

Truth, Justice, and the American Gay: Representation of Gender and Sexuality in Mainstream  
Comics

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### **Abstract**

This project explores the representation of LGBTQ+ characters in mainstream comics over time through the lens of queer theory. Queer theory challenges heteronormativity, or the idea that heterosexuality is the societal default and the only lens through which to interpret sexuality in media. To this end, the thesis investigates the research question “To what extent has LGBTQ+ representation in mainstream comics changed as it has moved from subtext to canon?” Canon representation involves a character being expressly identified as LGBTQ+. The thesis offers an examination of several texts ranging from the 1980s to the 2020s and a comparison between their handling of queer representation. Through this investigation, new light can be shed on representation in a facet of popular culture not discussed as frequently as other media, but still incredibly important in cultural discourse. This expanded knowledge is beneficial to multiple disciplines, including comics studies and queer studies.

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Truth, Justice, and the American Gay: Representation of Gender and Sexuality in Mainstream Comics

When thinking about media that offer a wealth of LGBTQ+ representation, mainstream comic books are not often included on the list. Commonly thought of as a juvenile medium with a primarily male audience, mainstream comic book franchises are not usually considered to have any nuance beyond heroes in colorful tights fighting off villains in the name of justice. This is certainly the case for many comic book stories, but the medium also has a storied history of queer subtext, characters, and interpretations. From the moral panic in the 1950s which inspired the creation of a self-governing censorship agency to DC and Marvel releasing variant covers for Pride Month in 2021, mainstream comics have made a lot of progress in their portrayals of queerness and queer characters.

It is true that these large publishers' comic books are by and large made by and consumed by men (Botzakis, 2009; Avery-Natale, 2013); however, that does not mean that there is no opportunity for queer interpretations, subtext, and characters. Queer theory maintains that texts can be approached from multiple perspectives and examines the relation between power structures and identity (Dhanens et al., 2008). Nowhere are power structures clearer than comic books, where heroes are often placed on pedestals and there are clear distinctions between good and evil. The concept of the superhero is inextricably tied with identity, with the conflict between the secret civilian identity and the colorful alter ego with mythical abilities. Superheroes must also grapple with trying to find their place in a world where they are different from everyone else, even if those differences are a secret. These conflicts provide a unique space in which to examine identity and its relation to hegemonic structures.

Long before serving as the source material for billion-dollar blockbusters, DC and Marvel comics had a unique grip on the cultural consciousness that saw millions of children and adolescents buying and trading issues each month (Tilley, 2012). Their prominence is why it is important to examine their queerness. As mainstream publishers, Marvel and DC have cultivated vast connected universes in which many of their narratives take place, and within such large story worlds there are countless narratives and characters to examine. Even if a character has been critically examined before, it is always possible to analyze them from a new angle, a different era, or a different portrayal with another creative team. These universes are largely collaborative efforts, with different artists, writers, and editors working together to form new iterations of old characters. With such vast possibilities it is important to continue to expand our understanding of queerness in comics across time and across creative teams. The storied history of Marvel and DC characters presents an opportunity to see queerness in media shift over time. Corners of these comic universes still remain unexplored in scholarly contexts. For these reasons, I have selected a mixture of well-known and more niche characters from Marvel and DC comics to examine in this thesis. This allows me to reexamine characters who have been written about before and explore less popular characters. The selected texts span from the 1980s to the 2020s, giving a comprehensive portrait of queerness in comics over time.

Apart from the subject matter, mainstream comic books are also a unique medium in which to explore queerness. As McCloud (1994) outlines, comics are a combination of visuals and prose that form a language all their own. The panels form sequences with gaps in between, leaving the perception of the whole and interpretation of meaning up to the reader. This is different from other media like film, television, or even books, where a sequence of events is continuous rather than chopped up visually. The more abstract cartoon style that many

mainstream superhero comics have more readily allows the reader to insert themselves into the text. Various combinations of text, artwork, panel size, transitions between panels, and more create different effects for the reader. Exploring queerness in this space is exploring the intersection of prose, visual art, and audience collaboration and how those affect the expression of identity within the text.

It is without a doubt that as the medium of comics has evolved over time, its queer representation has as well. While certain tropes such as the coming out narrative have remained popular, representation of sexual identity in mainstream comics has evolved to become more nuanced in many cases. However, bisexual characters are still fewer and farther between than gay and lesbian characters, and their portrayals can uphold biphobic stereotypes. Similarly, although many queer characters in comics are either hypermasculine or hyperfeminine, there has been progress in recent years towards more representation of gender nonconformity, including transgender and nonbinary characters.

### **Understanding Comic Book Cultures**

Traditionally, the typical comic book reader is assumed to be white, male, heterosexual, and cisgender (Botzakis, 2009). There have been few academic attempts to formally study the comic book consumer demographic; however, more informal studies by popular press outlets and industry publications estimate that the audience is majority white, millennial, and male. One such study estimates a growing LGBTQ+ and Hispanic readership (Hionis & Ki, 2019). Certainly, with an ever-expanding selection of popular television and film adaptations, more have become aware of comic book stories, if not the source material itself. This has led to increased calls for diversity in both comic books and their adaptations. The question of how to introduce more diverse characters and storylines into comic universes across media is not an easy

one to answer, and the industry has fumbled its attempts. In 2017, Marvel Vice President of Sales David Gabriel came under fire for his statement that increased diversity in Marvel comics was hurting sales (Hibberd, 2017).

Because they are often thought of as juvenile and not a valid art form, it is assumed that comics do not have political or cultural significance. This is not the case: comics often mirror cultural anxieties and attitudes that exist at the time of their publication. During the Cold War, comics frequently dealt with the fears surrounding communism and nuclear annihilation (Wright, 2001). Similarly, Kustritz (2019) outlines how DC television adaptations like *Smallville* (2001-2011), *The Flash* (2014-present), and *Supergirl* (2015-present) reflect anxieties about surveillance and terrorism. These shows also reflect the queer idea of leading a ‘double life’ as a vigilante, which Kustritz compares to the issue of closeting. Additionally, due to their lowbrow status, comics often have the opportunity to “convey serious and profound qualms about the political establishment and prevailing institutional mores” that are taboo to discuss in more reputable media (Pratt, 2009, p. 109).

Comic books as we know them today have a plethora of characters and storylines dating back nearly a century, with iconic characters having a multitude of different incarnations and interpretations. The medium is known for its countless alternate universes and timelines. In comics, a universe is the story world in which a given set of narratives take place. As mainstream comic book publishers, DC and Marvel have very large universes that link their various publications. For example, although Batman and Superman stories may not always reference each other, they both take place within the larger DC universe. Narratives can have varying impact on other stories within the universe as a whole. This analysis focuses specifically on mainstream comics as a place with lots of opportunities for queer representation. While many of

a publisher's stories are contained within one universe, comics often feature stories from an alternate universe with different circumstances. For example, while the main Marvel timeline can be found in Earth-616, stories can also take place in the Earth-1610 Ultimate Universe, or a number of other parallel universes (Marnell, 2019). DC Comics has a similar setup, with the main Earth-0 universe and countless alternate Earths (Polo, 2021). Marvel's Earth-616 timeline has remained constant since 1961, but the same cannot be said for DC Comics' continuity, which has been completely rebooted every decade since the 1980s (Corley, 2020). A reboot can be defined as a total reset of the canon, essentially starting from scratch with a new continuity of events. Even as time passes within a given continuity, characters usually remain ageless. These ever-shifting timelines often involve retcon, or retroactive continuity, which is when established facts or plot points are adjusted or made irrelevant by subsequently published works. This is generally a smaller adjustment and not a total reset like a reboot. Retconning can change characters' origin stories and even rewrite their personalities to fit in with the new canon. Because of this fluidity, writers have the opportunity to rewrite a character's history in order to make them explicitly queer, even if they were previously established as cisgender and heterosexual.

Historically, queerness has always been associated with comics, though not always positively. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, anti-comic crusaders gained traction, claiming that comics were corrupting children to delinquency, mental illness, and illiteracy. A common claim of this movement was that alleged portrayals of homosexuality in comics were harming children. The popularity of the medium only added to the fire—market research during this time indicated that 80 percent of teenagers and 90 percent of children read comic books (Tilley, 2012). These sentiments came to a head with the publication of psychiatrist Fredric Wertham's *Seduction of*

*the Innocent* in 1954, which was based on his findings working with disturbed children.

Wertham noticed that all of the children that he saw read and enjoyed comic books and assigned causality to them for the children's disorders. *Seduction of the Innocent* in part detailed the supposed romantic relationship between Batman and Robin (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, 2021). Additionally, Wertham alleged that Wonder Woman was a domineering lesbian whose stories had bondage subtext (Tilley, 2012).

