THE BULGE THAT DARE NOT SPEAK ITS NAME: CAMP, CLONES, AND THE EVOLUTION OF THE GAY SUPERHERO

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ABSTRACT

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In the last decade, there has been dramatic increase in the number of homosexual superheroes, or hero-characters that proclaim their same-sex status within comic book panels. While there is certainly an impulse to view this trend as step forward for political and social equality for the gay community, there is a need to consider both the compressive effects of commercialization on gay representation and how purportedly gay characters resonate culturally for gays. Cultural gayness, it will be argued, goes beyond a same-sex object of desire. Accordingly, camp, as a gay practice of appropriation, will be examined to demonstrate a how a particular character-type with origins in gay clone pornography has certain similarities to the modern day homosexual superhero.

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Introduction

In an 1986 issue of *Gay Comix*, there are many manifestations of the gay superhero. From *Leatherthing*, an abandoned BDSM garment that is lightening-struck back to existence to battle an evil hairstylist Vic Voo, to *Captain Condom*, the "clone" superhero who helps two potential bedmates resolve their safe-sex dilemma, to *Superstud*, the story of a horny gay urbanite's transformation (with the help his clique) in hopes of improving his love life, these heroes are steeped in gay culture, dealing with issues within the gay community. These gay superheroes draw on the time-honored mythos that has defined the superhero genre since it emerged in the late 1930s. Yet rather than fighting jewel thieves or bringing murderers to justice, the problems the superheroes must resolve are couched in the dark humor that pervaded a community ravaged by AIDS. In these comics in particular, same-sex object choice is never the sole indicator of sexuality. Rather these comics are indicative of a gayness that is constituted by the interplay of the appropriate object choice and the everydayness--the issues, the stereotypes, and the humor--that pervades the community.

Over the intervening decades, the concept of the gay superhero has evolved from comics targeted at a smaller, gay audience to the mainstream audience of the major comics publishers Marvel and DC Comics. Though these contemporary crimefighters proclaim their gayness via their same-sex object choice, these homosexual superheroes exist cordoned off from any culture that could be construed as gay. The lack of a gay and lesbian presence within the mainstream comics industry often results in representations of gay characters that are disconnected from the social codes, styles of dress, mannerisms, and cultural norms that members of the gay community employ in their interactions with other gays.

In an effort to track the cultural transformations within the gay community that contributed to both development of homosexual superheroes, I will examine how the superhero genre has been read by gay fans in the decades prior to the creation of homosexual superheroes. The practice of camp, or the camping of mainstream cultural objects ad identities, is integral to my analysis. This notion of camp expands the canonical definition developed by Susan Sontag, in her essay "Notes on 'Camp,' in certain ways. Rather than limiting camp to a non-political "sensibility" anchored in "its love of the unnatural" and "artifice and exaggeration," this essay will work with a definition that positions camp as a gay aesthetic theory, as well as a practice of appropriation (Cleto 22). While camp has been an important tool for the gay community for decades, its focus and subject matter has mutated over time to account for new trends and outlooks. I argue that the existence of homosexual superheroes in contemporary comics is the result of a change in the camp practice in the years following gay liberation. These years saw the rise of a hypermasculinized gay masculinity. Masculinity, or the characteristics, values, and traits that denote the degree to which one's maleness is in line with societal norms, is a complicated matter for gay men, because engaging in sex with other men is perceived to compromise their masculinity.

The gay clone masculinity that emerged in the 1970s was adopted by a segment of the gay community that was interested in perpetuating a new type of gender construction that exuded the masculinity typified by blue-collar workers and American masculine idols (the cowboy, the lumberjack). It was a system of gender that saw the masculinity of camp queens of the pre-Stonewall era as antagonistic to their outlook. The clone era, in a sense, was interested in vanquishing the camp masculinity and idols of a bygone time, in order to construct a masculinity untarnished by the perceived feminization of queens – a masculinity validated by sexual activity.

Sex, especially in light of the clone's disassociation from camp centered around appropriation of pop cultural artifacts, becomes a vital component of their gender and social construction. The commercialization of the community, in the form of erotic literature and pornography, led to images of gay males and their ripped, bulging bodies engaged in hardcore anonymous sex. As a result, representations of gays altered and the character type known as the nongay homosexual became a standard trope in clone pornography during this time.

It is my intention, through tracing the shift in camp's appropriative focus in the post-liberation years, to demonstrate the connections between the nongay homosexual character and contemporary homosexual superheroes. Though the character types differ in their desire to self-identify as "gay," both are dislocated from a larger gay culture. The cultural distancing that the contemporary homosexual superhero is indicative of the sanitizing and assimilating of gayness that today's homosexual superheroes must undergo in order maintain palatability for mainstream comics. While a contemporary homosexual superhero can freely state his sexual preference in comic book panels, I argue that gayness is more than what is stated. In lacking gay cultural signifiers, camp readability, and sex, contemporary superheroes operate on a heterosexualized homosexual level – whereby gay sexuality is compressed and appropriated in order to reinforce its privileged, normalized position in a relationship of dominance.

“How Batman and Robin Made Me Gay”

Though the golden and silver age comic books did not have the self-identified gay and lesbian characters found in contemporary comics, gay comic book fans did find ways to enjoy the comics of that era. *Gay Comix* #8 opens with a fan letter by Steve Beery, an avid comics fan and collector. Beery’s letter gives insight into the ways that gay comic book fans were able to engage superhero comics geared toward a mainstream, heteronormative culture.

In the course of his fan letter, Beery talks at length about how the Batman comic was important to him as a young child. He remembers spending hours pouring over the “fat, 25-cent Giants,” – comics which often held up to eight stories. These larger books were often comprised of republished Batman comics of the 1940s and 1950s. When considering why the Batman comic appealed to him, Beery explains that it was the relationship between the caped crusader and his plucky sidekick that ultimately solidified his status as a fan. Beery writes, “Batman and Robin stories were about devotion – to their crimefighting ideal, and more importantly, to each other. Unwittingly, and to my undying gratitude, Batman and Robin made me gay.”

