies.

Northstar himself has had a rocky and lonely life; he has not been seen to have an actual relationship in his entire comic continuity. Instead his sexuality has been contained by putting him a seemingly one-sided relationship with the X-Man Iceman, with no hope for a happy ending. He was also killed off at one point, to the dismay of fans. However he was recently resurrected and is back in action with the X-Men, though still without hope of a relationship. This is somewhat contradicted by the *Ultimate* comics which are set in an alternate universe. In this series Northstar finally has a relationship, though not with Iceman, but with the X-Man, Colossus. However this is outside of mainstream Marvel continuity. Iceman himself is another character doomed to a sad and lonely life. Many fans have taken his terrible track record with women as an indication that he is perhaps a closet queer. This could be supported by

the revelation made by his former girlfriend, Lorna Dane that they never consummated their relationship, as can be seen in Figure 6.2 in which she cruelly comments on his immaturity to Northstar, to his shock, and the other women at her hen party.

As for the last two characters that I have investigated, Batman and Robin, they are not openly queer within the text. But, fitting in with the unhappy ending strategy, Batman and the multiple Robins have not had a good run. The first Robin, Dick Grayson, who most fans suspected was most likely to have had a relationship with Batman, was sent away to college in the hope that queer readings of the text would die off, especially after the recently finished camp era. The second Robin and the third Robin, Jason Todd and Tim Drake respectively, were seemingly not as close to the Dark Knight. Todd was murdered by the homophobic representation of homosexuality himself, the Joker. Drake, the current Robin, is still alive and working with Batman, though he is often called away for his Teen Titan duties. Batman himself is perhaps one of the most tragic superhero figures, he is an extremely isolated character, both physically and emotionally, who seems to avoid relationships of any kind, let alone sexual. This leaves him with a fairly lonely life, and also allows fans to continue to interpret his sexuality any way that they wish.

As can be seen by the different characters that I have studied, this strategy works particularly well within the superhero comics. Nearly all the characters have tragic lives especially when it comes to romance. However because of the fact that comics are constantly evolving and changing from writer to writer, artist to artist, most heterosexual mainstream comic heroes seem to have tragic lives and constantly changing love lives. Very few stay with the same partner through their whole continuity, whether separated by death, amnesia, alcoholism or relationship troubles.

This leaves the fourth and final strategy to explore, transcendence. Transcendence 'operates at the level of reviewers' responses to these representations', (Fuoss, 1994, p. 168). 'Transcendence occurs when a reviewer recognizes the homosexual content

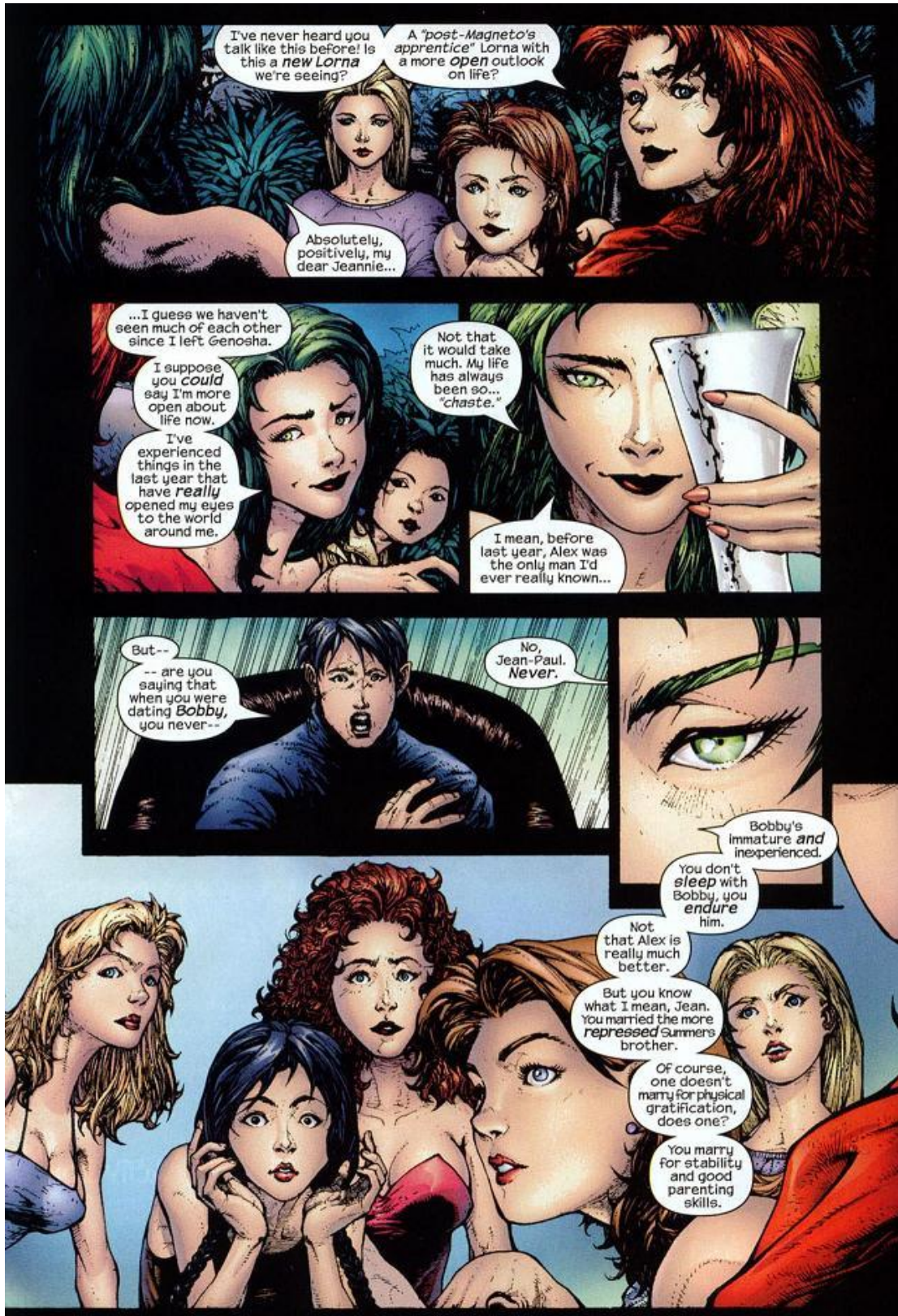


Figure 6.2: Polaris (Lorna Dane), Tells A Shocked Northstar That She And Iceman Never Slept Together. From *Uncanny X-Men #425: Sacred Vows, Part 1 of 2.*

of the work but then relegates this content to a peripheral position, emphasizing – usually with much vigour – that the novel is “really about” something else’ (p. 168). This occurs fairly often within fan letters and comments on discussion boards concerning gay characters in comics. Many of the fans of the, after stating that they are not homophobic, go on to say that comics should not include political views as they are intended for enjoyment not to encourage particular social practices.

I'm all for homosexual characters in comic books as long as they don't feel like they were shoved down our throats. In other words, don't put a gay guy or a lesbian chick in a comic book just for the sake of putting one in there (looking at you Judd Winick, (Darkbatman1, Jul 24, 2007).

The fans emphasize that it is not about the fact that the characters are queer, but rather that ‘political views’ are being forced onto them. Even some of the fans who profess themselves to be pro-homosexuality compliment *Young Avengers* for the fact that the relationship is not overly promoted and abused, allowing those that like it to enjoy it while others can ignore it:

I think everyone who's commented here (myself included) agree that gay characters are great in the DC universe if the handling of the character--the writing, the story development, not "forcing" the issue--is done well, (Dcallstar, Jul 24, 2007).

As can be seen from the way that these strategies translate into mainstream superhero comics, problems around the representation of queer characters is shared by a lot of young adult audiences’ literature. The idea of presence/absence is to me the most relevant as, in the comics the information is there yet it is absent as well. Examining Figure 4.1 these two images depict hints of Jean-Paul’s sexuality while avoiding the subject. In the image Jean-Paul and Iceman exchange a flirtatious banter. However this may not be obvious straight away from the dialogue as the audience needs to understand and translate what they are saying. For example, the term that Northstar

uses when addressing Iceman, is blatantly sexual, if you are aware of what an Otter Pop is. An Otter Pop is a frozen confectionary sold in the United States. It comes in a long circular tube the top of which is cut off in order to suck out the frozen juice within. This is a clear reference to Northstar's sexuality as well as referring to Iceman's powers. Though the fact that Northstar has a crush on Iceman has not been revealed in the comics at this point, it is obvious through small signs such as the term 'Otter Pop'.

The second part of the image shows Iceman's reply, he sarcastically bows slightly behind Northstar, clasping his hands together, smirk on his face, bantering with him in a mock flirtatious way. "Oh, may we, Northstar? May we follow you? Gosh, you're so strong", (*UXM #414*, 2002). This flirtatious relationship continues through the series, in Figure 6.1 Northstar holds Iceman in his arms after a disastrous encounter with a jealous husband. He addresses Northstar, "Hey, handsome. Nice suit. Come here often?" (*UXM, # 415*, 2003). This flirtatious behaviour encouraged fans in their interpretation of Iceman being a 'closet case' and secretly being in love with Northstar. According to Northstar fan, Khirsah, this relationship was created in order to rid *Uncanny X-Men* of the threat of Northstar's sexuality. "It's fairly obvious that Austen chose to have Jean-Paul fall in love with Bobby in order to 1) show that Jean-Paul is homosexual and 2) render him "safe" by giving him a supposedly one-sided love interest", (Khirsah, 2004). By trapping him within this one-sided relationship the writers effectively castrated Northstar. As Rob Lendrum (2004) comments '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', (p. 70).