*Seduction of the Innocent* is now largely regarded as junk science that dismissed larger social, cultural, and familial contexts in favor of blaming comic books for causing mental illness and other issues, but the outcry it inspired led to a series of hearings in the Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency. Subsequently, the Comics Code Authority (CCA) was created as a voluntary self-regulator for the industry. The CCA implemented a code for publishers to create "wholesome" entertainment and prevent government interference in the industry, effectively sanitizing the medium (Tilley, 2012). The 1954 Comics Code regulated the narrative and visual depictions of a variety of subjects, from how large the word 'crime' could be printed on the cover to how good should always triumph over evil. In the section on marriage and sex, the code forbade "illicit sex relations," "sexual abnormalities," and "sex perversion," essentially banning homosexuality from comics (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, 2021).

The Comics Code was updated in 1971, but it was not until 1989 that publishers were instructed to treat "social groups identifiable by lifestyle," including homosexuals, in a positive light. The 1989 Comics Code also specified that degrading others due to factors like "sexual preference" should be shown as unacceptable (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, 2021). From the 1980s onward, more graphic depictions of violence were deemed acceptable, and comics meant for mature readers were published without the CCA seal. By 2001, Marvel had ceased

submitting its comics to the CCA, and by 2011, the Comics Code was entirely abandoned as a rating system (Tilley, 2012). However, the ramifications of the CCA and the Comics Code can be observed in portrayals of queerness both before and after the 1989 revision.

### **Previous Research on Queerness in Comics**

Researching comic books is a wide subject area that can be approached from many different disciplines. Although a large portion of comics research is grounded in examining the ways that the medium deals with national politics, such as Young's (2017) analysis of how comics portrayed the Vietnam War, in recent years comics research has also begun to move towards discussing identity politics and the queer elements of comic books. For example, Langsdale (2020) delves into the subjects of race and gender through the lens of queer theory as they relate to the Marvel title *Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur*, which centers around a young Black girl with superhuman intellect and her dinosaur sidekick with whom she is able to switch bodies. Scrutinizing the interweaving of Black girlhood and monstrosity within the text is "to study the intersections of gender, race, sexuality, class, and ability and, by virtue of those intersections, to become aware of particular (and often unjust) cultural constructions of normative and nonnormative subject positions" (Langsdale, 2020, p. 395).

On the other hand, comic books' representations of gender and sexuality specifically are a less common topic of research. Here, it is necessary to define some types of representation that can fall under 'queerness': there is queercoding, which is when there is subtext indicating a character's queer identity without explicitly confirming it (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015), and there is canon or explicit representation of self-identified LGBTQ+ characters. A large portion of previous research centers around queercoding. Shyminsky (2011) discusses how more effeminate sidekick characters like Robin and Jimmy Olsen are a concentration point for

queerness that serve to 'straighten out' the hero and main narrative. However, this research mostly pertains to the Golden and Silver Ages of comics, when there was public uproar about the depictions of homosexuality in comics, and canon representations would not have been allowed under the Comics Code Authority. While this is necessary context for this analysis, none of the selected texts are from these eras in comics.

Marvel's X-Men are a one of the most common topics for academic discussion of queerness in comics, with scholars arguing both that they can be read as a queer allegory and that certain characters have queer subtext. These queer allegories and subtexts span both during and after the code era of comics. Since their first appearance in 1963, the X-Men have served as an allegory for marginalized populations, as their stories often deal with themes of second-class citizenry and in-groups versus out-groups, although this is usually thought of in the contexts of the civil rights movement or anti-Semitism. The X-Men are a team that is made up of members of the mutant subspecies. Born with the X-gene, mutants have a variety of superhuman abilities and can become incredibly powerful and dangerous. They are frequently persecuted by humans, and while the X-Men advocate for peaceful integration with humans, their adversaries seek mutant supremacy and domination. Freeman Lifschutz (2017) discusses how X-Men storylines frequently parallel the fight to declassify homosexuality as a mental illness, as well as the shameful stigma surrounding it. In particular, the Legacy virus storyline that ran from 1993-2001 featured a virus with AIDS-like symptoms killing mutants and eventually spreading to humans, which was an obvious allegory for the epidemic that disproportionately affected the LGBTQ+ community in the 1980s and 1990s. Along with these parallels to real-life oppression, Lifschutz argues that the X-Men parallel a positive queer community in many ways. As young mutants discover their abilities in puberty, they are taken in by a group of people like them, creating a

found family dynamic that mirrors how queer youth can find acceptance with people like them. There is also the mutants' common struggle of reaching self-acceptance and being 'mutant and proud,' an issue compounded by the fact that some mutants can pass for 'normal' better than others. This is a struggle that can also apply to queer people, some of whom can pass for cisgender and/or heterosexual better than others.

Building upon this, Lecker (2007) examines several X-Men properties, including comics, one of the animated television series, and the live-action films. Lecker concurs that the X-Men can be read as a queer allegory, with many mutants' powers manifesting not only during puberty but during sexual situations, where a queer person may discover their sexuality. The X-Men are also unique in their minority status because like queer people, they often do not share that status with the rest of their family the way that other marginalized groups do. Lecker further defines this allegory as empowering because the oppressed outsiders are classified as the next step in evolution and more powerful than their human counterparts. This leads to frequent conflict between embracing their superiority and conforming to the rest of humanity. Although this doesn't exactly mirror a real-life queer experience, it does match the dilemma between conformity and embracing difference. They are also able to go to Professor X's school for mutants, where they have access to adult mentors like them (something that many queer youths do not have available to them.)

D'Agostino (2018) discusses the queer implications of the Marvel character Rogue, whose power is to siphon the abilities, memories, and personalities of anyone she touches. She is unable to control this ability, and therefore can rarely make physical contact with other people. This complicates her ability to form relationships and condemns her to otherness. However, despite the queercoding surrounding her character, Rogue is heterosexual, and there is less

research on explicitly LGBTQ+ comic book characters. Streeby (2018) even admits in an article discussing the queer themes present in comics that “in thinking about form and heroism in comics today, there are still many questions left to ask about the intersections of sexuality, gender, race, and nation” (p. 458). Therefore, researching LGBTQ+ comic book characters through the lens of queer theory will ultimately further flesh out an area of research in both comic studies and queer studies, benefitting both disciplines. Comic books are a medium generally thought of as juvenile and targeted only towards a straight white male audience, but they are actually rich with opportunities to expand knowledge of the superhero archetypes that pervade cultural consciousness.

### **Methodological Approaches to Studying Queer Representation in Comic Books**

First, background research was conducted on queer theory in order to understand the complexities of queer visibility beyond simple definitions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ representation. Research was also conducted on queerbaiting and queercoding, because even without explicit LGBTQ+ narratives, queer readings of a text can certainly exist or be implied (Ng, 2017). In fact, even heterosexual narratives can be seen as queer over time, as queerness is posited to have always been a part of straight media (Shaw, 2009). This research involved discussions of media other than comics, but there are principles that can be learned and applied across media. Then, research was carried out on what other scholars have written about the intersection of queer theory and comics in order to inform later readings of selected texts and ascertain what has been accomplished in the field. It was also necessary to learn the terminology for analyzing comics and their visual grammar in order to conduct a thorough analysis of the texts.