While one might question the ability of a comic book to influence sexual orientation, this statement is indicative of a type of gay reading experience, long before the explicitly proclaimed gayness of today’s superheroes. Though the relationship between Batman and his young ward has been a highly contentious topic at times for both comic book fans and critics, Beery’s statement demonstrates that amidst the societal hostility to homosexuality and a dearth of cultural representations of gays in the post-war years, gay youth or “proto-gays” were able to glean gay potential from the panels of the Batman comic (Halperin 112). For Beery, Robin the Boy Wonder was pivotal. Many “kids wanted to be Batman. I wanted to be Robin. Batman was

the Daddy: accomplished, perfect, remote. Robin was just like me, only more so. He was a pint-sized punster who would hold his own against six armed thugs." A foil for Batman's age, experience, solemnness, and flawlessness, Robin, due to his age, his willingness for adventure, his loyalty, is a relatable figure (Steranko 47). From his statement, it is clear that as a child, Beery identified with Robin, and even imagined Robin as an improved or more realistic version of himself. While the individual character of Robin was important to Beery, the relationship that Beery saw demonstrated in the comics between Robin and Batman was also important to his sense of self and his status as an avid fan -- who amassed a sizeable collection of the duos' adventures. Beery saw ways to read and conceive the heroes' relationship as a gay one. This process involves reading gay culture and norms in mainstream images--images never intended to transmit even latent notions of homosexuality given the hostile climate of the time toward alternative sexualities.[1] Beery is clear in his fan letter that he saw Batman and Robin not only as a fantastic crime-fighting team, but also sexual partners who were bonded by love.

And Beery was not alone in his feelings. There are several accounts of other young men reading a certain homoeroticism into Batman and Robin comics in Fredric Werthem's condemnation of the medium entitled *Seduction of the Innocent*. Though undertaken to turn public opinion against and ultimately dismantle the comics industry, Werthem's book uses anecdotes from some of his patients at the Quaker Emergency Service Readjustment Center in

[1] Batman's publishers, writers, comic historians attest to this. DC Comics top editor explains "Batman is not gay … Because he wasn't written that way." Alan Grant, a Batman writer also agrees. He says,"The Batman I wrote for 13 years isn't gay … Denny O'Neil's Batman, Marv Wolfman's Batman, everybody's Batman all the way back to Bob Kane … none of them wrote him as a gay character." A comic historian attests to this, as well. He writes, "While it remains possible, through deconstruction and re-interpretation, to view these actions as a means by which Batman is deluding himself about his own homosexuality … the gay interpretation of Batman and Robin is ultimately subjective and not intended by creators," (Rhoades 59).

the early 1950s that attest to the gay reader-viewer's ability to encode panels with meaning. Werthem includes an account from one of his "young homosexual" patients:

> I found my linking, my sexual desires, in comic books. I think I put myself in the position of Robin. I did want to have relations with Batman. The only suggestion of homosexuality may be that they seem to be so close to each other. I remember the fist time I came across the page mentioning the 'secret bat cave.' The thought of Batman and Robin living together and possibly having sex relations came to my mind. You can almost connect yourself with the people. (Wertham 192)

Despite the fact that Wertham undertook his book project to demonstrate how young kid's ability or potential to read homosexual themes in the Batman and Robin comics necessitated the dismantling of the comics industry, this example does show the way that young gays were able to take the comics and make them relevant to their own desires. These fans accomplished this feat through the process of camp, in which gayness is read into mainstream cultural artifacts.

Camp, as reading practice, has been employed by gay men as a means of claiming popular, heteronormative elements of culture as their own. Juan Suárez, in his book *Bike Boys, Drag Queens and Superstars*, explains that camp, in its pre-Stonewall era, was a means by which gay men could find evidence of themselves and their sexual identities in different types of mainstream cultural products:

> Gay audiences had traditionally operated in dialogical relation with the products of the culture industry, appropriating stars, movies, songs, and images in which they found particular resonances. These plunderings had defamiliarizing effects on the appropriated objects, as they unveiled the complexity of popular texts and

> the existence of a significant gap between the ideologies encoded into them and the ones actually decoded by specific audiences. (Suárez 131)

Suárez is clear that camp is particularly successful when applied to "low-brow," mass-produced elements of popular culture. His use of the word "plunderings" is also vital, because it denotes the active, participatory nature of this method of encoding. But more importantly, Suárez underscores that camp, as an activity vital to the continued flourishing of gay subcultural communities, is not a matter of applying the heteronormative codes and norms to gay life but rather a means of undermining the normative societal messages that exclude gay life. Due to this exclusion, this sense of being cordoned off from meaningful, non-pathologized representation in popular culture, gays use this distance between themselves and the cultural artifacts that discount or ignore them to proficiently and knowingly erode their influence.

> Gay readings demonstrate the subcultural tendency to appropriate … 'the alien word,' a tendency dictated by the need of subordinate groups to append their meaning to available images and channels. In this respect, the gay sensibility bears qualities that stem from its subaltern social position. A minority devoid of institutional support or stable cultural apparati, gays have been adept manipulators of received codes. (Suarez 131-132)

Superhero comics, as well as the comic medium in general, proved effective at both harboring and fostering camp readings. There are several elements within the medium that make it a hospitable environment for the development of camp encodings and readings, including the gutters (spaces between comic panels) and a process Scott McCloud calls "closure." McCloud, a comic book artist and theorist, writes that closure accounts for the distinctive, highly participatory way that readers engage with comics as they are read (McCloud 62). Unlike other

mediums, the gutters in comics exist traditionally as white space between panels. These white spaces are meant to signal changes from one panel to the next, not all of which can be denoted in the panel that follows. In addition to signaling point of view changes, the passage of time, or even scenic changes, gutters are at once a marker of transition (in one form or another) as well as a signal to the reader. The small white spaces, in their blankness, help readers transfer, connect, and advance the narrative of the comic, but they do this by simultaneously allowing the reader an unprecedented interpretive agency (McCloud 68).

McCloud's notion of closure is based on the reader observing only parts of a message, an image, an idea, yet being able to perceive the whole based on the fragments presented (McCloud 62-63). While McCloud does discuss the ways that other media like film do allow the audience to rely on their own interpretive powers to understand narrative developments, the comic medium has an unprecedented reader/viewer collusion, in which "the audience is a willing and conscious collaborator and closure is the agent of change, time and motion" (McCloud 65). Randy Duncun and Matthew J. Smith describe why this process of audience collusion is different in comics than in other mediums in *The Power of Comics: History, Form, and Culture.* These authors describe comic book reading as more complex than deciphering and interpreting words and pictures, because of what they term the "interanimnation of meaning". This means that "The reader must understand how text and pictures in the same panel each affect the meaning of the other, and together create a meaning beyond what is communicated by word or picture alone" (Duncon and Matthew 154).