In Figure 6.3, which is taken from the four issue *Northstar* (1994) miniseries, the general who wishes to kill Northstar because of his abnormalities addresses his council on what they need to know about Northstar. He ends by commenting "He's arrogant, pig-headed, highly contemptuous of authority. And he's... well you've all

read the file” (*Northstar* #1, 1994). While this indicates his sexuality, it skirts around mentioning it, even within a special mini series centred on the character. It is in fandom that Northstar find fulfilment, generally with his love interest, Iceman.



Figure 6.3: An Adversary of Northstar’s Discusses His Character With Others, But Skirts Around Mentioning His Sexuality. From *Northstar: Fast and Loose*.

6.3: Fan Reactions through Letters


Northstar's 'coming out' generated a lot of controversy and interest within comic fandom. The character became even more popular with the fans because of the momentous event. What is interesting is whether fan responses have changed since Northstar came out in 1992, since queer characters are slightly more common today than in the early nineties comics. Have fans become more complacent about queer characters or are they still so rare that each new individual is treated with a renewed rush of enthusiasm? And are the negative responses still the same now as they were then or has the more publicly accepted queer culture challenged these? To explore this I examined the letter column pages from the issues immediately after the coming out of the queer characters from three different comics. The first is of course Northstar in the infamous issue #106 of *Alpha Flight* in 1992. The page that I explored is from *Alpha Flight* #110, (1992). The second letter column that I examined is from DC's *Flash* comic #57 (1991). The reason for selecting these is that they foreshadow Northstar's outing and also it allowed me to explore whether a main character coming out in the 1990's differed in responses to a minor character coming out. The third letter column that I include comes from the *Young Avengers* series, issue #7. The characters came out officially in #6. It was released in 2005, over a decade after Northstar came out; I believe that this has been one of the main comics to gain popularity for 'out' queer characters since Northstar. First however I would like to point out that the amount of negative and positive letters shown on the pages, as seen in Figure 6.4, 6.5 and 6.6, may not convey the actual amount of each received, even of *Alpha Waves* does out a tally at the bottom of the page. It is also possible that some of these letters may be edited for publication and therefore may be shortened or made more conservative. I am merely considering what has been published, and exploring the messages that the fans have left in this particular medium. As Morris E. Franklin III commented in his work *Coming Out in Comics* (2001), 'the silence of readers as suggested by Bennet is broken by the use of letters columns, yet paradoxically maintained as editors select certain letters rather than print all letters received on a specific issue or topic' (p. 223).

Alpha Waves

EDITOR: ROB TOKAR ASSISTANT EDITOR: DAN CUDDY

WE APPRECIATE YOUR COMMENTS. PLEASE WRITE TO:
ALPHA WAVES, % MARVEL COMICS GROUP
387 PARK AVENUE SOUTH, NEW YORK, NY 10016

PLEASE TELL US IF YOU DON'T WANT YOUR FULL ADDRESS PRINTED.



Due to the immense response ALPHA FLIGHT #106 generated, we're just going to run your letters without response. So read on:

Dear Marvel Comics,
Marvel Comics have been the best for years, I love them!
In your ALPHA FLIGHT series, your super hero Northstar, possibly once a role model for someone, certainly proved he was no hero and hopefully NOT a role model with his proclamation that he was gay. That is sick!
It is bad enough that this country is plagued with homosexuals, but it is really sad when even comics start to portray it.
I was an avid reader and collector of Marvel Comics once, but I can assure you that I will not continue to purchase any Marvel Comic as long as you promote this nonsense.
I have an idea, maybe Northstar can die in a skiing accident or something.
My attitude towards my comic collection has degraded so that I decided to throw them away. That was a lot of money I invested in your product, so believe me I am one unhappy investor!
I will continue to boycott your comics and advise others to do so until you clean it up.
That skiing accident really is possible seeing as how at least two skiers died in the Albertville Olympics.

Paul J. Miner
Box 719
Central College
McPherson, KS 67460

Dear Alpha Waves,
I am writing to salute Northstar's "coming out" as gay. Children should know more about homosexuality, so that when they grow up, they don't become homophobic or gay bashers. The more gay people come out of the closet, the more straight people will have to make room for homosexuality in their "straight" morality.
I think it's also important for kids who already know that they are "queer" to see positive role models who are gay.

Mary Lucia W. Burn
2240 Bryant St.
San Francisco, CA 94110

Dear Alpha Waves,
You'll probably receive some nasty letters from people who found Northstar's "coming out" as gay a crying shame. I want to thank you for having him fly out of the closet. Having a gay super hero not only helps us who are gay--but it helps fight aggression that is used against straight kids all the time. It's just one more way ugly people make the rest of us feel small and worthless by calling us all fags, whether we are or not. What they fear is that someday we won't feel ashamed or humiliated. They fear us being strong and able to laugh at their silly name calling.

Bryan Hall
Santa Cruz, CA

To whom it may concern:
My name is Jason Konys and I am an avid collector of comic books, especially AMAZING SPIDER-MAN, GHOST RIDER, the X-MEN, FANTASTIC FOUR and the PUNISHER.
I like the stories and the artistry in these comics. I'm glad that you publish good comics like those, but when I heard of the new Marvel Comic that was coming out on the newsstands Jan. 16, 1992 about a new gay Marvel super hero, I couldn't believe it!
I'm 14 years old; comics are meant to be enjoyed, but a gay comic book character doesn't appeal to me! What I don't understand is how you can publish something like this.
I am interested in what you think of this type of comic is.

Jason Konys
1706 W. Bonanza Rd.
Las Vegas, NV 89106

Dear Publisher,
As I was browsing through my local comics store I was told by the owner that they had just received more of the so-called "controversial" ALPHA FLIGHT #106. After reading it I thought "This isn't controversial at all, it's just WRONG!" I know that a huge corporation like Marvel doesn't have care about what I think.
However, if you'll just take the time out of your busy schedule to read what the Supreme Authority feels about this subject Please read Leviticus 18:22, 20:13 and Romans 1:24-32. There is not other interpretation of the punishments for this

sin. They are worthy of death-not only do the same, but also approve of those who practice them." Such is you...If you will not listen to me then listen to him who has created you, and blessed you with this great company.

David Lane
Imperial Cyclops
Knight of the KKK
P.O. Box 25053
Halifax, Nova Scotia

Dear Alpha Waves,
We are writing to give you a hardy round of support for the March edition of ALPHA FLIGHT, in which Northstar came out and you addressed the topics of AIDS so dramatically.
What else can we say besides that it is a monumental step for a super hero like Northstar to be depicted as openly gay and so politically astute about how AIDS affects everyone?! Please keep up the good work and expand on our idea; in fact we would love a lesbian super hero and/or a "gay super hero of color."
We also would like to praise you in support of your unequivocal response to a homophobic letter writer, stating that we look up to gay and lesbian heroes every day--right on! Keep spreading the message!
We might add that this venture of yours has produced a valuable collector's item, the first printing of that issue is selling for \$15.00 here in Washington already.
Again, keep up the good work and we look forward to more stuff about gays and lesbians and the AIDS crisis from Northstar!

Cathy Renna and
Michael North
GLAAD/NCA
P.O. Box 57044
Washington DC 20036

And just for the record, we sorted out the opinions from AF#106's over-stuffed mailbag and tallied up the responses. The approximate totals on Northstar's "coming out" are:

Pros:	76.3%
Cons:	21.1%
Undecided:	2.6%

Figure 6.5: The Letter Column Published In Alpha Flight #110.

YOUNG AVENGERS

Welcome back, everybody. We've received several letters this month from readers complaining they were tired of the so-called "Hulking/Asgardian" debate that has dominated the YA letters column for the past few months. However, we received even MORE mail from people who were anxious to join the discussion. So, before we move on to other topics...

Due to the VERY one-sided discussion of the "are they or are they not gay" issue that was covered in the YOUNG AVENGERS' letters page, I will be dropping the book from my pull list. I do not like the comics I read to be the platform for someone's social/political bias. I also do not like to be strung along about a possible gay relationship for an undisclosed amount of issues. If there's nothing to be ashamed of, just come right out and say it. Everyone's entitled to their opinions, but Mr. Heinberg's choice to use this otherwise fabulous comic as his soapbox has cost Marvel a reader.

Travis Cliff
(via e-mail)

Travis, I earnestly hope I haven't turned YA into my own political soapbox, but there is no getting around the fact that it reflects my own personal experience and worldview. And I understand if it's not a worldview you care to subscribe to. Sorry to lose you.

I am a 35 year old father of five children and I've been a fan and collector of comics since the 70's. I've enjoyed YOUNG AVENGERS thus far even though Kang and time travel has always for some reason been my least favorite recurring Avengers villain/theme. However, I thought Asgardian was female and so did not notice the homosexual overtones of the book. Only upon reading the letter pages of issue 5 (I had not read the letter pages in previous issues) did I realize Asgardian was a boy and realize that homosexuality was being explored in this book. Even though most honest estimations put the U.S. homosexual population at less than 3% (yes homosexual organizations quote much higher percentages but I doubt their veracity) we are constantly inundated with the homosexual lifestyle through all forms of media and entertainment. I will not support a comic book that is supposed to be uplifting and entertaining that promotes homosexuality as a lifestyle choice. I always have and always will read comics because they are fun and a release from the stressors of everyday life. With the readership of comics shrinking its surprising to me that the editors of this book would include such a controversial topic knowing that many would be turned off by it. Even though it may matter little to you that I am ending my subscription through my local comic book dealer on this book, I thought important for you to know that at least one person will no longer read this book as a result of its promotion of that lifestyle.