Next, the selected texts were analyzed, and their handling of queer storylines based on the perspective of queer theory were noted. Subsequently, the portrayals of queer characters and

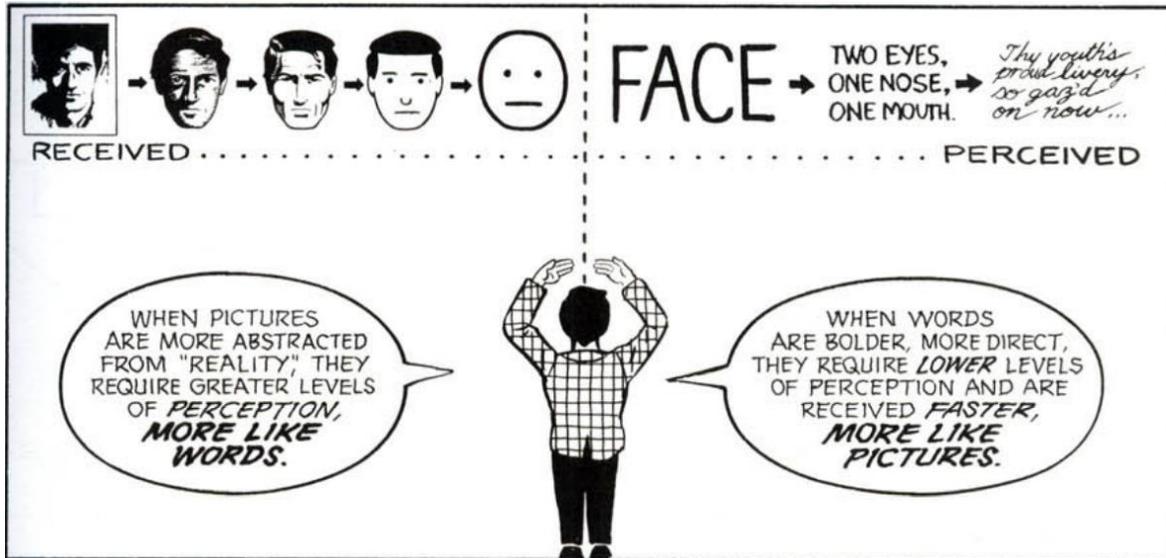
stories in the selected texts over time were compared and contrasted, with the intended outcome of displaying the changes that have occurred in mainstream comics' queer representation, and to a certain extent the larger cultural context. This involved discussions of characters' powers, their visual representation, as well as their level of agency in the text. In examining this change, it was important to consider the possible negative effects of increased visibility of non-normative sexual identities in a mainstream medium (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). This will ideally also aid in the further recognition of comic books as an important, if often overlooked, medium to study in a scholarly context.

### **Approaches to Studying Comic Book Medium**

Because mainstream comic books are a mass medium, many consider them not to be fully art nor writing, and incapable of artistic expression. This negative perspective was aided by the fact that many who pioneered comics as we know them today were members of marginalized populations: immigrants, Jewish people, African Americans, women, and homosexuals (Pratt, 2009). In actuality, comics have existed in some form or another for centuries, occupying a space that is both and also neither of those things. Defining precisely what a comic is an ongoing process, but McCloud (1994) offers a comprehensive portrait of the various genres, styles, and subject matter that all fall under the umbrella of comics. Comics have artists and writers coming together to create one story, and McCloud outlines the differences in how we interpret meaning from both of those things. Pictures are received information, meaning that we receive the message instantaneously. Words, on the other hand, are perceived information, because certain learned skills are required to decode meaning. We recognize a cartoon smiley face as a face, but it is not as instantaneous as seeing a realistic portrait. Figure 1 illustrates this progression of iconic abstraction: as an image becomes more cartoonish, the closer it gets to being perceived

information like language. On the other hand, as words become more stylized, they are received more like pictures.

Figure 1: McCloud's representation of iconic abstraction

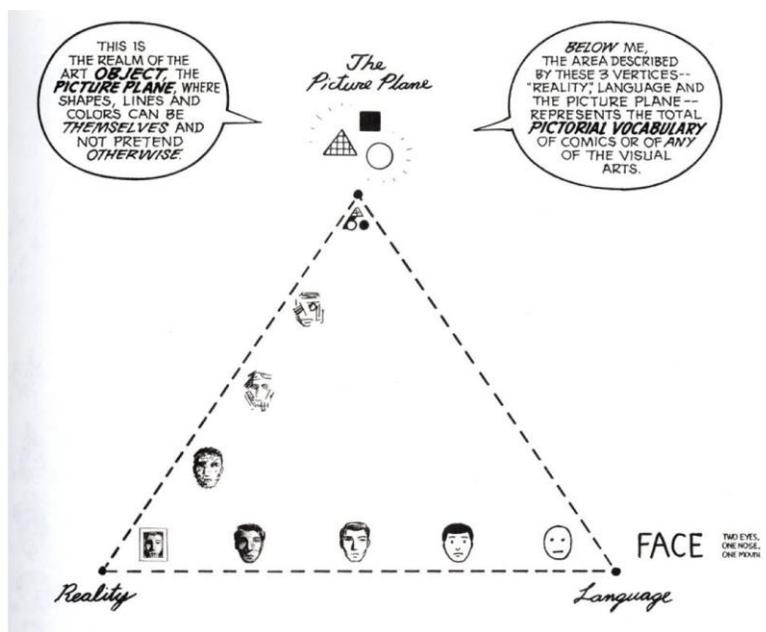


However, iconic abstraction is not the only type of abstraction that can be employed in comics. To better understand this dynamic, McCloud (1994) provides the triangle of representation, which displays three axes that define the entire “pictorial vocabulary” of any visual art, including comics (p. 51). This triangle can be seen in Figure 2. The bottom edge of the triangle is that same progression of iconic abstraction from reality to language. The top point of the triangle between reality and language is the picture plane, a space where shapes, colors, and lines exist without representing something else. In other words, the picture plane represents non-iconic abstraction. The shapes, colors, and lines of the picture plane do not correspond to any meaning or form whatsoever. This triangle is a good lens through which to examine the visual

grammar of the selected texts, especially because comics are a media so heavily based in visual iconography.

Of course, individual comics can fall anywhere within the triangle, but many mainstream Western comics fall somewhere along the bottom edge of the triangle (McCloud, 1994). All of these elements working together means that interpretation is very reliant on the reader. It is up to the reader to gain closure, or perceive the whole from the parts. Comic book panels “fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments. But closure allows us to connect these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality” (McCloud, 1994, p. 87). Different transitions between panels, as well as panel size and shape help the reader to perceive the amount of time in a sequence. Additionally, different combinations of words and pictures can have different meanings. Interpreting these cues to form meaning is not an exact science, and it is largely up to the reader’s instincts to decipher all of these elements.

Figure 2: McCloud’s triangle of representation



### **Applying Queer Theory to Comics**

Queer theory is not applied to comic books as frequently as it is to other media like film, television, and literature, and it provides a different lens through which to examine mainstream comic books. Queer theory contests the rigid social norms that define gender and sexuality, rejecting the binary positioning of homosexuality and heterosexuality, as well as male and female (Dhaenens et al., 2008). Through the lens of queer theory, sexuality and gender are thought of in terms of dynamics of power and hegemony rather than in binaries. The theory acknowledges the diversity within the community: there is no one-size-fits-all queer person due to the fluid nature of sexuality and gender across various contexts. Texts can be interpreted in multiple ways, and active audiences can interpret queer readings of a text. This does not mean that they are making the text queer; rather, the queer interpretation is just one possibility out of many (Dhaenens et al., 2008). Resistance is at the core of queer theory, refusing labels that seek to understand queer people in terms of how they compare to cisgender, heterosexual norms.

With this in mind, it is possible to apply queer theory to comics, which like other media has an active audience who can form their own interpretations of the texts. In fact, comics have been uniquely positioned to foster an active audience, with issues frequently featuring letters back and forth between readers and producers. In addition, there is room for a slew of audience interpretations within the sheer amount of lore that exists within comics, including various alternate universes, timelines, and retroactive continuities. With so many possibilities, it is only logical that some of these interpretations can be queer, especially considering the moves in recent years to bring more explicitly queer storylines to the medium.

### Description of Texts

All of the selected texts fall within the Modern Age of comics, defined as beginning in the mid-1980s and continuing to the present day. This era in comic book history is marked by increased commercialization of the genre, a rise in darker and more adult storylines, more psychologically complex characters, and a “search for new heroes” as multiculturalism increased (Volintine, 2016, p. 33). This move towards more diversity and more adult storylines may have opened the door for increased queer representation, with queerness often being considered a taboo subject for children. In order of publication, the selected texts are *Watchmen* (1986), *Uncanny X-Men #255* (1989), *Uncanny X-Men #265* (1990), *Alpha Flight #106* (1992), *The Sandman Volume V: A Game of You* (1992-3), *The Authority Volume 1* (1999), *X-Treme X-Men Volume 1 Issue 1* (2001), *Gotham Central Volume 2: Half a Life* (2005), *52 Volume 1* (2006), *Gotham City Sirens: Book Two* (2011), *All-New X-Men #40* (2015), *Uncanny X-Men #600* (2015), *Very Merry Multiverse* (2020), and *The New Warriors*, which was pulled before publication in 2020.