It is this reliance of the comics upon their reader in order to fill in the gaps between the panels that makes it an accommodating medium for fostering camp codes and ways of reading. For while McCloud is clear that the majority of comic artists are interested in viewers reading

and interpreting their panels in specific ways, he is also well-aware of the subjectivity and the individual experiences that inform one's interpretations. He writes:

> Here in the limb of the gutter, human imagination takes two separate images and transforms them into a single idea. Nothing is seen between the two panels, but experience tells you something must be there … Comics 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 66-67)

The act of closure is an instance where the subjective experiences of the reader are brought to bear on the comic panels they are viewing. While the comics medium has endured over the decades due to the ways in which the medium is intended to work (relying on the reader to fill in the gaps between panels), there is no guarantee that any one reader will fill these gaps in the same way. The blankness that so enchants McCloud because of its ability to allow for connections between ideas and images also has the potentiality to recall and imprint the individual experiences of the reader. The gutters and the "closure" process that they facilitate are spaces, but are also distances that must be traversed by the reader, as well. Given the distance and removal needed in order for an object to be encoded or camped, the gutters in comics serve as a constant reminder of that removal – a reminder of the distance between the consumable object and the life of the reader. It is a distance and a space that demands to be filled. And for the gay subject who sees few if any representations of his life or his sexuality, this blankness, this white space, helps distinguish and clarify the intended meaning or message, and simultaneously begs for revision – the meaning or message taken from the gay subject's own life and experience. It is this potentiality for revision, brought about by the distance and the removal

facilitated by the gutters and the closure process, that makes comics such an agreeable medium to those interested in severing or ignoring intended normative meanings of the panels – who are instead focused on transmitting the codes and messages of camp.

While there are certainly elements within the comics medium that contribute to its viability as a facilitator of camp readings, there are also aspects of the comic superhero genre that make it conducive to camp. Since the genre emerged in the 1930s, and especially during the heyday of superheroes in the years during World War II where over 15 million comic books were sold each week, this type of comic was mass-produced with a plethora of masked men fighting enemies and criminals in urban settings (Rhoades 43). Though at the height of this genre's popularity there were literally hundreds of superheroes, plots, the archetypal alter-ego and the arch-villain were all aspects of the genre that were replicated not only from story to story of one comic book superhero, but among the hundreds of other superhero comics. Stories followed very formulaic patterns, with each hero finding a cause to fight for, a criminal to stop, justice to restore, etc. The result is a genre-wide narrative routine and a certain lack of dimensionality. The earliest years of the Batman comics for example, begin with title pages that inform the readers, issue after issue, of what travesty Batman will right and what criminal is running rampant over Gotham City. From a band of jaded street youth under the influence of a career criminal, training them for a life of crime, to an ugly man determined to make the citizens of Gotham as homely as he is, to Batman's repeated duels with his nemesis The Joker, the title pages of these comics present the reader with the prototypal adventure, with minor plot adjustments:

> Once again a master criminal stalks the city streets… A criminal weaving a web of death about him. Leaving stricken victims behind wearing a ghastly clown's

> grin. The sign of death from the Joker! Only two dare oppose him – Batman and Robin the boy Wonder! Two battle the grim jester called the Joker! A battle of wits … with swift death, the only compromise!! (Kane 3)

Though enemies may vary, a reader can approach each issue with a set of expectations that will be fulfilled. The comics themselves are primarily plot driven. There is very little character development. Batman and Robin limit their conversations primarily to the task at hand, as well as brandishing witty remarks toward their enemies.

This lack of dimensionality inherent in these comics conveys an artifice of sorts that allows the superhero to garner a certain mystique. Given the lack of details about hobbies, personal lives, or habits, the superhero comics of this time focus almost exclusively on deeds carried out by the superheroes. These are very often physical actions and confrontations with criminals. While engaged in these altercations, the superheroes' agility, strength, and toughness are flaunted. Though the reader might be privy to the thought or intellect that helps the heroes unravel the mystery and therefore take part in the archetypal "final showdown" with a villain, it is largely through a superhero's corporality, his physical dominance and superiority over another man that these conflicts are resolved. One might also add, that the body of the superhero is traditionally clad in form-fitting, muscle-accentuating, costumes, often complete with a 20th century codpiece.

There is a paradox when it comes to the ways that superheroes are evaluated and viewed by readers. For example, the reader is prompted to account for the viability of each superhero based on physical prowess and dominance. Yet this is a form of viewing and evaluation that privileges heternormativity by allowing viewers the ability to be enthralled by (traditionally)

male corporality without adversely affecting one's masculinity. It is a form of surface reading that insists on superficiality in order to avoid the quandary of the prolonged gaze.

Both surface and artifice are recognized by those interested in appropriating artifacts of mainstream culture for their own subcultural devices. Subcultures are comprised of communities of people with interests that lie outside traditional societal norms. There is first a cultural removal, whereby subcultural communities, due to practices or beliefs outside normative society, either voluntarily detach themselves from mainstream society or are forcibly exiled. But this cultural distance and outsider status makes those within the communities aware of the fragility of normative surfaces -- the artifice involved in forging undisputed norms and cultural values. It is in recognition of the elements of normative culture that first allows for camp readability. Once this cultural shallowness is evident, then camp codes and practices simultaneously expose this cultural vulnerability and endow these formerly-normative icons and artifacts with new, non-normative meaning.

For Beery and other gay comic fans, reading the medium and the superhero genre itself brought them into contact with contradictions – contradiction that they chose to rectify in their own manner. For example, when recalling the ways in which Batman's look changed over the years, Beery is quick recall being 11 or 12 years old (around 1965) when "the comics folks upped the sex ante. The drawing got more anatomical, and the villains got hunkier." Even as a child, Beery was able to see the inconsistencies and incompatibility in a genre primarily centered on muscled, physical specimens parading around in their underwear. To him, the pretense that one could read the genre and not erotically gaze upon the bulging anatomy and hunky beefcake was laughable. The ability to utilize such prominent forms of normative culture in the service of

his own non-normative aims and desires is one of the ways that Beery, as a comic book fan, was engaging in camp.

And Beery was not alone. In *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*, Daniel Harris writes at length about the pre-Stonewall era of gay camp culture (when Beery was coming of age). During these years camp was a form of collectivity and subversion that gay men used in order to covertly identify each other within the confines of a hostile normative society.[2] For Harris, popular culture and its artifacts were especially important to this burgeoning subculture:

> Bridges were built partly through the cultivation of shared tastes in popular culture, through a reverence for a group of cinematic heroes whose glamor lent an unprecedented centrality to the previously disjointed and atomized nature of gay life … Large numbers of gay men established around these stars a new type of esprit de corps as the votaries of a particular pantheon of goddesses. Fandom, in other words, was an emphatic political assertion of ethnic camaraderie, as was the gay sensibility itself, which did not emanate from some sort of deeply embedded homosexual "soul," but arose as a way of achieving a collective subcultural identity. (Harris 17)

Though Harris is primarily concerned with the role Hollywood icons played in the development of camp culture, by conceptualizing camp as a form of fandom, the practice can be easily transposed onto gay comic fans. But equally important is Harris' linkage between camp and forms of collectivity. It demonstrates that while camp is a process of coding and "plundering" normative objects its effects are seen when these codes are reproduced and transmitted to others.