Brian Zoeller
(via e-mail)

Before Marvel forwarded this letter to me, one

of my extraordinary editors, the astonishing Andy Schmidt, took time to respond to Mr. Zoeller on his own:

I'm just one of the editors here, but I don't really see the book as promoting homosexual lifestyles or whatever you want to call it. I don't want to split hairs on the subject, but I don't see any reason why a homosexual character or even two can't be a part of a team book. I work on a team in the office and there are homosexuals working with me. I don't think that means that the company is promoting the lifestyle. I'm sorry you feel the way you do and that it's going to prevent you from reading what I think is one of the most entertaining comics we publish right now. We're sorry to lose you, and we hope you'll come back for a visit on down the line.

Andy Schmidt
Associate Editor, YOUNG AVENGERS

What makes YOUNG AVENGERS such a compelling read is that it encounters issues of race, class, gender, and sexuality in an intelligent and entertaining way. Its characters are smart and sophisticated, and it avoids the pitfall most Marvel titles fall into, which is rampant sexism in the superhero genre. HOUSE OF M has built its entire plot around the idea that Wanda Maximoff is some baby-crazy, psychotic witch who is actively seeking to kill all her teammates. The fact that AVENGERS: DISASSEMBLED couldn't come up with anything better than to blame women for the events that took place is a shame. YOUNG AVENGERS on the other hand has shown passionate but in-control women who are smart, sassy, and hold their own in a fight. Kate Bishop is quite possibly the best character I've seen produced in a long time and I do hope you'll play with her class status at some point. All of this in addition to your brilliant handling of Patriot and his complicated political and racial history.

For the work you've done so far I applaud all of you. Mr. Heinberg's writing is superb. Mr. Cheung's artwork is gorgeous, edgy, and compelling. And Mr. Dell's inking makes for beautiful atmosphere.

I hope that you do not let the social significance of this book fall by the wayside.
Ramzi Fawaz
Berkeley, CA

I'm enjoying this book at the moment, mostly for its even-handed, respectful treatment of the readership and the characters. (The letter column's debate about what the comic book medium can do, or should be allowed to do, is just an added benefit.) Regarding those characters, is it just me or does it seem like Kate is in charge in the field? She's very decisive and logical (as per 'depowering' Iron Lad and ending the present threat by telling him to shuck the Iron suit), and her quick thinking has saved the team more than once. Plus, she seems something of a master at arms. Any chance we'll see Kate and not Patriot running this team? Could it be? (Could Patriot's ego take it?)

Tracy
(via e-mail)

I know you have been getting a lot of mail

about the relationship between Asgardian and Hulking. I have heard other fans talk about another somewhat controversial character: Patriot. Gail Simone of the Distinguished Competition recently said, "Almost ANY portrayal of a black person by a white writer is going to [anger] someone, usually a white reader." When you showed us Patriot was black in YOUNG AVENGERS #3, a lot of people accused you of writing another angry, black teen.

You have to admit, this is not completely unfounded. In YA #1 you had Patriot arguing with Iron Lad, Kat Farrell and Kate Bishop. In YA #2 he got into a fight with Cassie Lang. In YA #3 he tried to get into an argument with Captain America. Do you see the pattern that I am seeing here?

Then we get to issues #4 and #5, and I really like what you are doing with Patriot. When the rest of the team was talking about Iron Lad returning with Kang, it was Patriot who said no, they were a team. Patriot seems to best understand what being part of a team is about, even if he still needs to work on his teamwork. In #5, he emerges as the team leader, even more so than Iron Lad. You have made him a natural leader even if he is not sure where to lead the team yet. In other words, you are making him not just an angry, black teen, but a complex character who is a hero. Good job!

YOUNG AVENGERS is definitely my favorite comic being published. Please tell Mr. Cheung, Mr. Dell, Mr. Pettit and especially Mr. Ponsor (love the colors) to keep up the good work.
Terry C. Johnson
Washington, DC

Thanks again to everyone who wrote in this month. Join us in thirty days for Part One of our two-part "Secret Identities" arc featuring the amazing artwork of guest penciler Andrea Di Vito (THOR, STORMBREAKER, BRATH).

Take care, everybody.
Allan Heinberg

NEXT ISSUE:



SECRET IDENTITIES PART ONE

E-MAIL:
MHEROES@
MARVEL.COM
MARK E-MAIL
"OKAY TO PRINT"

YOUNG AVENGERS C/D MARVEL COMICS
417 5TH AVE NEW YORK, NY 10016
IF YOU DON'T WANT YOUR NAME AND ADDRESS PRINTED, PLEASE
LET US KNOW. LETTERS MAY BE EDITED FOR CONTENT AND LENGTH.

Figure 6.6: The Letter Column Published In *Young Avengers: Sidekicks* #6.

The first page that I wish to examine is the first in chronological order, *Flash #57* (1991). In the comic, The Flash's former arch enemy, The Pied Piper, now one of his friends, discloses his sexuality. The Piper, a.k.a. Hartley Rathaway, was introduced in 1959 as a super villain enemy of the costumed speedster the Flash. However he later retired from a life of crime, becoming a social worker and friend to the third generation Flash, Wally West. In a conversation around the Joker, the Piper reveals his sexuality, assuming Wally already knows.

Piper: 'You don't really get to know guys like him (the Joker)... he'll kill you just to make a point. We didn't all live in a clubhouse of evil.'

Wally: 'Just wondering... You've heard the rumors... How, maybe, he's gay? What did he seem like to you?'

Piper: 'The Joker... gay... I've never seen any reason to believe...'

*Wally: [interrupting] 'Sure, but guys like that, you can **always** tell... There are signals...'*

Piper: 'He's a sadist and a psychopath... I doubt he has any real human feelings of any kind...He's not gay Wally. In fact I can't think of any super villain who is... Well, except me of course. But you knew that, right?'

Wally: 'Me? Oh, sure... I mean how could I not know something as... as...'

Piper: 'and it doesn't bother you?'

Wally: 'Gosh, no! Oops look at the time! Got an appointment Piper. Gotta run.'

Piper: [grinning] 'Right. Glad it didn't bother you'. (Messner-Loebs, 1991, p. 4).

While Flash was slightly uncomfortable and embarrassed about not knowing that his friend was gay, he recovers and their friendship remains the same as before.

However not all the fans of the comic accepted the Piper's revelation the way that the

Flash did. The editorial comment in the *Flash* column from #57, which is the fourth issue after the Piper came out, which I investigated, states:

well, I don't believe I've ever found myself in the midst of so much controversy before. The Piper's revelation that he was gay elicited a tremendous reaction from you folks, and while we were prepared for a real controversy, the response was overwhelmingly POSITIVE. There were a few detractors, that's expected, but so very few was wonderfully surprising. I'm proud of the story and I'm proud of all of you (Augustyn, Speed Reading, 1991).

This statement indicates a low percentage of negative letters, perhaps that is why, out of the eight letters on the two pages, only two are negative, though one of the negative letters takes up an entire column. From this it is possible to estimate that responses may be around the same amount as the letters to *Alpha Waves*, over Northstar's outing which rates their responses as 76.3% positive, 21.1% negative and 2.6% undecided. Likewise many of the discussions of queer characters in the online discussion forums are in favour of the characters being gay. This could be because of the way that such communities are moderated, those attempting to start arguments rather than debates are often banned from the forums. In a discussion on Hulking and Wiccan's sexuality, a fan codenamed Beast commented:

Please try to avoid offending fellow posters with close-minded comments that are offensive or crude. Just because you may not agree with the lifestyle, doesn't mean that you shouldn't treat those people with respect. Let's try not to turn this thread into venomous comments and hate spewing anti-gay speech. There are places on the net for that sort of thing. Remember that people on the other end of the net actually have feelings, (Beast, CBR, 20 July, 2005).

While there are such warnings up, occasionally those who have differing points of view will join a discussion, however these are usually dealt with quite calmly as can be seen by this conversation from *Comic Book Resources (CBR)*:

You hit the nail on the head with the word "normal". It is normal for a male and a female to kiss, but it is very 'abnormal' for 2 males or 2 females to kiss. Just knowing the 2 characters are gay is good enough. No need to throw it into the faces of us normal people, (Titan Slade, CBR, 20 July 2005).

To which fan, Beast replied:

It's only abnormal because you don't approve of it. They're human beings and as humans they display affection by kissing. Whether it's a woman, or in this case another man. It's the epitome of normal, because it's love, (Beast, CBR, 20 July 2005).

In response Titan Slade commented:

It is hard for me to have tolerance for the gay community and their agendas, because they are very militant and hatefull towards anybody who disagrees with them. They always preach tolerance, but when somebody disagrees with them, they turn very hatefull and accuse you of being a bigot. It just gets old after a while, (Titan Slade, CBR, 20 July, 2005).

While Mirrorball Man responded:

It certainly does, but I'm not sure that the "I'm normal and you're not" strategy is the most efficient course of action if you don't want people to turn hateful, (The Mirrorball Man, CBR, 20 July 2005).

The fans responding to Titan Slade's comments did not become agitated and the session did not deteriorate into an argument, however Titan Slade was at a later point of time banned from the site for another incident.

The two negative responses in the flash column, entitled *Speed Reading*, show two particular discourses. The first one takes the 'comics are not a forum for discussion' approach which is often used, or so I have found in relation to the representation of queer characters in mainstream comics.