The selected texts span from 1986 to 2020, offering a wide range of queer stories across decades. While a portion of the representation (namely that of Mystique, Harley Quinn, and Poison Ivy) is more subtextual, the majority of it is explicitly queer. In total, fourteen texts and thirteen characters are included in this analysis. Seven texts are Marvel comics and seven are DC comics. (*The Authority* and *The Sandman* were technically published under Wildstorm and Vertigo, respectively, but these are subsidiaries of DC Comics.) Six characters are cisgender women, four are cisgender men, two are nonbinary, and one is a transgender woman. Of these texts, three have plots that are specifically centered around a coming out, whereas in the rest the

characters' queerness is either not part of the main plot, alluded towards, or only briefly acknowledged. This information can be found displayed in chart form in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3: Selected texts and their attributes

Text(s)	Publisher/Year Published	Queer/ Queercoded Character(s)	Other Attributes
<i>Watchmen</i>	DC Comics (1986)	Silhouette	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Silhouette is dead, only appears in flashbacks</li> <li>● Her story is not a major part of the main narrative</li> </ul>
<i>Uncanny X-Men #255</i> <i>Uncanny X-Men #265</i> <i>X-Treme X-Men, Volume 1 Issue 1</i>	Marvel Comics (1989, 1990, 2001)	Mystique	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Gender non-conforming</li> <li>● Story not centered around sexuality</li> </ul>
<i>Alpha Flight #106</i>	Marvel Comics (1992)	Northstar	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● First explicitly gay mainstream comic book character</li> <li>● Story centered around coming out</li> </ul>
<i>The Sandman Volume V: A Game of You</i>	DC Comics (Vertigo) (1992-1993)	Wanda	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Transgender woman</li> <li>● Gender plays a major role in her story</li> </ul>
<i>The Authority Volume 1</i>	DC Comics (Wildstorm) (1999)	Apollo, Midnighter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Queerness only briefly acknowledged</li> </ul>
<i>Gotham Central Volume 2: Half a Life</i>	DC Comics (2005)	Renee Montoya	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Story centered around coming out</li> <li>● Latina character</li> </ul>

<i>52 Volume 1</i>	DC Comics (2006)	Batwoman (Kate Kane)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Queerness only briefly acknowledged</li> </ul>
<i>Gotham City Sirens: Book Two</i>	DC Comics (2011)	Harley Quinn, Poison Ivy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Queerness only alluded towards</li> </ul>
<i>All-New X-Men #40 Uncanny X-Men #600</i>	Marvel Comics (2015)	Iceman (Bobby Drake)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Story centered around coming out</li> </ul>
<i>Very Merry Multiverse</i>	DC Comics (2020)	Kid Quick	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nonbinary</li> <li>• Character of color</li> <li>• Gender is not a major part of the story</li> </ul>
<i>The New Warriors</i>	Marvel Comics (2020, pulled before publication)	Snowflake	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nonbinary</li> <li>• Character of color</li> </ul>

### Sexual Identity in Comics

#### Comics Code Era Representation of Sexual Identity

Prior to the Comics Code revision in 1989 allowing for explicit portrayals of homosexuality, queer representation in mainstream comics had to be subtextual in order to make it past the censors at all. The X-Men antagonist Mystique was implied to be in a relationship with another woman during this time. However, explicit queer representation could still be found in comics specifically intended for mature audiences that were not submitted for CCA approval. The character of Silhouette in *Watchmen* is one example of explicit representation in adult comics. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, sexuality was represented as a binary in comics, with the majority of explicitly LGBTQ+ characters being either gay or lesbian. Mystique is one exception to this, as she was in relationships with men in addition to her subtextual relationship

with her partner Destiny. However, the other examined texts from the 1980s and 1990s exclusively depict gay or lesbian characters.

One early example of canon LGBTQ+ representation is the character of Silhouette in the graphic novel *Watchmen*. Although she only appears briefly in flashbacks and is dead by the time the main narrative begins, Silhouette marks an important point in the transition from queercoding to explicit representation. She was a member of the Minutemen, a superhero team that disbanded decades before the start of the story. *Watchmen* was published in 1986, before the Comics Code revision allowing explicit portrayals of homosexuality, but it was not subject to the same type of censorship due to it being intended for mature readers. This queer representation is largely removed from the main continuity of DC Comics, as *Watchmen* is a self-contained story that takes place in an alternate timeline where the United States won the war in Vietnam, and Nixon is elected to a third term. Silhouette only appears in the background of a few panels, and her story is largely told through the supplemental prose materials that can be found at the end of each chapter, including an excerpt from a teammate's memoir and a magazine interview with another teammate. These excerpts are written in standard prose and expand upon the story. In a medium often criticized for its lack of literary merit, the inclusion of prose pieces adds greater depth to the world that Moore (1986) creates within *Watchmen*. With these materials, Moore brings up interesting points regarding the intersection of superheroes and queerness, as one hero notes in his memoir that dressing up in a costume to fight crime had its "more libidinous elements" and that all the heroes had their own "sexual hang-ups" (p. 72).

This connection between vigilantism and queerness has implications not only for the characters in *Watchmen*, but also for the superhero genre in general. The story may take place in its own universe, but it relies on readers' knowledge of the ever-shifting history of heroes and

what they have come to symbolize (Cates, 2011). Even the most casual of fans know that Superman stands for truth, justice, and the American way, or that Batman seeks to stop crime where the police cannot. The characters in *Watchmen* are alternate versions of characters within the main DC universe, and the story serves as Moore's take on what would actually happen politically and psychologically if superheroes existed in the real world. These alternate versions of mainstream characters allow for them to be critiqued without completely retconning them in the main universe (Cates, 2011). Essentially, because *Watchmen* readers are likely familiar with the main DC universe, they are able to identify Moore's commentary and then see those main universe characters in a different light. This does not make those original main universe characters canonically queer, but it does serve to highlight a queer reading of them. Therefore, because Moore inserts queer subtext into *Watchmen*'s vigilantes, this same queer subtext can be pointed out in the main DC universe.

*Watchmen* is a series lauded for being one of the first to depict a gritty, realistic superhero story, and is often marked as one of the major turning points in the transition to the Modern Age of comics. Moore (1986) acknowledges the campiness of superheroism, with heroes in brightly colored costumes operating outside of societal norms, and arguably helped to bring the inherent queerness of comics to light. Of course, it must also be noted that the reason that Silhouette is long dead is that she and her partner were murdered in what is alluded to be a hate crime shortly after she was kicked out of her team for being gay. Although she was exiled due to her sexuality, another of her teammates acknowledges in an interview that "she wasn't the only gay person in the Minutemen" (Moore, 1986, p. 312). The idea that several members of a superhero team were gay adds more credence to the inherent queerness of the crime-fighting alter ego. Ultimately,

Silhouette is only a footnote in the larger story of *Watchmen* with little agency, but she is an early acknowledgment of the queerness surrounding vigilantism as presented in comics.

### **Comics Coming Out of the Closet**

Similarly to other media, the 1990s were a decade filled with comic book characters coming out of the closet, with the Comics Code finally allowing the explicit representation of homosexuality. Many of these narratives were focused specifically on coming out, framing the closet as an inherently negative and oppressive space for queer people to exist in. Coming out had become a political statement that served to normalize gay people for the public, and prominent figures who kept their sexualities private were somewhat looked down upon during the 1990s (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). Northstar, a Marvel hero recognized by many as the first openly gay superhero, embodies the tropes of this type of coming out narrative that became prominent in the 1990s. However, not all representation was as centered on the coming out narrative: much more casual representation of same-sex relationships can be found in Ellis's (1999) *The Authority Volume I* with Apollo and Midnighter. Coming out narratives have remained common into the 2000s, with characters like Renee Montoya, Kate Kane, and Iceman grappling with the closet as a defining discourse for LGBTQ+ people. The closet is central to Western understandings of queer experiences and acts as a metaphor for the oppression of living within the confines of secrecy regarding one's identity. Because it has become such a prominent experience for queer people, it is very often reflected in media about queer people (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). This is no different in comics, where many queer stories following the 1989 Comics Code revision followed the coming out trope.