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[2] Robert Corber, in his study of Hitchock films and homophobia in the post-war years, describes the conservative paranoia of the time. He writes, "America in the 1950s experienced the emergence of an increasingly heterogeneous and antagonistic social field in which the proliferation of differences threatened to lead to a generalized crisis of identities" (Corber 7).

Clone Corporality or "Superhero Sex"

In the years that followed the Stonewall riots of 1969, the gay community changed. Gay urban centers and neighborhoods were developing and there was a new, unprecedented openness concerning gay sexuality. Given this new outlook, it is no surprise that camp codes and practices evolved as well. Though the camp queendom popular before Stonewall still existed, gays in trendy urban centers became entranced by different way of camping that validated gay sex and sexuality, as well as codified a gay masculinity modeled after blue-collar icons – and opposed if not directly hostile -- to the masculinity of the queen. Though the era of the gay clone might seem unrelated to homosexual comic books superheroes, this period of history is important to examine, due to the way that gay culture, gay bodies, and gay commercialization shaped the way that mainstream culture appropriates what it construes as gayness in today's society.

Martin P. Levine and Daniel Harris, in their respective works *Gay Macho* and *The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture*, explain the evolution of the gay clone movement and the masculinity and sexual paradigm shifts that were brought about from the cultural upheaval. Vital to this cultural transition was the way that camp changed. These changes were the result of new outlooks and cultural ambitions, which the Gay Liberation Movement helped foster. Harris explains how camp, a system of cultural values and communication, mutated in order to better reflect the needs and values of clone culture:

> But camp has always been something more than just the death throes of pagan idolatry in a secular age. It has also served, as we have seen, to consolidate group identity. Because gay culture is becoming less closeted however, the need to seal

> our furtive communal bond through the secret handshake of Hollywood trivia is disappearing, and with its disappearance, a crucial element of the gay sensibility has been thrown into jeopardy…." (Harris 33)

In the decades that preceded the Stonewall Riots and the Liberation Movements, camp had served as a code of sorts that aided in gay communication amidst a hostile heteronormative environment. Identification and knowledge of gay-claimed pop cultural artifacts or icons helped gay men identify each other before the development of gay communities centered around neighborhoods or other types of gay spaces. But as gayness became more public and less hidden, there was a not the same need to code one's sexual interests or desires.

Though the clone was a departure from the way that camp was practiced in the pre-Liberation decades, this form of camp is still comprised of techniques that appropriate elements that pervade popular culture, but in a manner that distances these now-appropriated forms from their original intent. For Harris, this particular cultural appropriation seemed to reify the heteronormative culture that was the source of gay masculine angst:

> In the act of remaking themselves in the images of such mythical icons of American masculinity as gunslinging cowpokes and closecropped leathernecks, homosexuals failed spectacularly to alleviate their nagging sense of inadequacy to straight men, whose unaffected sexual self-confidence continues to serve as the subcultural touchstone of manly authenticity. (Harris 99)

Gay appropriation of American masculine icons demonstrates the need of the gay community to validate their status as men through a masculinity constructed around images that cannot be separated from normative conceptions of manhood. Though Harris sees this method and focus of appropriation as backward because it coincides with dominant masculinity in ways that appear

less than transgressive, Levine writes that these icons were then stylized in a way that reflects the desires and culture of the burgeoning gay community:

> In the past, camp had characterized stereotypically feminine sign-vehicles; now, though butch rhetoric expressed camp by its self-conscious appropriation of traditionally macho sign vehicles … What mattered was the doubleness of clone style – its self-conscious almost parodying references to stereotypically traditional masculinity. (Levine 59)

The doubleness or distance that Levine insists on returns agency to the act of the cultural appropriation that the camp process undertakes. Though many scholars, including Susan Sontag, have focused on the more imitative processes of camp, there is also a need to be conscious of camp's subversiveness. Harris insinuates that the clone use of typical masculine figures of note (such as the cowboy and lumberjack) ultimately leaves the clones bounded to the community responsible for their oppression. This truncates the potential of camp's transformative affect. Levine points out the distance or space that gays leave between the original, normative intent of their appropriated object, and their use of the object.

The clone masculinity which resulted from this move away from coded references to popular culture toward an appropriation of normative masculine icons, developed out of a need to legitimize gayness and gay sex in a way that also refuted normative conceptions of gay men as suffering from a flawed masculinity. There is a tension between normative conceptions of masculinity which operate on a societal level, and gay sex, which is perceived as effacing one's masculinity and status as man. It is not surprising then that gay clones became invested in an effusive masculinity that sought to distance themselves from notions of a compromised gay masculinity:

> Gay men enacted a hypermasculine sexuality as a way to challenge their stigmatization as a failed men, as “sissies” and that many of the institutions that developed in the gay male world of the 1970s and early 1980s, catered to and supported this hypermasculine sexual code – from clothing stores and sexual boutiques to bars, bathhouses, and ubiquitous gyms.” (Levine 7)

The development of a gay sexual code attached to the clone appropriation of the masculine is an example in which the use of iconic masculine figures goes beyond imitation. It demonstrates the way that camp works like scaffolding, facilitating the emergence of unique, viable, cultural manifestations and values, out of an initial appropriation of a pop cultural or iconic object. But what is interesting in the changing of the gender resonance in camp signs during this era is the way that this "macho" move of gay culture affected conceptions of sex within the clone community. Sex became a vital way to both empower and propel this new cultural movement -- as a way to both proclaim one's gayness and one's clone masculinity:

> Masculine erotic norms and self-fulfillment values shaped the patterns of cruising. These norms called for detached, objectified, and phallocentric, sexual conduct. In other words, they told men to engage in recreational sex for orgasmic release with partners selected for physical attractiveness. They also instructed men to affirm manly prowess through sexual conquests ... Hot sex. Heavy sex. Rough sex. Gay sex. But decidedly masculine sex. The clone “took it like man” and he also “gave” it like a man. It was in their sexual conduct – both the cruise and the contact itself – that gay men demonstrated most convincingly that they were “real men” after all. (Levine 79)

Changes to camp and gay culture during this time were drastic. Within the clone era there is a distinct fusion between sex and culture; sex becomes more than a way that gay men are different from their heterosexual counterparts. Sex is both foundational to and inseparable from clone culture of the 1970s.[3] After all, "the clone was about nothing if he was not about sex" (Levine 76).