As of issue #53, you have turned it in to an arena for homosexual propaganda. "Whoa!", you're thinking, "propaganda is too harsh a word!" Now let me assure you, "propaganda" is not too harsh a word to use. Think about it: What are comics for? To entertain, right? Right. Now, if there were no homosexuals in FLASH it would still be entertaining, right? Right. Therefore, I can only perceive the Piper's revelations as not a means to entertain, but as a way for Mr Loeb's to preach his view of morality into the consciousness of the populace. (Revis, Speed Reading, 1991)

As can be seen by this, the fan uses the guise of 'comics should be used as entertainment only' to excuse his homophobic response to the Piper's revelation. He sees this as a way for Loeb to preach a certain point of view through his work. One might argue that every piece of writing or art is shaped by the creators' world view and experience, some ideas being more obvious than others, however arguing the point is irrelevant to this thesis.

It amazes me that despite the vast majority of America's population professing belief in God and only one percent of America's population being exclusively homosexual, American comics are created by folks such as Loeb's who are so out of touch with the righteous mainstream that the values of such a writer run rather radically contrary to those of our culture, (Porta, Speed Reading, 1991).

The second negative letter takes a different approach, attacking it from a religious angle. This particular approach is also popular as a negative response to comics with queer characters. The fan uses quotes from the bible to emphasize homosexuality as wrong and unnatural, “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable”, (*Speed Reading*, 1991). He also makes claims that only one percent of the American population is gay, and claiming the *Bible* as the holy book of American people as a collective. Like the first fan, Porta hides his discomfort with the queer plot line behind a particular kind of reasoning, in this case religious fanaticism. In comparison another fan, Jeffrey A. DeWitt, also claiming to a religious background, comments, “Great story! One of the best handlings of a personal revelation I have seen in a long time”, (*Speed Reading*, 1991). Though he is not a fan of homosexuality he does not condemn the character or the writer, preaching tolerance instead.

Likewise the negative letters from *Alpha Waves*, *Alpha Flights* letter page about Northstar’s emergence from the closet, tend to fit with these categories as well. The fourth letter, which was written by Jason Konys, takes the comics as entertainment approach. “I’m 14 years old; comics are meant to be enjoyed, but a gay comic book character doesn’t appeal to me! What I don’t understand is how can you publish something like this”, (*Alpha Waves*, 1992). Konys, like many comic fans, often tend to believe that they have a sort of ownership over their favourite comics. Because a gay comic character does not appeal to him, he believes that such things should not be published. The letter immediately following after Konys’s, fits in with the religious approach:

As I was browsing through my local comics store I was told by the owner that they had just received more of the so-called “controversial” ALPHA LIGHT #106. After reading it I thought, ‘this isn’t controversial at all, its just WRONG!’ I know that a huge corporation like Marvel doesn’t have [to] care about what I think. However, if you would just take the time out of your busy

schedule to read what the Supreme Authority feels about this subject Please read Leviticus 18:22, 20:13 and Romans 1:24-32. There is not [an] other interpretation of the punishments fro [for] this sin, “they are worthy of death- not only do the same, but also approve of those who practice them.” Such is you... if you will not listen to me then listen to him who has created you, and blessed you with this great company (Lane, Alpha Waves, 1992).

By his words ‘they are worthy of death – not only do the same, but also approve of those who practice them’, (*Alpha Waves*, 1992), he condemns the Marvel company unless they listen to him and his god. There is three negative letters on the *Alpha Waves* page, the third takes neither of the two aforementioned approaches, taking instead a completely homophobic approach, “In your Alpha Flight series, your superhero Northstar, possibly once a role model for someone, certainly proved he was no hero and hopefully Not a role model with his proclamation that he was gay. That is sick! It is bad enough that this country is plagued with homosexuals, but it is really sad when even comics start to portray it”, (*Alpha Waves*, 1991). He goes on to suggest that Northstar be killed off in a skiing accident, and proclaims that he has thrown away all of his Marvel collection and will encourage others to boycott them. While his response is extreme he does not attempt to justify his homophobia through religion and decrying comics as a source of enjoyment, not political agendas.

On the other hand there are many positive responses to the characters. Many of the positive responses on the *Alpha Waves* and *Speed Reading* pages seem to be written by gay fans. Of the three positive letters on the *Alpha Waves* page, two of them are written by queer fans. Of the eight on *Speed Reading*, there are also two from queer fans. These four letters applaud the coming out of the characters as a ‘positive step in acknowledging the gay population. One thing that is noticeably different in the two different letter columns is that the three positive letters in *Alpha Waves* all address issues such as homophobia and AIDS, for example this letter from Mary Lucia,

I am writing to salute Northstar's 'coming out' as gay. Children should know more about homosexuality, so that they don't grow up to be homophobic or gay bashers. The more gay people come out of the closet, the more straight people will have to make room for homosexuality in their "straight" morality. I think it's also important for kids who already know that they are "queer" to see positive role models who are gay (Lucia, Alpha Waves, 1992).

Lucia exhibits the attitude, prevalent around the 1990s and now that closeted gays should come out to further the gay movement. As mentioned earlier, this was a cause of discontentment within gay politics as many had viable reasons for not coming out.

Most of the *Speed Reading* pages positive letters, on the other hand, address the issue of stereotyping as seen within this example;

As Wally found out, you cannot always tell who is gay and who isn't. Not all gay men are effeminate and not all lesbians are masculine. I hope that the Piper is used to make this clear in the future, since he is one of the few characters we have today. Maggie, Extrano, and Tony of the Secret Six are languishing in comic book limbo, and Northstar of your competitors comics is suffering from terminal closet exposure (Phillips, Speed Reading, 1991).

This example considers the fact that fans do not want a stereotypical effeminate superhero, and applauds the fact that the Piper is not cast into this role. Perhaps the reason for this aspect of fan response is not present in the responses to Northstar because he is often deemed to be stereotyped. Or perhaps the letters were selected because of a similarity in theme.

One of the most interesting things about *Speed Reading* that *Alpha Waves* lack is that the editor has written responses to the letters. *Alpha Waves* does not have these in the issue that I had available to me because, as noted at the top of columns, "due to the immense response *Alpha Flight #106* generated, we're just going to run your letters

without response”, (*Alpha Waves*, 1992). The responses to the negative letters within *Speed Reading* are particularly fascinating because of the fact that the replies, advocating the gay character, were quite sarcastic.

Well, Trent, I guess we made a mistake assuming that a comic book (or any medium) might be used as entertainment and as an area for discussion. How dare we say that all people are the same, that you should treat everyone with respect and that its good to like your friends because of who they are, not what they are. As this rate, we'll be advocating racial harmony and an end to war next. And no I won't be calling you any of those names you mention, but thanks for the offer (Augustyn, Speed Reading, 1991).

As can be seen by this example, the editor feels quite strongly about the negative reaction to the Pied Piper. He also, unlike many fans and even people within the industry, believes that comics can be used both to entertain and as a political platform as well. Superhero comics have always been moralistic in style, advocating good against evil. The fact that a, by some fans, disliked minority, is used to make a moral point is something that seems to quite controversial in the early 1990s.

These days, things have honestly not really altered in regards to reader responses as can be seen within the *Young Avengers* comics. The letter columns illustrate the debate between fans as they draw upon a diverse group of wider social discourses relating to homosexuality within American society. Some of the fans were horrified by the relationship, or potential relationship as can be seen in this letter from a fan which was printed in issue #6.

I am a 35 year old man of five children and I've been a fan and collector of comics since the 70's. I've enjoyed YOUNG AVENGERS thus far even though Kang and time travel has been my least favourite recurring Avengers villain/theme. However, I thought Asgardian was female and so did not notice the homosexual overtones of the book. Only upon reading the letter pages of

issue 5 (I had not read the letter pages in previous issues) did I realise Asgardian was a boy and realise that homosexuality was being explored in this book. Even though most honest estimations put the U.S. homosexual population at less than 3% (yes homosexual organisations quote much higher percentages but I doubt their veracity) we are constantly inundated with the homosexual lifestyle through all forms of media and entertainment. I will not support a comic book that is supposed to be uplifting and entertaining that promotes homosexuality as a lifestyle choice. I always have and always will read comics because they are fun and a release from stressors of everyday life. With the readership of comics shrinking it's surprising to me that editors of this book would include such a controversial topic knowing that many would be turned off by it. Even though it may matter little to you that I am ending my subscription through my local comic book dealer on this book, I thought important for you to know that at least one person will no longer read this book as a result of its promotion of that lifestyle (Zoeller, YA #6, 2005).

The fan defends his position on homosexuality by stating that although only a small percentage of the population is homosexual the media is 'inundated with the homosexual lifestyle'. This links in with the earlier letter from David Malcolm Porta, the religious fanatic from the *Speed Reading* column, who commented that only one percent of the American population was homosexual. Also, like Wertham, he also sees homosexuality as a lifestyle choice as do most of the other anti-gay letters. Associate Editor of *Young Avengers*, Andy Schmidt replied to this letter before Heinberg, commenting that he did not 'see the book as promoting homosexual lifestyles or whatever you call it. I don't want to split hairs on the subject, but I don't see any reason why a homosexual character or even two can't be part of a team book' (YA #6, 2005). However other letters agreed with the reader's point of view, most informing the creators that they would be cancelling their subscription. Like this letter they also admitted that they had been enjoying the series up until they discovered the relationship between Billy and Teddy. The following reader from issue seven also sees homosexuality as a lifestyle choice and a character flaw.