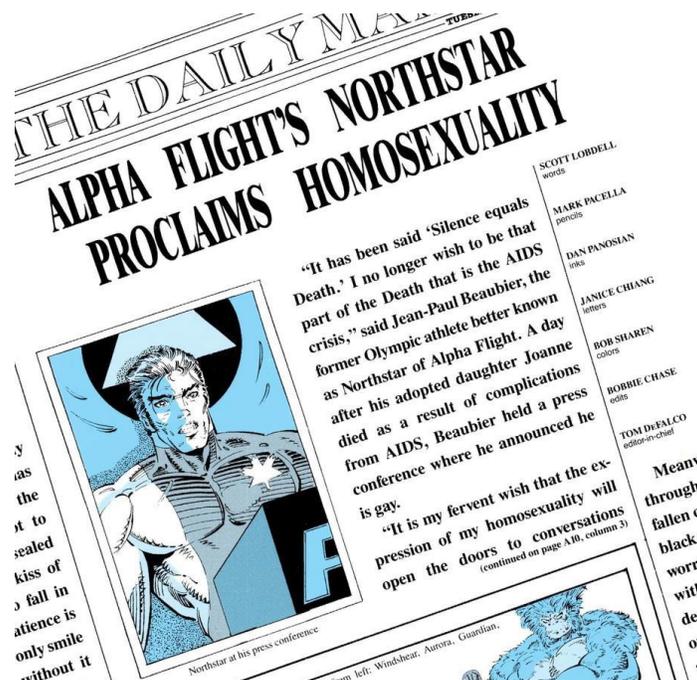
*Northstar*

Despite the queer representation (both implicit and explicit) present in comics before the 1989 revision of the Comics Code, Marvel hero Northstar is often credited as the first canon gay comic book character. Northstar is a mutant and a member of the Canadian superhero team Alpha Flight. He came out in Lobdell's (1992) *Alpha Flight #106*. The issue is entirely centered around his coming out, dealing with the AIDS epidemic, and resulting stereotypes of homosexuality. In the issue, Northstar finds and adopts an abandoned newborn with AIDS, and the child receives a lot of sympathetic media coverage. This prompts a retired hero to storm the hospital, because his gay son died of AIDS and did not receive the same public outcry on his behalf. As a result of this altercation, Northstar to come out as gay himself, though he says that it is no one's business but his. The other hero is further angered at this revelation because he feels that Northstar could have been a positive role model and is just as guilty for the stigma of an HIV diagnosis. These warring characters represent the conflicting views of the closet as a central discourse for LGBTQ+ identities. For some, the closet is seen as an oppressive structure and coming out is a liberating political action that creates greater visibility. On the other hand, some queer scholars critique it as upholding heteronormativity and implying that the only legitimate queer experience is one in the public eye (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015).

Lobdell stakes his claim in this discourse surrounding the closet. The two heroes eventually embrace, and after the child dies due to complications from AIDS, Northstar comes out to the press at the end of the issue (see Figure 4). He states that he "no longer [wishes] to be that part of the Death that is the AIDS crisis" (Lobdell, 1992, p. 29). It appears that he faces no negative consequences for doing so. We don't even see him coming out in real time; rather, it is depicted in the form of a newspaper article, and this framing adds to the idea of needing to see

gay people publicly. This is not just an emotional moment for him as a character, but a moment for public consumption. Although the issue is a bit heavy-handed and feels a bit like a public service announcement, it was a necessary one for the time period, where there was a lot of controversy surrounding gay people becoming more prominent in the public eye. Queerness was seen more frequently as inherently political, and there were moves to normalize homosexuality (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). While Northstar initially thinks of his sexuality as a private matter, he comes to realize that he can make a change by revealing it publicly. Lobdell is careful to state that HIV/AIDS is not a disease that exclusively affects gay people, and the emotional impact of a loved one becoming a statistic in an ongoing epidemic is explored well.

Figure 4: Northstar coming out to the press at the end of *Alpha Flight* #106.



### *Apollo and Midnighter*

The 1990s were not totally centered on coming out narratives, and casual representation could be found if one knew where to look. Apollo and Midnighter's relationship is only briefly acknowledged in Ellis's (1999) *The Authority Volume I*, but it is a powerful moment. These two characters exist outside of DC's main universe and are intended to be satirizations of the Superman and Batman archetypes. Unlike Superman and Batman, they generally kill their enemies and are much more violent. They fight on a team of superheroes called the Authority, who operate outside of any government jurisdiction. It is not until midway through the volume that it is made clear that Apollo and Midnighter are partners in the romantic sense as well as the crime-fighting sense.

After a particularly devastating fight, Apollo must go on alone to defeat the enemy, even though he is already drained. Midnighter grabs his face and urges him not to go, and Apollo responds by kissing him on the cheek before leaving (see Figure 5). This panel has no text or speech, creating a pause that lets the moment sink in for the reader. It places some emphasis, but it is not the focus of the narrative. There is no grand coming out moment or explanation, just a tender moment between two people. The word 'gay' does not even appear in the volume, but unlike other queer characters previously discussed, this is not due to censorship or a lack of explicit confirmation. It is just a brief but powerful acknowledgement of Apollo and Midnighter's relationship that is important because of its casualness. Of course, because it is a kiss on the cheek, the nature of their relationship could be interpreted as platonic by readers, so this moment of representation is not absolute. In many ways, *The Authority* is a satire of the

superhero genre, but the relationship between Apollo and Midnighter is treated with a level of care and respect.

*Figure 5:* Midnighter and Apollo sharing a brief tender moment before talking about their team leader Jenny (these panels are split over two pages)



### ***Renee Montoya***

The turn of the century saw an uptick in queer representation. One shining example is Renee Montoya in Rucka's (2005) *Gotham Central Volume 2: Half a Life*. Montoya is a Gotham City police officer originally introduced in *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992-1995) in 1992 and was later included in the comics as a supporting character. This volume focuses entirely on

Montoya's forced outing at the hands of blackmailers trying to ruin her life. Throughout the volume, she faces opposition from both her coworkers and her family in a very realistic take on what coming out means for the everyday person. This is further emphasized by the relative lack of superheroism in the story: *Half a Life* takes place in Batman's territory, but he only makes a brief appearance. The volume is illustrated and colored like a traditional detective noir, with bold shadows and a muted, monochromatic color palette. This contrasts the sometimes fantastical imagery of many other comic books, firmly grounding the story in a more realistic world, which makes sense for a story about a working-class woman grappling with her sexuality. Rucka also takes care to point out the intersectional experience that Montoya faces as a Latina woman: when her captain tries to offer her advice after she is outed at work, Montoya responds that her experiences as a gay Latina are much different than her captain's as a straight white woman (Rucka, 2005).

Montoya is framed for murder and eventually kidnapped from custody by Two-Face, a prominent Gotham criminal. It is revealed that Two-Face had orchestrated everything to ruin her reputation and encourage her to be with him, because he has fallen in love with her. Two-Face has set up a romantic dinner for the two of them. Initially, it appears to be a normal date, but his scarred side is revealed once he begins explaining how he sought to ruin her life and take her for himself (see Figure 6). He is in blatant denial that her sexuality bars them from having a relationship. Duality has always been an important element in Two-Face's narrative and visual portrayals, but here the separation of his scarred and unscarred halves creates a striking image of the monstrosity of male attempts to 'fix' lesbians.

Figure 6: Two-Face having dinner with Montoya after he kidnaps her



Apart from dealing with her workplace and being framed for murder, Rucka (2005) also emphasizes the effects that this outing has had on Montoya's relationship with her family. As previously mentioned, coming out is often framed as an improvement that legitimizes a queer person's identity; however, Rucka goes against this notion with Montoya's story. She is not only outed at work, but photos of her with her girlfriend are also mailed to her family. Her brother (who already knew and begrudgingly accepted her sexuality) managed to diffuse the situation but was less than supportive. By the end of the volume, Montoya has made the decision to officially come out to her parents, and they subsequently disown her. This scene is not shown in detail; instead, the altercation is shown in one panel from the perspective of Montoya's girlfriend looking up into the apartment from the car. Montoya emerges and is comforted by her girlfriend (see Figure 7). This allows the reader to fill in the blanks of the argument, and for the volume to

end on a more tender note. It is also refreshing to see Montoya allowed to be vulnerable, as masculine lesbians (much like men) are often not permitted to be emotionally vulnerable in their stories (Eaklor, 2012).

*Figure 7: Montoya's girlfriend comforting her after she comes out to her parents*



### *Batwoman (Kate Kane)*

Montoya is featured in the reveal of another queer character: Kate Kane as Batwoman in Johns et al.'s *52 Volume 1* (2006). Kane is a rebooted version of the Batwoman who appeared in Batman comics in the 1950s and 1960s. That Batwoman was romantically interested in Bruce Wayne, but the updated character is revealed to be a lesbian who previously dated Renee Montoya. The character of Kate Kane deals heavily with issues of closeting: she and Montoya broke up due to her being closeted, and although it is not revealed in this issue, Kane left the military due to the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy. Comic book superheroes have always somewhat reflected this dynamic between a boring day-to-day persona and a glamorous alter ego

that needs to remain a secret (Kustritz, 2019). Beginning in the 1990s, the closet began to take on more negative meanings as there was a push for queer people to come out publicly as a political statement (Hilton-Morrow & Battles, 2015). Kane, a rich heiress, is looked down upon by Montoya for being in the closet when she has more privilege than Montoya, who was forcibly outed and disowned by her family. This veiled commentary on public figures keeping their sexualities private becomes especially apparent when comparing Kane and Montoya, who is working-class, masculine, and Latina. As can be seen in Figure 8, Kane wears an evening gown while Montoya is dressed much more casually during their initial confrontation, furthering the difference between their two worlds and the realities of how they navigate their sexualities in them.