Yet what makes sex and its role in clone culture particularly relevant to a discussion of contemporary, homosexual comic superheroes is the way that this particular aspect of gay culture was condensed, packaged, and commercialized by the pornography industry. While gay pornography had existed in various forms for hundreds of years, the 1970s marked a change in the aesthetics of porn, including differences in narrative and the ways/types of bodies that were portrayed. Pornography during this era carried with it many of the clone cultural tenets described above. But what I hope to convey is the compressive effect that commercialization has on a clone culture. As discussed earlier, this emerging form of masculinity that surfaced during the gay clone era greatly altered mental and sexual conceptions of gay men. It also altered the type of sex and the terms of sex within this community of men. As Harris explains, the desire to distance themselves from widespread feminine stereotypes afforded to a certain type of queen masculinity changed the way that gay clones thought about their bodies and their masculinity. It

[3] Martin P. Levine chronicles clone culture in his study *Gay Macho*. Chapter four opens with Levine relating is experience of overhearing two men in a neighboring room of the bathhouse. The dialogue overheard by Levine demonstrates a clone masculinity that was invested in a "specifically masculine" form of sexuality. After the receptive man commands his partner to penetrate him, Levine "heard bodies slapping against each other, and, 'Take it, fucker. Take it like a man. Yeah. Take, it fucker. Take it like a man. Yeah. Fuck that ass. Oh, yeah. Fuck that manhole. Come on, fucker, ride that cock. Come on, fucker, ride that big dick. Uh huh. Yeah. Push that hole open. Give me that ass. Ride it. Oh yeah. Take it like a man. Open that hole. Give it to me, fucker. Yeah. Take it like a man" (Levine 78).

is no surprise then that sexual encounters between the men who ascribed to this new masculinity also changed:

> In the act of denying the stereotypic images of the effeminate pansy in the course of the 1970s, gay men asserted their masculinity in overcompensating ways that give rise to a distinctly militaristic appearance. This style of behavior also carried over into the bedroom where homosexuals played out fantasies of bestial couplings free of feminizing affection and tenderness. Intercourse that emphasized sexual pleasure and intimacy over aggressive contact between two dehumanized, hypermasculine sex machines would have compromised the new machismo, which fostered a type of pornography that stripped sex of its sensuality, as well as of the ludicrous emotionalism that now seemed both hilariously dated and despicably effeminate. (Harris 148)

The tension that this pornography creates is striking. The concept that crops up during the distilling of clone culture into a consumable product is the hypermasculine sex that is interestingly "dehumanized." Harris goes as far as to call these men engaged in sex "machines" engaged in "bestial couplings." Even sexual "intercourse" between men is transformed to "aggressive contact." When considering the use of such terms, the quandary of the consumable is evident. The compression of a culture into easily digestible products always truncates the full scope of the culture of origin. This flattening is responsible for distortions that fail to capture the dynamic intricacies or evolutional context that comprise the conduct and values of a community. While pornography as a medium might be capable of capturing clone investment in sex, implicit in Harris' remarks is how the hypermasculinity attached to this particular subculture begins to infringe upon the readability of the real or realistic sex act. The connections that Harris raises

between the hypermasculine and the mechanistic element evident in clone pornography recalibrates the sexual encounters vital to the affirmation of a new gay masculinity and refashions them to be no less arousing, but in a manner that forecloses on cultural resonance.

For Harris, tracking clone pornography's removal from realism does not end at the sex act itself. There are also corporal inflations that help perpetuate this. As if taking a cue from the erotic exaggerations that inundated Tom of Finland's erotic art, Harris explains that gay men in 1970s pornography were depicted as "enormous hulks with bionic bodies, rippling pecs, quads the size of tree trunks, and erections the thickness of fire hydrants and baseball bats … the characters took on the distinctly surrealistic appearance of steroid monsters who engage in what might be called superhero sex" (Harris 149). Superhero sex, though an evocation of a sexual encounter, seems heavily slanted toward the corporality of the men engaged in superhero sex, as opposed to a new form of sex altogether. Instead the term refers to the ballooning of men into comic-al proportions. Yet, the term also signals a complex set of interrelations and discord among the masculinities involved. Traditionally the superhero has been a bastion, a foundational pillar that normative conceptions of masculinity can rest upon. Superheroes generally are afforded an unquestioned normative privilege that grounds their more eccentric qualities (modern-day codpieces, secret identities, form-fitting costumes, etc.) in a masculine mystique. This mystique absorbs the more normatively troubling aspects of a superhero character, keeping them as legitimate icons of masculinity.[4] What Harris is implying with the term "superhero sex" is the severing of gayness from the gay sex acts. Whereas culturally, clone sex was about

[4] This is the case in comics that were published in Gold and Silver ages of comics (1940s-1980s). The Bronze Age or Copper Age of comics that writers such as Alan Moore and Frank Miller "deconstructed the superhero genre," and "comic book characters became darker and more psychologically complex" (Rhoades 124-125).

celebrating gayness and espousing a virile gay masculinity, the sex in clone pornography, amidst the hard bodies and the minimizing of subcultural values, peels away from the celebratory gayness and toward the detached, glistening, rough sex. Under this premise, one superhero can engage sexually with another, but due to privilege afforded both can still emerge with their normative masculinities uncompromised.

This is evidenced further, as Harris further discusses "superhero pornography" trends including the heterosexual conversion plots, in which "A typical scenario is the discovery by a presumably straight man that he actually enjoys gay sex, which he experiences during a chance homoerotic encounter" (Harris 150). One example of this storyline is in the 1980 film *Wanted*, starring clone porn superstars Al Parker and Jack Wrangler. Roger Edmonson, in a biography of Parker entitled *Clone: The Life and Legacy of Al Parker Gay Superstar*, describes the plot of the film where "Jack Wrangler plays an abusive warden: Al Parker and Will Seagers are featured as prisoners who escape from a chain gang, still chained together. Seagers's character is straight, and the tension rises as he tries to understand Parker's sexual preferences" (Edmonson 111). The heterosexual conversion plots are entrenched in a privilege similar to the privilege inherent in "superhero sex," in which sexual encounters with other men do not constitute a calamity that endangers a man's normative masculinity. While Harris acknowledges that both viewers and scholars of superhero pornography have seen this heterosexual conversion narrative as positive in the way it implicates gayness onto the supposedly pristine masculinity of heteronormative culture, he emphasizes that this genre ultimately cleaves gay identity from gay sex:

> The propagandistic use of the conversion narrative to incriminate the entire gender, to blacken with homosexual aspersions of every quarterback and auto mechanic, may at first seem like a clever form of liberating sexual sabotage, but

> on closer scrutiny, it proves to be fundamentally self-loathing. The dominant mythic figure of the post-Stonewall pornography is the nongay homosexual … who, while engaging in gay sex, manages to retain the masculine identity of a straight man untouched by the look and sensibility of the subculture. The nongay homosexual is gay only in the bedroom, while in public he easily passes as a dyed-in-the-wool heterosexual … Despite his formidable stamina and sex drive, he is a solitary sensualist who has no stake or interest in a collective homosexual identity but has eliminated all telltale signs of urban gay life from his behavior, which strictly conforms. (Harris 151-152)

When taking into consideration the deep, complex subcultural roots of the clone, the nongay homosexual character that emerges from the heavily commercialized clone pornography seems to run counter to the subculture's proud investment in explicit gay sex. The fact that the nongay homosexual can engage in sex and simultaneously reject the subculture responsible for it demonstrates how gayness – especially the clone conception of it – is reliant upon the subculture and cultural values and norms to sustain it. It is in the rejection and compression – if not the willing disregard – for gay culture that allows the nongay homosexual character to function as it does. The nongay homosexual can engage in gay sex, but it is his conscious or unconscious lack of engagement with the subculture – with gay culture – that saves his lauded masculinity. Gayness, for this character is a cultural not a sexual act.