I am writing this letter in response to the current debate over the Hulkling/Wiccan relationship. Let me preface the following statements by saying that I am anti-homosexuality. That being said, I will continue to buy the YOUNG AVENGERS even not that it has been announced that Hulkling and Wiccan are, in fact gay. While it is a fact that the gay community has been vastly over-represented in most forms of media, comic books are one of the only outlets to have produced nearly no homosexual characters. While I may not agree with the lifestyle, it is more realistic for there to be one or two gay characters in the Marvel universe than for there not to be. Also, it is not as if Heinberg has made a plain show of support for the lifestyle in the book, either, as was made plain in the letter by Editor Andy Schmidt, which he posted in the last issue. He has simply given the characters homosexuality as a personality aspect. While liberals may consider Hulkling and Wiccan to be the rightful representation of a minority, I see their homosexuality as a character flaw, which lends their character's depth. It is not a character's perfection that makes him interesting; it is his flaws. I, for one, will continue to read YOUNG AVENGERS until Heinberg makes a blatant show of support for homosexuality, and I encourage my fellow conservatives to do the same (Gore, YA #6, 2005).

However, unlike the first letter, this reader is prepared to overlook this 'flaw' as long as it is not made too obvious. This letter again reflects an earlier letter in the *Speed Reading* page in which a Christian fan commented that while he did not agree with homosexuality he would continue to read the comics.

Several other readers, while hinting that they are not anti-homosexual, have become annoyed that sexual issues are even in the book. For example in the letter column of *Young Avengers #3* (2005), one fan complained to Heinberg, "...I would hope that you and Marvel would not be so gung-ho to pander to every taste within society that you would forget that comics were never meant to be an outlet for changing society's

view or forcing sensitive issues to be discussed among the readership. Sexuality issues were never needed in the past to make super hero comics exciting and interesting. I don't think they need to now to be so, either." This links to earlier letters around comics being used as a political platform from the two earlier comics.

Another *Young Avengers* fan commented

Due to the Very one-sided discussion of the "are they or are they not gay" issue that was covered in the YOUNG AVENGERS' letter page, I will be dropping the book from my pull list. I do not like comics I read to be the platform for someone's social/political bias. I also do not like to be strung along about a possible gay relationship for an undisclosed amount of issues. If there's nothing to be ashamed of, just come right out and say it. Everyone's entitled to their opinions, but Mr Heinberg's choice to use this otherwise fabulous comic as his soapbox has cost Marvel a reader (Cliff, YA #6, 2005).

This letter is particularly interesting as the reader admits that the only reason that he is not going to buy the comic any longer is because of the one page letter column. He also commented that 'everyone's entitled to their opinion' however it is the 'one-sided discussion' of Billy and Teddy's relationship that has put him off the entire series. While the reader commented 'if there's nothing to be ashamed of just come right out and say it', which could indicate that he would accept the relationship, he addresses the issues presented as being social/political bias, putting them into a more negative tone. As Allan Heinberg himself is openly gay, some fans, like this one, questioned whether the queer undertones in the text were his attempts to put his own political and personal view in the series. As relationships are often strung out over a long time in comics, it indicates that it is the gay relationship itself that the reader has trouble with.

However while many of these letters have been negative, the major amount of letters published, like the responses to the Piper and Northstar, have been in support of the relationship, the comic and Heinberg. Several of these positive letters comment that

the relationship is noticeable for those who want to see it and ignorable by those who do not, therefore negating the idea that the comic promotes some kind of lifestyle. The characters are presented as superheroes who are gay rather than as gay superheroes. Of course there are also many fans who want more emphasis on the relationship for example a reader writes in *Young Avengers* #12 (2006):

Would it kill ya to have Billy and Teddy kiss? Please talk Jim Cheung into giving us some love here! Blatant hand-holding maybe? Fingers running through a mop of hair? Foreheads pressed together as thumbs stroke tear-stained "I thought I lost you" cheeks? Even Brezhnev got a little in-the-public-eye, guy-on-guy kissing done! (Baysinger, YA #12, 2006).

It is evident from letters such as this that many want more of an indication of the off panel relationship. However the series tends to concentrate more on the action of the storyline, the relationship is more of a comfortable dialogue between the two that is relegated to the background of the story. This frustration at the lack of sexual or affectionate interaction between the characters is one of the reasons that some fans turn to fan fiction.

Northstar is a pioneering character who has helped to shape the way that homosexuality is portrayed on the comic panel today. However that is not to say that he is popular as an example of a queer character, rather his coming out and his treatment on panel is often pointed out as an example of what not to do. As can be seen by Fuoss' four political strategies (presence/absence, transcendence, containment and unhappy endings), Northstar's sexuality has been suppressed in an attempt to comply with social attitudes. For all of that, the fact that he was on panel as a main character and dealt with queer issues, created an awareness of the possibilities for queer characters. By investigating the letter columns of the three examples, *Speed Reading*, *Alpha Waves* and *Young Avengers*, I intended to explore the changes in attitude between the first queer characters to come out on panel to some of the newest. However as can be seen, very little seems to have changed in the

responses to the texts, homophobic reactions are still hidden behind religious or political reasoning, though the editors claim that the overall response was positive. However Northstar is one of the most important queer comic characters, not only because of his pioneering effort in coming out but also because he led the way for other queer characters such as Wiccan and Hulkling.

Chapter Seven: Wiccan, Hulkling and Creative Constructions

7.1: Introduction and *The Young Avengers*

This chapter investigates the way in which fans construct characters through creative endeavours such as fan fiction and fan art. I have previously, in Chapter Four, explored the ambiguity of characters such as Batman and the way that fans prefer to interpret such characters as being queer instead of further developing characters who are constructed as queer within the text. However with Wiccan and Hulkling being a canon couple, fan interpretations change, there is more information available for the fan to poach. I have also discussed, in Chapter Six, the way in which fans use the letter pages to communicate with each other and either attack or applaud ‘out’ gay characters. As seen in the Chapter Five and in Chapter Six queer political issues are prevalent in the superhero series, especially homophobia. However with creative fan construction, fans are able to extract themselves from such issues, often creating ‘perfect worlds’ for their favourite characters. While there are other forms of creative fan participation, including cosplay (dressing up and acting like a particular character) and role play games (where fans use a particular character to interact with other fans in a game setting), I choose to use fan fiction and fan art because they provided easily accessible texts and because they show the fans opinion on the character through the way the character is portrayed in the story or art rather than merely imitating their appearance in order to assume an identity and participate with other fans. While fan fiction and art is less sociable than cosplay and RPG’s they are an important example of the way that fans participate in fandom.

The Young Avengers is a superhero comic series, published by Marvel Comics, that was introduced in April 2005. The series was created by openly gay screenwriter Allan Heinberg, who is perhaps best known for writing several episodes of the television series *The O.C.*, and penciler Jim Cheung. Cheung was named one of Marvel’s “Young Guns” in August 2005, a group of artists picked by Marvel’s chief editor, Joe Quesada as being future stars in the field.

The teen superhero team consists of founding members, Iron Lad (Nathaniel Richards), Asgardian later renamed Wiccan (Billy Kaplan), Hulkling (Teddy Altman) and Patriot (Elijah Bradley). They were joined by the end of the first story arc by Hawkeye (Kate Bishop) and Stature (Cassie Lang) and then by the end of second series, Speed (Tommy Shepherd) and the Vision. In the series, newspapers refer to the young heroes as "super-powered fanboys" and label them the "Young Avengers," a name the team members initially disliked but which stuck nonetheless (*YA #1*, 2005).

It is important to acknowledge that the *Young Avengers* follows a long history of comic heroes many of whom are mentioned or hinted at in the series. Each of the young superheroes, at least at first, patterns themselves on an original member of *The Avengers* team. Therefore the history that Heinberg has been able to draw upon is huge and rich with characters, histories and storylines. *The Avengers* history goes back to September 1963 where the team was first introduced in *The Avengers #1*. The team originally included the line up of Ant-Man, Wasp, Thor, Iron Man, and the Hulk, later the Hulk left the team and was replaced by the character Captain America who was given founding member status and eventually became the team leader. The young avengers follow in this long tradition of heroes and it is revealed over the series that each has a connection with the Avengers as shown below.

Patriot- is the grandson of the black Captain America, Isaiah Bradley who became a super soldier after taking the serum during World War II. The serum was tested on several black soldiers before it was perfected and given to Steve Rogers the white Captain America.

Iron Lad- is the teen version of evil time travelling war lord Kang the Conqueror, a marvel villain who first appeared in *Fantastic Four issue nineteen* in 1963 and then *Avengers issue eight* in 1964. Kang attempted to show his younger self his future as a war lord but young Kang rebelled, stealing a time travelling suit and travelling to the

past in order to ask the Avengers for assistance. However the avengers had recently disassembled and the teen, as Iron Lad, created a new team of young avengers.

Hawkeye- Kate's connection to the Avengers has not really been explored as yet, other than being named Hawkeye in honour of the original Hawkeye who was an Avenger but was killed prior to the *Young Avengers* in 2004.

Stature- Cassie Lang is the daughter of the second Ant Man, Scott Lang, who died prior to the start of *Young Avengers*.

The Vision- based on the original Vision who has been a character in the *Avengers* comics since 1968 who was an android. The Vision was destroyed in *Avengers #500*, but his shell which was left lying around in a warehouse for some reason; was discovered by Iron Lad and his programming was absorbed into Iron Lad's suit. Later, once Iron Lad had left the suit and gone back to his own time, the young Vision became sentient and joined the Young Avengers.

Hulking- Hulking's connection to the avengers is like most of the others through family. During the second storyline of the series he discovers that he is in fact the son of Captain Mar-Vell who is a member of the alien race the Kree, and Princess Anelle of the alien race the Skrull. Both races have been at war for generations and have fought against the Avengers several times. He also based his look on the character the Hulk.

Wiccan and Speed- it has been revealed that Billy and Tommy, who look like twins though born to different families, may be the reincarnated children of the original Vision and the Scarlet Witch, a former member of the Avengers. Billy originally based his appearance on the Avenger, Thor, the Norse god of thunder.