Figure 8: Montoya and Kane arguing



*Iceman (Bobby Drake)*

Iceman (Bobby Drake) is different from many of the characters examined thus far because he is a much more prominent character, having been a member of the X-Men since its first issue in 1963. He is a mutant who can manipulate ice, often forming it out of water vapor in the air. Iceman is a classic character who was retconned to be gay in Bendis's (2015a) *All-New X-Men #40*. It is not uncommon for comic book writers to retcon certain character traits or even rewrite characters' personalities, but it is relatively rare for a character to be retconned in order to make them explicitly queer. Retconning Iceman to be gay is an incredible step in representation because it was a purposeful decision to make a character who has a long history in Marvel comics gay. It is not creating a new character, nor making a side character or antagonist gay, it is making a hero explicitly gay, and saying that he was gay all along. Due to time-travelling shenanigans in *All New X-Men #40*, a teenaged Iceman comes face-to-face with his present-day counterpart, resulting in an identity crisis. He is eventually confronted by his telepathic teammate, who asks him why he calls women hot when she has read his mind and knows that he is gay. Because Bobby has met his older self, who is seemingly straight, he is not confident in his sexuality. Later in *Uncanny X-Men #600*, Bendis (2015b) confirms that the older version of Iceman is also gay. This leads to a moment between the two, where the present-day Bobby confesses that he has always hid his sexuality because he couldn't cope with being both gay and a mutant (see Figure 9).

Instead of a flashback or an imagined sequence, Bendis (2015b) depicts the two together in real time, existing within the same space. This touching moment between the same person at two different points in his life highlights how internalized homophobia makes self-acceptance more difficult (Yolac & Meric, 2021). Although some of Bobby's agency is removed because he

was outed by a mind-reader, making his character explicitly queer both in the past and the present is an especially important milestone because he is such a prominent member of the X-Men. He is not an alternate universe version of himself, nor is he a side character. It is fairly rare to see a classic comic book character be explicitly queer, and for that reason Bobby Drake is an important marker for queer visibility in the genre.

Figure 9: Bobby talks to his older self about their sexuality in *Uncanny X-Men* #600



## Bisexuality

Bisexuality is less commonly represented than gay and lesbian characters in comics. All of the bisexual characters examined in this project are women, and all of their endgame relationships are with women. They do not explicitly label themselves as bisexual, which can be a form of erasure. As a whole, bisexuality is more common among female characters than male

characters in media (de Barros, 2020). Although bisexuality was generally not portrayed during and for some time after the era of the Comics Code, Mystique's subtextual bisexuality was a part of her stories during that time, although it was at times an unflattering depiction of bisexual people. Likewise, Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy's relationship in the early 2010s was subtextual and somewhat regressive.

### *Mystique*

The notable exception to the trend of the sexuality binary during the Comics Code era was Mystique, who had a subtextual romantic relationship with fellow mutant Destiny as well as relationships with men. Mystique is a character that was intended to be explicitly queer, but whose representation was limited by the censorship taking place in comics at the time. She is a mutant, a race of metahumans born with superhuman abilities that often face discrimination from humans. Mystique is a shapeshifter, able to look like any person, mimic their voice, and even create clothes on her body. She first appeared in 1978 and is a frequent enemy of the X-Men, fighting for mutant supremacy as a part of several villainous organizations.

Mystique's queerness was relegated to subtext, with her partner Destiny referred to on one occasion as her "leman" in a story where they do not appear (Claremont, 1990, p. 18). Although it appears to mean something akin to henchman, 'leman' actually means an illicit lover, but due to the archaic terminology it was able to be snuck past the censors. Ten issues prior in *Uncanny X-Men* #255, Destiny had been killed, and on the cover, Mystique is portrayed holding her dead lover in a manner reminiscent of how male heroes hold their lovers (see Figure 10) (Claremont, 1989). (Despite comic books being a medium where it is incredibly common to resurrect dead characters, Destiny remains dead over 30 years later.)

Figure 10: Mystique holding Destiny's body on the cover of *Uncanny X-Men* #255



Mystique's sexual fluidity is inextricably linked to her shapeshifting powers, with a scrapped story idea involving her adopting male genitalia to father a child with Destiny (Cronin, 2017). Bisexual people are often represented in media as duplicitous and manipulative (Schildcrout 2011), something that Mystique personifies, as she is literally able to become another person and often uses these powers to further her own interests. However, Mystique is not an entirely irredeemable character. She and Destiny did adopt runaway teenage mutant Rogue. They were presented to readers as a family unit, with Mystique and Destiny acting as parents even though their relationship was never explicitly defined as romantic. The idea that a nontraditional family not only was portrayed in comics as early as the 1980s but could have even more explicitly tackled issues of gender and sexuality is a positive indicator of the wealth of queer interpretations that comics have to offer.

### *Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy*

This somewhat regressive representation of bisexuality continued into the 2010s, specifically with the relationship between Harley Quinn and Poison Ivy. From her first appearance in the Fox Kids cartoon *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992-1995), Harley has been in an on-again, off-again abusive relationship with the Joker. She was also depicted on the show as being very close with Ivy, often running to her when she and the Joker argued. The episode “Harley and Ivy” saw the two team up to go on a crime spree together (Dini & Kirkland, 1993). Paul Dini, Harley’s creator on *Batman: The Animated Series*, called the relationship between Harley and Ivy on the show “a very true relationship” with “a lot of passion” (Hervieu, 2017). Harley and Ivy were never confirmed to be anything other than friends on the series, and this pattern continued in the comics for many years.

Despite the queer subtext present in their relationship in *Gotham City Sirens: Book Two*, the two constantly reaffirm the platonic nature of their relationship. Harley calls Ivy her “pal” and her “best freaking friend,” and Ivy refers to Harley as “the only human I’ve ever called a friend” (Bedard & Calloway, 2011, n.p.). Their relationship can be read as platonic; however, there are also hints to Ivy’s romantic love towards Harley. Both characters consistently refer to the “history” between them, connoting something other than friendship. The frequent denial of anything romantic also points towards such feelings existing. In order to distract Ivy and allow herself and the Joker to escape prison, Harley asks Ivy if she is so dedicated to their friendship because she loves her. This appears to be true, as it throws Ivy off and allows Harley and the Joker to escape. Ivy contemplates killing Harley after this betrayal but decides against it, instead choosing to love her.

At the end of the volume, Harley and Ivy part ways. The moment conveys more romantic subtext between the two characters (see Figure 11). Harley places her hand on Ivy's shoulder and Ivy grabs Harley's arm in a rare moment of physical contact that doesn't involve combat. That contact is especially significant because of Ivy's general disdain for humanity, with Harley as the only exception. Their "history" is again referenced, further implying the romantic nature of the moment. These hints that are dropped throughout the volume allow their relationship to be read as queer despite the "hide-and-seek strategy" of recoding them as "just friends" (Holmlund, 1994, p. 37). Their romantic relationship has now been explicitly confirmed both in the comics and more recently in the adult animated series *Harley Quinn* (2019-present) on HBO Max (Maleh, 2020).

Figure 11: Harley and Ivy part ways



Bedard and Calloway (2011) frame Harley's bisexuality as a major source of contention in her relationship with Ivy. When her character was established, it was as the Joker's lovestruck girlfriend. She later grew to love Ivy as well, without renouncing her attraction to men. Although her relationship with the Joker is abusive, she frequently leaves Ivy to go back to him, tying her bisexuality to an inability to choose (Schildcrout, 2011). When Catwoman confronts Harley with the fact that she would leave in a heartbeat if the Joker called her, Harley admits that "it's probably true" (Calloway & Bedard, 2011, n.p.). As previously mentioned, Harley is not above using Ivy's romantic feelings against her for her own ends. Even at the end of the volume, Harley still does not choose either of her love interests in favor of going off on her own. Ultimately, Harley's bisexuality is positioned as a large roadblock to Harley and Ivy entering into an explicit romantic relationship in this volume, and this regressive portrayal serves to perpetuate stereotypes.