From its roots as a product of a new, post-liberation form of camping, the gay clone was invested in fabricating a sexual and hypermasculine paradigm that would allow the subcultural community to reconcile its sexual desire of men with its desire to be men free of normative society's imposed stigmas. Sex – frequent, aggressive, anonymous sex --became a method of

perpetuating this masculinity. Yet, what I hope that I have captured is the manner in which commercialization of this subculture compresses and subsequently fractures this hope for an uncompromised masculinity from its celebratory gay roots. Through commercialization of their culture in the pornography industry, the clone desire to be gloriously, culturally, and sexually gay is altered. The product of this mutation is none other than the nongay homosexual, who though very interested in frequent, aggressive, anonymous sex with other men shuns the gay cultural roots that such sex calls to mind. For the nongay homosexual, gayness (culture) is maligned, and by not subscribing to gay culture, he can maintain a heterosexual, untarnished masculinity. This is a move that forecloses on gayness as a source of pride or a cause for celebration. The invention and perpetuation of the nongay homosexual character, though made famous by the pornography industry, soon becomes a way that mainstream, normative society can represent homosexuality in a way that is more digestible, less offensive, and more socially acceptable. Though, I would argue, it is also much less gay.

Homosexual Superheroes

The character of the nongay homosexual that resulted from the commercialization of gay culture by the pornography industry in the 1970s is related in many ways to the character of the homosexual superhero, which emerged nearly 20 years ago. The most recent work on the development of the contemporary homosexual superhero is Gareth Schott and Gemma Corin's book, *'Ambiguously Gay Duos' to Homosexual Superheroes: The Role of Sexuality in Comic Book Fandom*. Schott and Corin focus on contemporary fan communities in the age of the Internet, as well as the history of what they term the "gay superhero."

Though the title of the book uses the term "homosexual," which indicates a same-sex object choice, the crux of the author's argument is focused around differentiating between superhero "gayness" that is endorsed by comic creators and the comic industry, and gayness that is read into comics by the reader-viewer. The authors only employ the term homosexual in the title of their work, and subsequently create their own terms when it comes to separating what they see as two forms of "gayness" found in some contemporary superhero comics. The term homosexual denotes a same-sex desire or a person who engages in sex with someone of the same sex. The term gay, on the other hand, implies a person's investment in the particularities, norms, and codes of a larger gay culture. There is a need to differentiate between representations of culturally viable "gay superheroes" (those representations that resonate to gays on a cultural level), and "homosexual superheroes" (who have a same sex object of desire). In my terminology homosexual superheroes are those representations of homosexuals who explicitly declare their "gayness," while gay superheroes are gay by their readability (or viability) as harbingers of gay sex and culture. According to Schott and Corin, the "gay superhero" is a character that "is

promoted as a gay icon and symbol for the gay community," by the artist, publishing company, etc. In contrast, the "superhero that is gay" is a character that is "held up as a gay icon by the fans … their homosexuality is not emphasized or endorsed by the writers of comics" (Schott and Corin 14-15). While I would not go as far as to say that Schott and Corin outright privilege the industry-endorsed "gayness" over the (re)encoded gayness that the reader-viewer encounters and transmits, the terms that these authors have created espouse the existence of a "gayness" that focuses on an explicit disclosure of a same-sex object choice, without taking into account the cultural resonance that a term like "gay" connotes.

Though demarcated by an explicit declaration of their same-sex object choice, it is often difficult to otherwise cordon Schott and Corin's "gay" superheroes from their heterosexual counterparts. This is because a successful commercialization of a culture necessitates the creation of new, possibly compelling representations that are subtly different or unique, while still conforming to the traditions of a nearly 80-year-old genre. The tension between the presence of "gay superheroes" in mainstream comics, which would have been impossible to imagine thirty years ago, and the inability of these superheroes to ultimately stray from traditional associations evident in the genre is hard to resolve. There are some who undoubtedly see the representations of allegedly gay men in such a mainstream, pop cultural artifact as evidence of a lessening of hostility between the gay community and society at large, if not an indication of social advancement. But the trouble that the gay reader-viewer has in meaningfully distinguishing "gay" superheroes from other (heterosexual) heroes seems to call into question the legitimacy of this "gayness." While there are segments of the gay population that espouse different, if not outright conflicting political beliefs (the desire for gay marriage and adoption are

two examples), by separating the institutions of identity and culture, David Halperin, in his book "How to be Gay," explains that there is an apolitical point of referentiality amongst gays:

> Identity can perform this important practical and political function because it allows and indeed encourages normal people to categorize the members of a stigmatized population as a single group, not on the basis of their offending behavior but, more neutrally, on the basis of their 'identity' – that is, their common membership in a 'community.' The category of 'identity' offers plausible grounds on which to support as a matter of principle the equal treatment of individuals belonging to such a community by representing them as a general class of persons – as a group like any other – and by downplaying their shared flamboyant differences, all those weird and disturbing shenanigans that at least partially define, distinguish, and constitute the group in the first place … (Halperin 73)

Though Halperin acknowledges the admirable functions of identity in matters of political equality, he also underscores a non-political, one might say cultural, point of reference – "the shared flamboyant differences"—that separate gays from heterosexuals. Though gay culture has its own diverse subcultures, there are collective commonalities and understandings (separate from identity) that underpin the community. These shared differences are one way that gays are culturally distinguishable from heterosexuals. Yet, these shared difference are often go unrepresented.