The three main sites that I have explored for creative responses to *Young Avengers* include the following:

- *Fanfiction.net*- a massive archive of fanfics from every kind of genre and category.
- *Young Avengers Live Journal*- a fan run site in which Young Avengers fans are able to discuss news, post fanfic and art, and communicate with others of the same interests.
- *Tales From the Dorkside*- the archive site for fan fiction by Fullmetal_Cute.
- *Deviant Art*- a site featuring multiple artists work, this can be fan art or original works.

This particular series was selected because of the characters Wiccan and Hulkling, or Billy and Teddy, who are openly gay and are engaged in a relationship. While the fact that Billy and Teddy are queer characters was not confirmed until issue seven, fans almost immediately picked up subtle hints in the subtext. In the letter page in issue three, one fan asked whether the two were in fact gay. While many fans reacted positively to the idea, others reacted with horror.

The two of them model themselves on two Avengers (Hulk and Thor), who shared an antagonistic relationship for years while in the Avengers together. While the Hulk did not really get on with any of the heroes on the team, he had a particularly rocky relationship with the Norse god Thor. This has been inverted in Billy and Teddy's relationship, the two being romantically attached much like the way in which Apollo and The Midnighter's relationship is a polar version of Superman and Batman's.

Since the series is relatively new, having published only thirteen comics, including a special, the characters backgrounds and personalities are still being developed. The fact that there is very little in-depth information on the characters, might lead one to assume that there is little for fans to use when appropriating from the text. Indeed, even the relationship between Teddy and Billy was not confirmed until issue seven. However it seems that the less information there is the better, leaving the characters open to speculation. I intend to explore the way in which the characters seem to

really only exist through the fan interaction with them. By examining how the characters have been constructed through letters, fan art, discussion groups and especially through fan fiction, I hoped to show the way in which fans become poachers who not only recreate characters for their own personal use; but can actually influence and shape the understanding of other fans.

7.2: Appropriation and Slash Fiction

The ambiguity of superhero comics leaves the genre open to appropriation by fans. As Jenkins (1992) commented ‘Because popular narratives often fail to satisfy, fans must struggle with them, to try to articulate to themselves and others unrealised possibilities within the original works’ (p.23). This is most evident today within fan-communities online where the sexual identity of popular superheroes are continuously explored and expressed through the production of slash fiction and queer-themed fan art. Fan fiction has been published in fanzines since the 1920s, before comics as we know them, existed. Henry Jenkins suggests that slash fiction itself, tentatively came into existence in the early 1970s as writers of *Star Trek* fan fiction began to suggest that there was a deeper relationship between Kirk and Spock than originally thought (p. 187). Slash fiction gets its name from the use of a slash symbol in the description of the key pairing involved in the story; it symbolises a same-sex pairing for example male/male indicates a homosexual relationship.

Generally the characters appropriated for use in these stories and pieces of art are straight in the original text. Often they are chosen for their close relationship, such as Batman and Robin, whether it is underlying sexual tension or just a close friendship; however they can also be chosen for having an antagonistic relationship, usually putting a hero in a relationship with a villain. The fact that these characters are represented as straight in the original text gives the fan free reign in their fiction over how the couple might of started their relationship and even aspects of their personality that might be ‘hidden’ in everyday life. The fan often takes liberties with the potentiality of the homosocial relationship between fellow male superheroes,

whose sex lives are often ambiguous as the storyline of the comics often concentrates on the action rather than the emotional or romantic.

Having openly gay characters in mainstream superhero comics has not really changed anything as having gay characters in a relationship seems to be taboo. However slash fiction writer were given something tangible to work with even if it was just the one character. Northstar (Jean-Paul Beaubier) for instance is constantly paired with fellow X-man, Iceman (Bobby Drake). However Iceman is not presented as gay in canon, though many fans might argue. They are mainly paired because of the fact that Northstar has a crush on Iceman, this was revealed in *Uncanny X-Men #415* (2003), as can be seen in Figure 7.1. In the slash fiction Northstar is often shown as a confident, arrogant, gay man whereas. Iceman on the other hand, since he is supposedly straight in canon, is often portrayed as a closet homosexual who is just coming to terms with his feelings for his team mate. The following is an excerpt from SavvyLeBeau's *Can I Tell You?* (2005)

During the whole movie it felt like Jean-Paul was watching me. I'm probably just wasting my time... I know he's gay... but... there's no way he'd ever be interested in a guy like me. I sat through the movie, for a while I tried to steal some of his popcorn, but he caught me. "You know, Robert," he said, I love how he pronounces my name. Ro-bare it's so hot. His accent is the kind of thing that makes me want to do things no straight man has ever done, "I'm the one here who has the overactive metabolism." "So? Can't I get some food?" I pressed, hoping that if he agreed we'd bump hands in the popcorn bowl. He seemed to consider letting me have some. I could tell, because he was biting his lip. I don't even think he knows he does that, but it's so adorable, and I can't stand it. Why does he torture me with his incessant lip biting? I'm sure if he knew it attracted me, he wouldn't do it. "Non," he said, using that delicious French accent again. My breath hitched as he spoke, "you have a slow metabolism, you don't need to eat." I wanted to come up with some sort



Figure 7.1: Northstar's Crush On Iceman Is Revealed In *Uncanny X-Men #415: Secrets*.

of witty retort, but I couldn't come up with one. I had to try so hard to concentrate on the movie. I mean, what else was I supposed to do? Kiss him? I don't think so. Admit that I've been in love with him for weeks now? Once again, no, (SavvyLeBeau, Fanfiction.net, 27 Feb 2005).

While liberties are taken with Iceman's character, the actual possibility that such a relationship could exist, in theory, is there because of the fact that Northstar is in fact gay. This is recognised by fans in fan fiction in that he is always an established character, he does not need to go through any personality or sexuality changes in order to become what the fan wants, rather he is a ready made gay character with a strong personality to match. However this might in fact take some of the appeal away for slash fans who want to make the impossible, possible and therefore prefer the relatively blank slate of the straight canon characters.

While non-gay characters in slash fiction are open to any possibility relationship wise, and single gay characters such as Northstar are easily accessible but still have the blank slate appeal because of their lack of a partner, canon gay couples are on a new level. Their relationship is set in ink, literally. While there have been gay superheroes in relationships before in adult, or more obscure comics, couples like Teddy and Billy from the *Young Avengers* are rare in mainstream superhero comics.

While the start of their relationship itself is not shown in the comic, it is known that they met recently, just prior to the events of issue one. In the issue the characters keep up a friendly, flirtatious banter but give little other indication of their relationship (see Figure 7.2). Instead of paying attention to the fight around them, the two keep up a friendly repartee. Like this image, many of the panels of the series have the two standing together, viewing this; it is easy to see how the relationship has been implied through the structure of the image. This can be seen in Figure 7.3, Billy and Teddy stand next to each other on Billy's energy disc, their bodies form a triangular shape, indicating the strength of their relationship. In Figure 7.4 Billy holds an injured Teddy in his arms much like Figure 6.1 in which Northstar holds



Figure 7.2: Asgardian (Later Wiccan) And Hulking Flirt While Taking Down The Bad Guys In *Young Avengers: Sidekicks*.



Figure 7.3: Wiccan And Hulkling Are Constantly Next To Each Other In The Panel. From *Young Avengers: Sidekicks*.



Figure 7.4: Wiccan Holds Hulkling In His Arms. From *Young Avengers: Sidekicks*.

Iceman. However, comparing the two images, Teddy is leaning back into Billy whereas Northstar is holding Iceman up with one arm while he leans over him, indicating the distance between the two in their unrequited relationship. While it is hinted at in several parts of issues 1-5, it is not until issue six that we are aware that the two are actually in a relationship. By the end of issue six, their relationship is far easier to pick up on, and not just because of the dialogue, though that does give a clear indication as well. Figure 7.5 also indicates their relationship; Teddy appears to have his arm around Billy's shoulders, the panel is very casual hinting at the possibility before confirming it with Kate's dialogue.

Kate: 'So Billy, about your new code name...'

Billy: 'Why do I need a new code name?'

Kate: 'Because you're not an Asgardian, you're a warlock. Plus you need a name that won't become a national joke when the press finds out about you and Teddy'.

Billy: 'I definitely need a new code name'.

(YA #6, 2005, see Figure 7.6)

It is indicated that the two got together in the short time that they knew each other before the comic begins. While this leaves a gap for fan fiction writers to become creative with first time stories, it sets a particular time period that the relationship could have started. Therefore the 'first time' fiction on how the characters got together is set generally around the same time and is often set around training with the only other two young avengers at the time, Eli and Iron Lad. In fan writer Yalover's work, *Lost in Thought* (2006) the two characters are walking home after a training session, obviously set before they become a superhero team.

Its late and getting dark .I still don't have proper control of my powers yet, not exactly a great situation. Don't get me wrong I'm not scared for myself as such but rather what might happen if I have to defend myself. Which is why I'm secretly glad when Ted- when Hulkling offers to walk me home. Well it's a



Figure 7.5: Teddy Appears To Have His Arm Around Billy; This Was One Of The First Indications Of Their Relationship. From *Young Avengers: Sidekicks*.



Figure 7.6: Kate Convinces Billy To Change His Codename To Wiccan. From *Young Avengers: Sidekicks*.

reason anyway. Still all ulterior motives aside I would have turned him down, (What self respecting teen hero lets himself get walked home?) but he said, "It's no trouble. Besides I'd like the company." There's not much to say to that and I'll admit I'm not protesting as much as I could have. It helps that it's Teddy. If Ironlad or Eli had offered I would have known they were worried about me. Intellectually I know Ted's here because he's worried, but I can trick myself into believing otherwise, (Yalover, Fanfiction.net, 8 July, 2006).