### **Gender Identity in Comics**

#### **Gender Normativity in Comics Code Era Comics**

As previously discussed, the Comics Code tacitly forbade portrayals of homosexuality, and this censorship extended to transgender and gender nonconforming characters as well. The 1954 Comics Code stated that characters should be "depicted in dress reasonably acceptable to society" along with the rules against "sex perversion" (Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, 2021). While this served to ban overly sexualized character design in media primarily consumed by children, it also referred to transgender or crossdressing characters. This rule was done away with in the 1971 revision, but this legacy against gender nonconformity remained. As Avery-Natale (2013) outlines, despite the otherness of the superhero body, with its mythical abilities and unrealistic proportions, it is still often unable to transcend the male/female binary. Both the

consumption and production of comic books are male-dominated, and the medium is known for its hyperbolic depictions of incredibly muscled men and overly sexualized women. Characters' bodies serve as a spectacle for the male gaze, with the exaggerated musculature of the male superhero acting as an ego ideal for male consumers, and female characters serving as a sexual fantasy with prominent breasts, lips, thighs, and hair. This trend carried on into many portrayals of queer characters, who are either hypermasculine or hyperfeminine.

### *Hypermasculinity*

The hypermasculinity present in many early depictions of gay characters in mainstream comics both combats stereotypes surrounding effeminate gay men and limits the representation of those who are gender nonconforming. Northstar is drawn in the typical hypermasculine style of the genre, confronting the stereotype that gay men are usually feminine (see Figure 12). It also contrasts the common media portrayal of people with AIDS as emaciated (Lupton, 1996). The triumphant image of a man in peak physical condition declaring that he is gay is an undeniably important one in the decade following the onset of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, especially considering the disease's societal stigma and the traumatizing effect it had on the LGBTQ+ community (Bower et al., 2021). This type of hypermasculinity was common among gay male characters in the 1990s, with Apollo and Midnighter being another example of this. Part of the surprise at the reveal that they are romantic partners as well as crime-fighting partners comes from their hypermasculinity, not only in their visual depictions but also in their graphically violent action sequences, as can be seen in Figure 13. It is also somewhat unexpected because Apollo and Midnighter are satirizations of Superman and Batman, two notoriously heterosexual characters who are a part of DC Comics' main trinity (along with Wonder Woman).

Figure 12: Northstar in Alpha Flight #106



Figure 13: Apollo and Midnighter fighting their enemies



*Hyperfemininity*

Female characters have a long history of being sexualized in comics (Avery-Natale, 2013), and this has continued with many queer female characters. Their sexualization is further compounded by the fetishization of women who love women in media (Eaklor, 2012). Kate Kane is one example of this phenomenon. She is dressed in an evening gown when readers meet her for the first time, in contrast to her former partner Montoya's simple jacket and jeans. Her class status and feminine gender presentation corresponds to the "lesbian chic" stereotype observed in film and television, where lesbian characters are usually white, femme, and upper middle or upper class (Eaklor, 2012). Even as Batwoman, she is muscled but still very sexualized and contorted into the impossible positions in which female comic book characters are often drawn (see Figure 14). She also wears heeled boots, is visibly wearing makeup, and has her long hair down, which seems impractical for fighting crime but fits into the idea of female comic book characters acting as sexual fantasies for male audiences (Avery-Natale, 2013).

*Figure 14: Kane's first appearance as Batwoman*



Similarly, Harley and Ivy both fit into the 'deadly doll' lesbian trope of female lovers acting as mirrors, mothers, and men for each other, as outlined by Holmlund (1994). They are mirrors of each other, both killer femmes that are still opposites: blonde versus redheaded, and emotional versus detached. Ivy also acts as a mother to Harley, continually trying to dissuade her from returning to her abusive relationship. Although she ultimately fails to kill the Joker, Harley still acts as the homicidal man, killing several people in her way at the asylum, albeit by manipulation in addition to sheer violence. Ivy frequently uses her plants to physically dominate her enemies and is a formidable foe who does not rely much on feminine wiles, other than her pheromones. While Harley does not exactly cruise for sex, she does manipulate Ivy and use her romantic feelings against her in a very sensual moment that is still framed within the male gaze.

Harley leans in to whisper into Ivy's ear, in a close up of their heads that almost makes them appear nude (see Figure 15). The panel takes up nearly two-thirds of the page, highlighting the significance of this moment, contrasted by the tiny speech bubble of Harley's whisper. This portrayal arguably ties back to the oversexualization of bisexual people in media (de Barros, 2020). Both characters' costumes are also incredibly sexualized, with Harley in a skintight jumpsuit and Ivy just in a leotard made of leaves. Despite some of their more masculine qualities, all of this is still indicative of their role as sex objects (Avery-Natale, 2013).

*Figure 15: Harley confronts Ivy about her romantic feelings*



### **Increased Gender Nonconformity**

Although a majority of queer comic book characters have more normative gender expression, gender nonconforming characters have existed in the medium for some time. Following the lapse of the rule of socially acceptable dress with the 1971 Comics Code revision, gender nonconformity began to crop up, although it is usually not explicitly explored as a part of a character's identity. Mystique is an example of a character operating outside of the gender binary as early as the 1980s, and the character of Wanda in *The Sandman* series is one of the first explicitly transgender characters in comics. In the 2000s, Renee Montoya pushed the boundaries set in place for female characters at the time with her more masculine qualities. In 2020, both DC and Marvel introduced their first canon nonbinary characters, to varying degrees of success. With the exception of Wanda, these characters' gender nonconformity is casually acknowledged.

### ***Mystique***

Mystique was also an enigma during the era of the Comics Code in terms of her gender nonconformity, another area rich with subtext. Of course, as a shapeshifter she can appear as both a man and a woman, but it is never made clear whether she does this out of necessity or if it is part of her gender expression. In her essential blue form, she is drawn with a feminine figure and often wears a dress, firmly defining her identity as a hyperfeminine woman. Generally, transgender or gender nonconforming characters perform their gender to the extreme, and representation does not include those outside of the gender binary (McClaren et al., 2021). Her mutant shapeshifting abilities are an inherent part of her identity, and she is othered by her appearance due to that fact. However, her being female when she is not shapeshifted prevents her from becoming completely monstrous and losing her sex appeal. This reflects a common phenomenon that female characters who love women face, where they must still be appealing to

men who find that attractive (Eaklor, 2012). In an issue providing the origin of her relationship with Destiny, it was revealed that when they met and began their relationship Mystique was presenting as a man, as can be seen in Figure 16 (Claremont, 2001).

*Figure 16:* Mystique and Destiny at the start of their relationship, when Mystique was presenting as a man



As previously mentioned, Claremont, a prominent writer on the *X-Men* titles in the 1980s and 1990s, actually intended for these questions of gender to be made much clearer, with a potential storyline involving Mystique and Destiny having a biological child that was ultimately scrapped (Cronin, 2017). Although that very progressive storyline was never actually published, Mystique's character was nevertheless a challenge to the sexual and gender binaries during the era of the Comics Code. Questions of her fluid sex and gender are rarely explicitly addressed, but she remains somewhat of an enigma in an era of comics marked by a high degree of gender normativity. Regardless of the lack of label for her gender identity, Mystique is still a character who firmly operates outside of the gender binary.

### *Wanda*

Transgender representation was few and far between during and for some time after the era of the Comics Code. However, Gaiman's (1992-3) critically-acclaimed *The Sandman Volume V: A Game of You* featured Wanda, one of the first explicitly transgender characters in mainstream comics. *The Sandman* series takes place within the main DC Universe, and tells various stories about Dream of the Endless, the anthropomorphic personification of dreams. Like *Watchmen*, *The Sandman* was intended for mature readers and helped to popularize the graphic novel format. Wanda is a human character who only appears in this volume, and she is a friend to the protagonist, Barbie. Her story is very much centered around her gender identity.

Wanda is immediately established visually and narratively as a transgender woman (see Figure 17). She is drawn with more masculine features than the cisgender women in the story and is taller and broader than them. It is also made clear that she has not had bottom surgery because she is scared of the operation. This is made very clear visually, as she is the only character who is depicted as sleeping in just her underwear. Generally, transgender characters are rarely shown during transition, and medical procedures are often a part of their stories and character development (McClaren et al., 2021). In that way, Wanda differs from other portrayals of trans women that are almost exclusively hyperfeminine and post-op. However, she does align with the trope that trans women are extremely feminine in the expressions of their emotions, acting as a confidant and an emotional open book (Vanlee et al., 2020). She occupies that role with her friend Barbie and is protective over her when she falls into a coma. Her fears of surgery are made extremely visceral in a nightmare sequence where she is drawn as a man and forced to get bottom surgery to become a "real" woman (see Figure 18). This sequence creates empathy for Wanda's struggle for validation and self-acceptance as a trans woman, when so many treat

her femininity as something that can be easily taken off when she has not gone “all the way” in her transition.