The superhero genre presents an interesting challenge to any examination of sexuality because of the somewhat diminished role that even heterosexuality plays in the typical comic. Though it is common enough for superheroes to have a woman in their lives (Superman and

Spiderman being two famous examples), they are often secondary components to the comic series. For the comic book superhero, masculinity is defined through the hulking edifice of the body, courage, and dedication to a cause, rather than by the presence of a female love interest. But, as discussed earlier, the traditional comic book superhero is also ensconced with privilege that normalizes his perpetual bachelorhood. Superheroes are therefore presumed to be heterosexual, even in the absence of a female love interest or girlfriend. One could make the argument that sexuality in general, heterosexuality, homosexuality, or other forms of sexuality, are absorbed into the superhero genre in the way that minimizes its impact. Schott and Corin, in fact, do make this argument in regards to their "gay superheroes" and "superheroes that are gay." They theorize the way that the "gayness" of contemporary, mainstream comic book superheroes is absorbed into the superhero mythos:

> Thus, superheroes are a distillation of discourses on masculinity, both simplistic and exaggerated representations of these ideals whilst also serving to express the fragility of these constructions. The gay superhero absorbs sexuality into the superhero mythos whilst at the same time challenges the masculine ideal. Its presence also confirms the possibilities for subversion illustrating how easily the superhero can be rendered camp (29).

Though Schott and Corin's acknowledgement of the gay superhero's subversive potential, and how it both affirms and effaces the unimpugned masculinity afforded to the traditional hero is adept, their investigation of the process of absorption ends without an examination of the process of gay absorption or the effects of absorption on the gayness in question. They assert that homosexual relationships involving superheroes so-inclined are "treated no differently from heterosexual relationships and is normalized without issue, or that it is conspicuous by its

absence" (Schott and Corin 15). While I have stated that nearly all sexuality is absorbed into the superhero genre, the absorption of a socially normalized heterosexuality is far different from a less socially sanctioned homosexuality. Given the typification of heterosexuality through the superhero's masculine privilege, heterosexuality exists as an assumption– an implication – of the genre. Therefore, while heterosexuality might take a backseat to other aspects of a hero's character or storyline, its normalized status within the genre, makes its absorption fundamentally different from the absorption of homosexuality. Since homosexuality does not have this assumptive, privileged status, its absorption into the superhero mythos results in an invisibility. This invisibility is compounded by what Schott and Corin argue is the relative lack of differentiation or difference between homosexual superheroes and heterosexual ones:

> By definition, the queer superhero does not differ significantly from hetero-normative heroes in their "hero-ness.' The queer superhero retains the costume, the code name, the powers and the ideal hyper-masculinized body. The key difference can be found in the subtleties, the little differences on panel in the dialogue and storyline and the personality of the individual character. (Schott and Corin 12-13)

As these authors indicate, homosexual superheroes are often impossible to distinguish visually from heterosexual heroes. Their homosexuality is rarely rendered in visual and is reliant upon the "subtleties' of speech balloons and captions. And there is a relationship between these subtleties and the commercialization process, which seeks to represent homosexuality in a compressed manner.

This homosexual invisibility and subtlety evident in contemporary superhero comics presents a situation that is similar to that of the nongay homosexual character that emerged from

clone pornography. The homosexual superhero is portrayed as severed from gay sex and subculture, yet through subtleties of the comic medium or more explicit proclamations espouses what Schott and Corin, along with the comic artists and publishers, would deem "gayness" or representations of it. Yet this is a "gayness" that is hardly, if ever, culturally readable, much less present sexually. Contemporary homosexual superheroes, as much as they might possibly diversify and complicate the superhero genre, still conform to standards of the genre to the degree that they remain viable heroes. It is a similar tension that was examined earlier in regards to the nongay homosexual character in clone pornography. While the nongay homosexual has sex with men without ascribing to a (sub)cultural "gayness" that would compromise his masculinity, the homosexual superhero claims "gayness" in exclusion of the subculture and through sex/same sex intimacy that is almost never depicted. In both cases, the characters claim statuses yet divorce these them from the larger cultural concerns that account for the existence of the claimed status. In the case of the nongay homosexual the cultural dislocation is to preserve an unstigmatized masculinity, which is evidence of the perceived compromising effects of cultural gayness. On the other hand, the homosexual superhero is dislocated from larger gay culture, and gay sex, to make his presence less obtrusive – more palatable.

To call or categorize these homosexual superheroes as "gay" in any shape or form is unacceptable, given the way that gay sex and culture are underrepresented in the comics – if not completely excised altogether. Schott and Corin's terminology fails to take into account the differences between one's interest in a same-sex object choice (homosexuality) and a same-sex object choice coupled with an investment in the subcultural underpinnings of the community (gayness). The authors are contrasting "gay superheroes" that are encoded as such by their creators, in juxtaposition to "superheroes that are gay," which are (re)encoded by the viewers. In

other words, gay superheroes – the viewer is told – are gay because of the gay issues, situations, and symbolism the artists, writers, and publisher have deemed representative of the gay experience – often without any gay cultural context – much less gay sexuality. What these authors are failing to grasp is that, for the queer reader, there is quite a large difference between being explicitly told that something is supposedly gay and reading gayness into a signifier.

The Bulge that Dare Not Speak Its Name

Historically, camp reading practices have been vital to the gay community. From its roots as a code and a knowledge base that covertly conveyed male desire amidst the hostile normative environment, to the evolution of camp and its role in crafting a gay masculinity that could legitimize gay male desire and sex away from its stigmas, the practice has proven essential to the various forms of gay culture and cultural transformations that have occurred over the course of the last sixty years. In both of the aforementioned cultural movements, there was a certain distance or removal between appropriated artifacts and identities and the gay manifestations that resulted from such appropriation. Such a removal allows the constructed nature of normativity to be viewed, comprehended, and subverted. The removal is dependent upon a natural, knowingly vague, implicit quality. When considering the way that today's homosexual superheroes have been assimilated into mainstream comics, it is important to consider how the explicit "gayness" or "gay" status proclaimed by these heroes interferes with contemporary camp readings.

In *How to Be Gay* David Halperin discusses the workings of camp and its importance to gay male culture. When discussing the way that camp works as a lens that pinpoints gay male desire and pleasure, Halperin explains that even in today's world where there are representations of gays are available for consumption, gay men and boys often find unintended gay potential in artifacts that were not necessarily intended to convey such meaning:

> Gay men routinely cherish non-gay artifacts and cultural forms that realize gay desire instead of denoting it. They often prefer such works, along with the queer meanings those works express, to explicit, overt, thematically gay representations.

> There are in fact quantities of non-gay cultural forms, artworks, consumer products, celebrities, and performers that gay men invest with gay value. Cultural objects that contain no explicit gay themes, that do not represent gay men, that do not invoke same-sex desire, but that afford gay men opportunities for colonizing them and making them over into vehicles of queer affirmation exercise a perennial charm: they constantly get taken up by gay male culture and converted to queer uses. (Halperin 112)

This compulsion to read gayness into artifacts or performances that are not intended to illicit such readings or responses, Halperin explains, is often instinctual for young gays or "proto-gays." Yet the realization that is part of this process works on the level of the connoted, rather than what is more explicitly denoted. In this instance, there is a powerful element in "colonizing," in fashioning gay signification to normative objects or identities. Additionally, the agency involved in this appropriation distinguishes this practice from a more passive consumption. Gay men, we are told, "invest" images or artifacts with meaning – they "colonize" and craft mechanisms for perpetuating aspects of gay life and culture. These constructed "affirmations" are often preferred by gay men over more explicit representations that present blatant claims of gayness.