The main difference between fiction around Billy and Teddy and fiction around non-canon slash is that being gay is not an issue in the story. Unlike the fiction around Iceman, because the two characters are already gay, the situation does not often come up where they are confronted with issues over their sexuality. One of the few examples where the issue does come up can be seen in Saturn's Hikari's story *Dinner at the Kaplan's* (2006) in which Billy's mother tries to explain to her husband about Billy and Teddy but he remains surprisingly obtuse. Even then Jeff Kaplan does not seem put off when he finally gets it. The bold words indicate their thoughts.

*It's good they can make a study group" He calls into the dining, picking up the salad and the potatoes. "Me and my best friends never shared enough classes." **'They're best friends. Nothing odd about that'** "It's nice they can share so much- Billy's a lot happier this year." Rebecca chinks the glasses together, putting the boys' soda on the right, Sam at the head and her wine glasses next to his on the opposite side. **'You're in denial. Watch them Jeff. Just watch,** (Saturn's Hikari, Fanfiction.net, 12 January 2006).*

While the two do have a set relationship, there are of course fan fiction writers who prefer to create their own version of the relationship by writing AU, or alternative universe stories. For example fanfic writer Yamihakkai creates a story line in which the boys meet as children rather than immediately before the comic begins.

Billy didn't know the golden-haired boy who came running but he wasn't scared anymore...that boy wasn't coming to hit him... he was coming... to save him...he closed his eyes. He could hear the boys screaming but couldn't look. In his young mind he thought that the new boy was being trashed... just like the others always did to himself... and only because he was... different.
(Yamihakkai, *Friendship*, 2007)

The fan prefers to create his own setting, taking the slight ambiguity of the 'before' of the comic in order to appropriate the characters history. However, while many slash stories are first time fics, most of the fiction around Billy and Teddy is set around an existing relationship. Many of the longer stories have the relationship has an existing back drop much like the series, though generally with more interaction. However there is a large amount of drabbles, short fics, that are merely one-shots of the 'cute' relationship. Most of these involve only a small moment in time, author Fullmetal_Cute is predominant in writing these shorter fics about the *Young Avengers*.

Teddy held Billy's hand palm up, running the tip of his finger up and down and between Billy's fingers. Billy watched this curiously, but wrote it off as just one of those things Teddy did. And it wasn't like he minded.
Teddy ran his finger along the web of flesh between Billy's pointer finger and his thumb, then down across the ball to his wrist. His touch lingered there a moment, then moved along the lines of his palm
"Trying to read the future?" Billy asked lightly.
"Already know it," Teddy answered, (Fullmetal_Cute, Palm, 26 July, 2006).

While there is a lot of what fans would term 'fluff' such as Fullmetal_Cute's fanfic, there is also a lot of highly sexual fan fictions. These eroticise the characters and are generally centred on just sex scenes. "The amount of sex they'd had had sufficiently worn him out enough that he couldn't climb out of their shared bed without accidentally kicking Teddy once or twice, and by the time he'd reached the doorway,

Teddy was awake” (Amarin Rose, *Shared Appetites*, 2007). Another example of this would be Gaymuffin’s *Horny Virus* fic (*Young Avengers Live Journal*, 2006). In these the characters become infected with an alien virus which causes them to become completely overcome by their sexual urges.

As can be seen by these various different constructions of the characters and their relationship, fans have created a whole new existence for Billy and Teddy. Since the characters thoughts and emotions are rarely shown in the comics, the fanfics are able to construct the characters far more in-depth, creating stories like *Lost in Thought* (2006) in which other fans can get a glimpse of this, version of Billy’s thoughts and emotions.

Likewise in the more eroticised stories, the fans have the boys, who in the comics are only sixteen, which is under the age for consent in the United States, in highly sexual situations, including threesomes like Fullmetal_Cute’s series about Wiccan/Hulking and Anole (an X-Man).

*Victor raised his head lazily, one eye opening just enough to make not of the time on the clock on the wall. He didn’t feel the need to stir from the warm tangle of bodies he was in. He was sore, sticky, his mouth tasted funny, and he couldn’t remember the last time he’d been so relaxed. He buried his face in the crook of the nearest neck, aware of the rough feel of the carpet under him. They’d moved to the floor after the second time Billy was dumped from the too-small bed. He was also aware of something hot and hard pressing against his thigh. (Fullmetal_Cute, *Lost Scene*, 2006).*

7.3: Responses

To get a clear indication of how fanfics create a communal construction of the characters it is best to examine the reviews that people posted after reading. Several

examples of these from Fullmetal_Cute's *Central Park in the Summer Time* (2006) fic include:

SQUEE! I love this!

We have stage one and stage two here. They are, of course, Vic meeting Billy and Teddy, and Vic lusting after Billy and Teddy. Will we ever see a stage three fic?

And by stage three, I mean Vic shagging Billy and Teddy?

Please? Pretty please? Pretty please with sugar on top?, (Dorkside, Magus_69, 2006).

And

**laughing* oh geez, that was great. I can see the look on poor Vic's face.*

And I think I'll remember that for the rest of my life: Billy the shirtless sex god.

On the constructive side, great writing and character portrayal as usual. You write great fics, (Dorkside, Noteveryday, 2006).

And

Shirtless Sex God Billy? Oh so true~, (Dorkside, Twincast, 2006).

These comments are typical of the type of response that most fans post after reading fan fiction. Because they are generally published in sites which cater to the particular fandom, and have warning signs such as 'slash' and 'contains content not appropriate for minors', there are few fans who read the fics that dislike the particular genre that they use. Therefore generally the comments are positive and encouraging to the writers; fiction that is badly written is usually not commented on, other fans preferring not to give a negative judgment. As can be seen by the first example, Magus_50 begs the writer to continue in the series in a more erotic way, through a threesome, fulfilling his/her particular view of the story. The second example praises the writer for her great writing and character portrayal, they also comment on Billy as

a shirtless sex god as does the third example. This shows the way that the characters are constructed by the fans after all, in the comic Billy was bullied quite often at school before he gained his powers, it is indicated within the text that he was on the scrawny and ‘dorky’ side. Yet in these particular stories he is constructed as a shirtless sex god.

7.4: Fan Art

The styles used in the fan art suggest particular influences however as Gareth Schott and Andrew Burn observe, ‘Rather than simply seeing these as vague origins, we see them in terms of the idea of provenance in Kress and van Leeuwen’s (2001) theory of multimodal design. Provenance here means the specific use of existing semiotic resources in the making of a new text’ (2007, p. 239). This differs from notions of intertextuality in the fact that emphasis is laid on the signifier. For example the fan art in Figure 7.7 by fan artist Tagu, recalls traditions of Japanese manga and anime, the power lines around the character indicating power are remind viewers of series such as *Dragon Ball Z*. However the imagery of the character, Wiccan, also has clear symbolic connections to Greek mythology, note the winged head band around his head which represents the Greek messenger god Hermes. This and the staff that he carries comprise collectively produced meaning to ideas around magic. These all connect to the fact that the character originally based his own appearance on a Norse god, Thor.

In many ways fan art allows fans to construct the characters in the same way that fan fiction does. However while fan fiction explores their character and personalities, fan art focuses on the physical appearance of the character. Most of the fan art follows the comic style of hypermasculinised bodies, the characters in heroic positions. However since Japanese anime and Manga became more popular in the United States, fan art often follows the Manga style making the male characters beautiful in a more effeminate way. This can be seen in Figure 7.7 which holds recognisable signifiers of Japanese art. The image is even styled like a page from a Manga, including Japanese characters.