Figure 17: Panels showing Wanda as compared to cisgender women



Figure 18: Wanda's nightmare



Despite these validations of her identity, Wanda is still othered by most of the cisgender women in the story and faces transphobia at nearly every turn. Throughout the volume, others constantly ask Wanda about her gender identity and her genitalia. When her friend Barbie is trapped in the dream world and the other women venture to rescue her via witchcraft, Wanda is barred from joining them because she does not menstruate and therefore cannot perform the magic. She is left behind to look after Barbie's body and is stuck with the reanimated severed face of a man that the witch nailed to the wall for company. It is incredibly telling that while the cisgender women are able to partake in the rescue mission, Wanda is stuck defending her gender identity to a grotesque dead man (see Figure 19).

Being left behind is also what ultimately leads to Wanda's death, as the magic the other women used caused a storm that leveled the apartment building, killing Wanda. After death, she is completely stripped of her womanhood as her family buries her as a man. Her gender is still validated, however, as Barbie sees her with Death as a cisgender woman, the person she was inside all along (see Figure 20). Although the 'born in the wrong body' trope is somewhat reductive (McClaren et al., 2021; Vanlee et al., 2020), this is a fairly progressive portrayal of a transgender woman in the 1990s. This is not to say that there are not problematic elements: as previously mentioned, Wanda is continually othered as a trans woman, and her death is a plot device that serves to showcase Barbie's allyship more than anything else. After she attends the funeral, Barbie crosses out the deadname on the headstone and writes 'Wanda' with lipstick as a final goodbye to her friend (Figure 21). Overall, Gaiman's (1992-3) portrayal of Wanda as a transgender woman was an important milestone in the representation of gender nonconformity.

Figure 19: Wanda confronting the severed face of a man on the wall about her gender



Figure 20: Wanda as a cis woman with Death



Figure 21: Barbie at Wanda's funeral



### *Renee Montoya*

Montoya is not drawn in the same hypersexualized manner as many other female comic book characters. In fact, as displayed by Figure 22, she is drawn more masculinely, with more lines on her face that are similar to those of her male counterparts. Her figure is also more realistically proportioned. This is something that is fairly unique to *Half a Life*: even in another issue written by Rucka (1999), she is drawn much more femininely (see Figure 23). While she is not so masculine in her appearance to the point of becoming a stereotype, she works in a male-dominated field and is more level-headed than emotional, which can be seen as markers of a butch lesbian (Eaklor, 2012). As can be seen in Figure 8, Montoya is not drawn quite as masculinely in her appearance in *52 Volume 1* as she is in *Half A Life*, but she is still more

masculine than the incredibly feminine Kate Kane. Montoya's gender presentation combats both the stereotypical portrayal of butch lesbians and the sexualization of femme lesbians as sex objects in the male gaze.

*Figure 22: Montoya being outed at work*



Figure 23: Montoya as she is drawn in Rucka's (1999) *Batman Chronicles Vol. 1 #16*



### ***Nonbinary Representation***

While a lot of progress has been made in terms of portraying non-heterosexual characters, non-cisgender characters have not seen the same progression in visibility. Transgender and nonbinary characters still are relatively few and far between. Apart from Wanda in Gaiman's (1992-3) *The Sandman Volume V: A Game of You*, this investigation includes two other non-cisgender characters, both from 2020. Cohen (2020) introduced DC's first canon nonbinary character, Kid Quick, in *DC's Very Merry Multiverse*. This story takes place in an alternate universe where all of the characters are gender-swapped (i.e., Superman becomes Superwoman). There is something to be said about the inherent queerness of a universe where gender is flipped on its head, and writer Cohen stated that Kid Quick's introduction into this universe specifically

was deliberate. Artist Eleanora Carlini stated in the same interview that the diagonal lightning bolt design of the hero's costume was meant to visually represent that character's identity, as a straight horizontal or vertical divide would have indicated a binary between opposites (Kim, 2020). They are also drawn with androgynous features: a short haircut, a masculine chest, and a feminine pelvic region (Figure 24).

Typically, even characters who do not identify with their sex assigned at birth are still relegated to operating within the gender binary by performing either hypermasculinity or hyperfemininity, therefore privileging "legible" trans identities over nonbinary people (Vanlee et al., 2020). This makes Kid Quick's introduction as a nonbinary character especially important. The issue does not focus on Kid Quick's identity, and it is woven in very casually as their teammates use their preferred pronouns without question. It is also important to point out that Kid Quick is a character of color, further breaking boundaries in queer representation. Overall, this move towards more casual representation in a clearly thought-out manner indicates progress in the realm of portraying characters outside the gender binary in comics.

Figure 24: Kid Quick (front, in red and yellow) in DC's *Very Merry Multiverse*



However, the passage of time does not always indicate progress. As previously mentioned, one selected character (Snowflake) was never actually introduced, with their title being cancelled before its release. In an apparent attempt to appeal to younger audiences, Marvel announced their *The New Warriors* title, featuring the twin superheroes Snowflake and Safespace (Marvel, 2020). Snowflake was to be one of Marvel's first canon nonbinary characters and had ice powers. Like Kid Quick, Snowflake was a character of color. In their attempt to diversify their lineup and reel in younger audiences, Marvel managed to name a nonbinary character after a term often used to mock marginalized groups and came across as very tone deaf. Predictably, this caused backlash, and *The New Warriors* was quietly cancelled (Marr, 2020). I chose to include this case despite the lack of a text to examine because it serves as a reminder that progress is not linear, and a text's time of publication is not necessarily an indication of the quality of its representation.

### Conclusion

It would be too reductive to say that the progression of LGBTQ+ representation in mainstream comics has been linear as it has moved from subtext to canon, just as it is too black and white to define that representation solely as good or bad. This is not to say that progress has not been made: on the whole, representation of queer characters in comics has become more complex in the years following the 1989 Comics Code revision. Although many queer characters are still strictly defined as gay or lesbian, the 2000s saw an increase in number and diversity of gender nonconforming characters. Bisexuality is still portrayed in a reductive way at times, but both of the bisexual characters examined here end up with female partners, validating their same-sex attraction. The coming out narrative trope is still prevalent, but characters like Renee Montoya and Iceman explore the coming out in varying social contexts as a defining moment for LGBTQ+ people internally and interpersonally rather than as a political statement. In a far cry from the backlash of *Seduction of the Innocent*, both Marvel and DC have released variant covers for Pride Month 2021 (Marvel, 2021; DC Publicity, 2021). Marvel's covers feature some of its most prominent LGBTQ+ characters, and DC features both LGBTQ+ characters and characters who are allies (Figures 25-26).

Figure 25: Selection of Marvel’s variant covers for Pride Month 2021 featuring (from left to right) Iceman, Northstar, and Mystique



Figure 26: Selection of DC’s variant covers for Pride Month 2021, featuring (from left to right) Harley Quinn & Poison Ivy, Superman, and Wonder Woman



Because they are a medium of sequential art that combines visuals with prose, comics are a unique medium for queer representation. Superhero comics inherently deal with concepts of identity, making it easy to insert queer representation. The selected texts offer a diverse range of queer characters and storylines, displaying the development of queer representation from slightly before the 1989 revision of the Comics Code to the modern day. Although some of the texts follow similar trends, there are still a variety of sexualities and gender identities that were analyzed. With such large universes and countless possibilities for new characters, character development, and storylines, DC and Marvel comics are poised to include queer representation in many narratives. By their nature these mainstream universes are made up of layers upon layers of stories, with different creative teams putting out new interpretations of characters, even if that means retconning old storylines. Now more than ever, queer representation is having an important moment in comics.

Therefore, this analysis is far from all-encompassing: there are many LGBTQ+ comic book characters in DC and Marvel's vast universes who were not mentioned, and queer characters continue to be established or come out. During the process of completing this thesis, Marvel announced that the first LGBTQ+ person to take up the mantle of Captain America would appear in *The United States of Captain America* series that celebrates the character's 80th anniversary in 2021. The teenage 'Captain America of the Railways' is inspired by the queer community and protects "fellow runaways and the unhoused" (Flood, 2021). Comic book film and television adaptations have at times lagged behind their book counterparts (the recent controversy over queerbaiting on the Disney+ series *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (2021-present) comes to mind) (Warner, 2021). However, comic books have remained a unique medium for the narrative and visual depictions of LGBTQ+ characters. The world of

superheroes, with their fantastical abilities, sometimes strange bodies, and often timely stories, is one rich with opportunities to further critically examine queer representation. Despite the common misconceptions about the nature and audience of the medium, there are a multitude of queer characters in comics fighting for truth, justice, and the American “gay.”

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