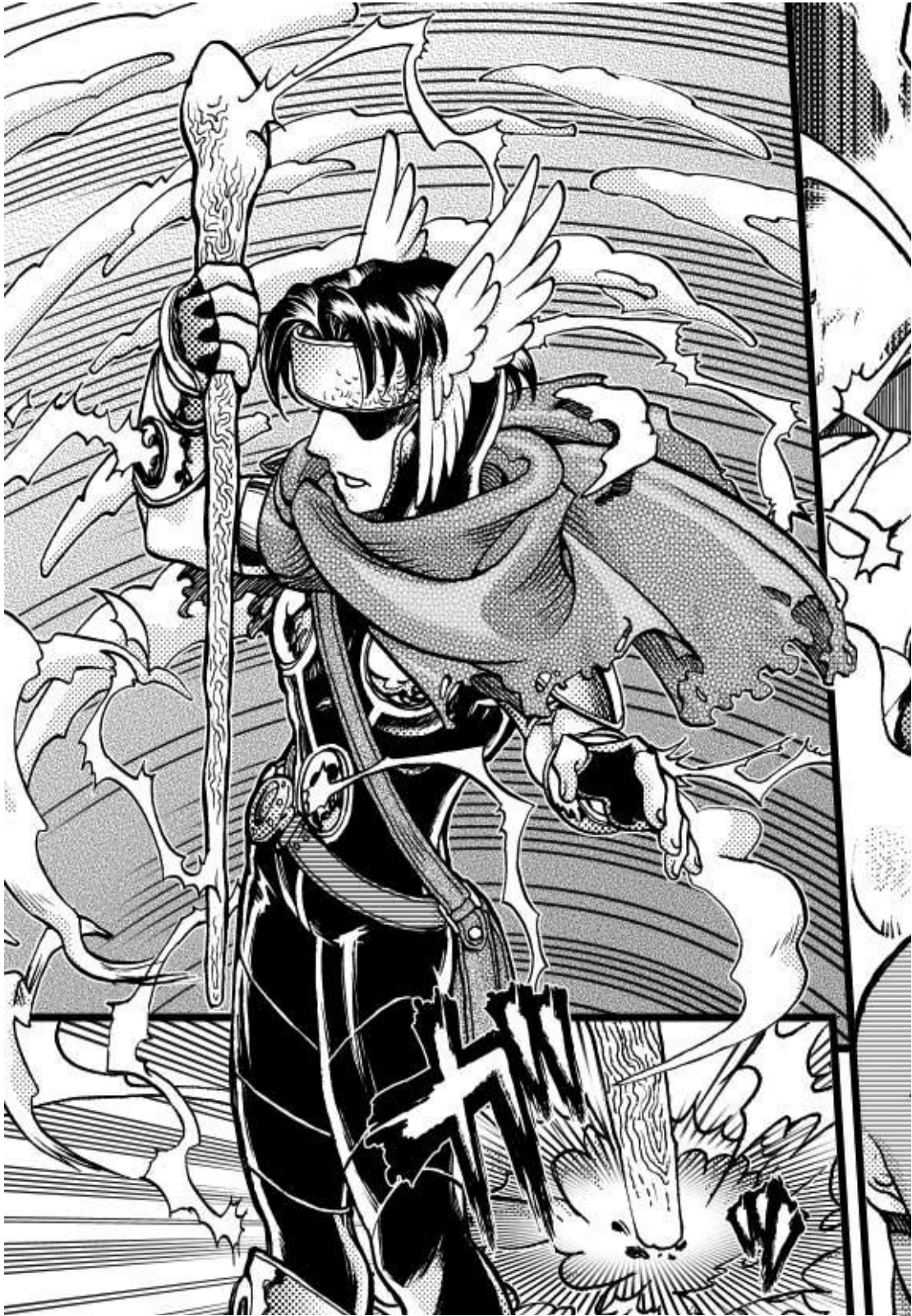


Figure 7.7: Fan Art By Tagu Depicting Billy Manga Style. Courtesy Of Tagu At *Another Damasare*.

In Figure 7.8 Emma Vieceli on the other hand keeps to the original image of Teddy and Billy, but casts them into a particular position, as if the image is actually the fan artist taking a photograph. Figure 7.9 on the other hand styles the characters as stick figures, but they are set within a comic strip and are not just a single image. The fan, Fishylove, constructs a storyline, not just around the characters but around the comic books themselves. In the strip the writer (Allan Heinberg), is given a suggestion by management to make one of the gay characters a girl. While he is considering the reader is able to see the reactions of the characters themselves, as well as the reaction of the reader. The strip ends with Heinberg saying no. The fan includes three elements of the comic industry, the fan, the writer and the actual characters, (icons) to get her point across that the boys should stay as boys. This was in response to rumours that Teddy, who is a shape shifter, was going to turn out to be female in order to satisfy conservative readers. This image represents the political concerns of the fans, expressing concerns and opinions over the characters, as if by creating the story or the art the fan in some way controls the fate of the character.



Figure 7.8: Fan Art By Emma Vieceli, Billy And Teddy Posing As If For A Photograph. Courtesy Of Emma Vieceli On *DeviantArt*.

As can be seen by the fanfic and fan art examples shown above, the characters have come to exist more in the vast chasm of the internet than in the texts themselves. Compare 12 issues, one special, minor appearances in other comics and a four part cross over with *Runaways*, with the multitude of fanfics created since the comics launch. Fifty-six on *Fanfiction.net* (as on 11 March 2008), some of which are multi-chaptered and a few hundred on the *Young Avengers Live Journal*. Fullmetal_Cute has written at least eighty-six, which are published on her page *Tales From The Dorkside*. Of course this is nothing compared to other more popular media, *Harry Potter* for example has 346,568 stories on *FanFiction.net* alone (11/3/08), showing that comics are only a small niche of fandom on the internet. The position that creative slash work has in fandom is interesting especially when compared to heteronormative works around ambiguous characters such as Batman. Because more information is available around Hulkling and Wiccan the engagement with the text by fans has changed aspects of the way they construct fan fiction. Also, though fans often turn to writing fan fiction out of frustration, as the characters do not share in sexual relationships, fans still seem to prefer ambiguous characters such as Batman, as seen in Chapter Four. Fan art, is used to create the heroes in the ideal image that the reader has, constructing a particular view of the characters within fandom. While Wiccan is constructed as a geek within the comic text he is often made into a 'shirtless sex god'. As can be seen by this, fandom poaches from the original text, to create a niche world in which more in-depth versions of the characters are able to exist in relative safety, away from death and loneliness that is often a strategy of dealing with queer characters, as seen in Chapter Six.

By examining the way in which fans construct characters through creative interpretations of the text, which is exposed through the creation of products such as fan fiction and fan art, I have attempted to explore the several major differences in the use of slash fiction, depending on whether the characters are queer or heterosexual, as well as the use multimodal design in fan art in order to create an ideal image. For

example fan interpretations change with Wiccan and Hulkling being a canon couple as there is more information available for the fan to poach therefore there is less need for the origin fanfics where the characters begin their relationship, also being queer is not an issue or a worry for a canon queer couple. Fans create in order to construct an ideal image or 'world' for their character, placing their own personal preferences and social views upon the characters in order to fulfil their own desires.

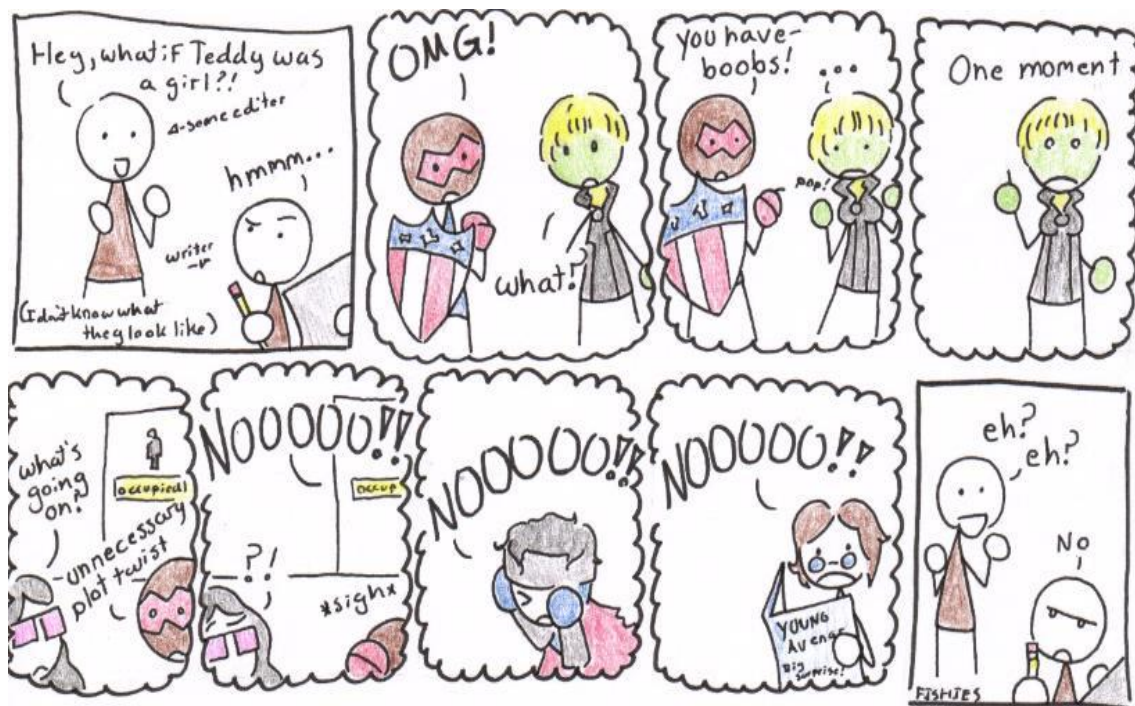


Figure 7.9: Fan Art By Fishylove. A Fan Comic Which Looks At An Issue That Concerned *Young Avengers* Fans. Courtesy of FishyLove on DeviantArt.

Chapter Eight: Conclusion

This has not been an analysis of the comics themselves, but rather a teasing out of the homoerotic discourses, and fan reactions to these discourses. What is important here is the attempt to create a frame of mind similar to that of the fan, in order to understand the possibilities inherent in the text. By doing so, only then is it possible to understand the possibility and the actuality of the homoerotic discourses within texts such as *Batman*, *Young Avengers* and *The Authority*. While overt examples of homoeroticism are being included in series like *The Authority*, these are aimed at older audiences, the homoeroticism in mainstream comics is comparably subtextual, continuing to leave comics open to fan poaching.

This work contributes to the landscape of academic knowledge created by academics such as Henry Jenkins, Matt Hills and Mathew J. Pustz around the subject of fandom and fan participation. However it takes a unique approach in that it brings together several methods of approach, (queer theory, comic theory, discourse analysis) in order to investigate the discourses of homosexuality in both the text and in the responses and the involvement of comic fandom. In the future, this research could be taken further to investigate homoeroticism in text in a more detailed and academic analysis. The focus of this work was not on the analysis, however the comic analysis used was based on works such as Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* (1994), this could be supplemented by using more general forms of visual analysis, such as *Reading Images* (1996) by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen, in order to create a more academically based framework for analysis. It could also be taken in the opposite direction and used to explore the reactions of comic fans to queer characters and their appropriation of these characters in more detail in order to understand the world of slash fiction and art.

As queer culture becomes more accepted within the public sphere, more queer characters will make their appearances in the medium. Future research around the area will perhaps be able to define whether the characters will be forced to stay in the

background or have their sexuality shunted into the shadow. In the mean time, comics such as *Young Avengers* and *The Authority* continue to evolve and explore the queer relationship of its characters, holding potential to take comics further than they have ever been.

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