Halperin examines the reasons for these preferences by discussing a trend in Broadway musicals that is comparable to that of contemporary superhero comics. In both instances, traditional reading/viewing practices of gays centered around taking mainstream images and artifacts and (re)encoding them with meaning relevant of gay culture and concerns. Yet overtime, both the Broadway musical and superhero comics came to supply their own, more

explicitly "gay" characters and content.[5] Halperin writes that rather than contributing to the same "charm" that traditional gay reception of appropriated objects and characters has for readers, this more overt gay content can actually interfere with the gay reception:

> Because the form of the Broadway musical itself functions as a vehicle of gay male desire, no enlightened effort to inject a thematic element of gay identity into the musical itself – to make its gayness more overt, to add gay subject matter to it – can actually make it more gay … when a musical attempts to achieve gayness through its explicit representation of homosexual subjects, the musical ceases to provide much of what gay men want … (Halperin 106)

While this is as far Halperin goes in considering mainstream appropriation of purportedly gay representations, the parallels between the gayness that gay men have attributed to the form of the Broadway musical and the gayness that gay comic fans have read into the medium are apparent. What is important, especially in light of Schott and Corin's theory of the industry-calibrated "gay superhero," is that Halperin acknowledges not all "gayness" is equal when it comes to gay readers/viewers. There is a difference between material made-gay by the community, and material made "gay" by mainstream society. Through his analysis, Halperin privileges or legitimizes community-fashioned gayness over that produced for by mainstream media for popular consumption. This creates an insider/outsider dichotomy, which implies that that there are codes, customs, and other community-specific knowledge that outsiders might overlook in their formations and representations of gays. "What gay men want," Halperin explains, is on some level related to the implicit, non-vocalized gay resonance, uncompromised by its specificity, recognizable for the informed, undetectable for the ignorant. Camp, as Daniel Harris

[5] Northstar was the first homosexual superhero. He came out in Marvel's Alpha Flight No. 106 in March of 1992.

explains, is a form of fandom, and fandom by its nature also calls to mind a similar "insider" sense of knowing – in which certain issues or elements of coveted objects or artifacts take on their own particular importance. Cheryl Harris and Alison Alexander in *Theorizing Fandom: Fan, Subculture, and Identity* demonstrate that "Part of being a 'fan' is immersion in a special lexicon often less than intelligible to outsiders, a practice common to membership initiation rituals in many social groups" (Harris and Alexander 8). Given its status and role within a subculture, camp involves processes that functions on the level of those attuned to its frequency. This accounts for the multiplicity of camp. While there is not necessarily any thematic, visual, or content-based correlation between camp objects and films, they can all be read as camp by their audience. Halperin accounts for this paradox by conflating camp as a network of realization, recognition and transmission:

> [Camp] marks the person making the judgment as an insider, as someone who is in the know, who is in on the secret of camp, already initiated into the circuits of shared perception and appreciation that set apart those who are able to discern camp and that create among such people a network of mutual recognition and complicity. (Halperin 189)

Insider status is vital to the continuity of camp, a practice that thrives on a specific relationship between the audience and object. In this instance, Halperin explains the inter-audience relation, the "shared perception," the "network" involved in the formation, recognition, and dissemination of camp codes from person to person. It is a network that brings together qualities of the object in a normative, heterosexual society, and the insider status of those in the best position to recognize all tensions and artifices represented in objecthood or identity. Additionally, camp is referred to as a "secret." This secret harkens back to its origins as a method of subversion, and

even though the need for closeted codes has diminished through the decades, camp remains a participatory practice in acculturation by the larger gay community.

The manner that camp implicates a larger community-wide insider status is especially important when considering the non-insider status of various industries responsible for the production of representations or characters that are intending to be gay. Though these industries, it could be argued, are making efforts to diversify their products, creators are often caught in a perilous position between conveying stereotypes or caricatures of characters and portraying politically correct, sanitized versions of gayness. The lack of insider knowledge results in characters that attempt to rise above cliché, but due to the explicitness of their proclaimed gay status, they lack gay cultural depth The effects of such explicit gay content is demonstrated by Halperin as he considers the ways that overt gayness conceptualized by producers of popular culture:

> By containing and confining homosexuality to the fixed, local, habitation of a particular character or theme – to a materialization of gay identity – the new gay musical implies that such a habitation is the only place in the musical where homosexuality resides, where gay subjectivity is at home … (Halperin 106)

Halperin demonstrates the way that mainstream use of "gay" representations and characters seeks to inherently confine and limit, through its explicit demarcation of gayness, the amount of connoted gay resonance the community can glean. Whether overtly gay characters are crafted in an effort to diversify content or other "enlightened reasons," this attempt at representation shows the desire to assimilate a subculture. The inclusion of such content has the effect of privileging the constructed gayness by creators, writers, and publishers. Here the open, readily available, pre-packaged, proclaimed gayness – the gayness that has been planned and prepared for – is

offered presumably to appease consumers, both gay and heterosexual. Yet what is not often accounted for is the way that such popular representations with their heavily processed, overt gayness come into conflict with the camp reading practices that have been fundamental to the gay community. There is a tension that arises between constructed, passive acceptance of popular conceptions and the active, reader-driven, subversive camp practice. There is a latent directive nature in much of the popular supposedly gay content produced for mainstream consumption. This directive goes beyond a moralizing, ethical, outright homophobic agenda, but there is still the need or desire to regulate, to control – for those who create this gay content to effectively say, "THIS, here, is gay. This is what we have intended to be gay." What is not taken into account by these creators is that this mindset creates a systemic conflict between their content and camp. Camp thrives by disregarding the privilege of intention, creating its own meaning for its own devices. While the film, television, or comic book industry might be comfortable "containing and confining homosexuality to the fixed, local, habitation of a particular character or theme," in controlling where "gay subjectivity is at home," in their manufacturing of content and storylines, they fabricate a tenuous boundary. This line of division serves many purposes including providing representations of gays, controlling or influencing where and what "gayness" is read-into the product, and bolstering the separation between "gay" and heterosexual.

Historically, the comics industry has what might be seen as a prudent interest in bolstering distinctions between gay and straight. Given the homosexuality attributed to a myriad of superheroes in the 1950s, the heavily muscled, bulging hero bodies, and the secondary position of love interests in the genre, the comic book industry – one might argue – has a vested interest in protecting the masculinity of their heroes that might be impugned by the implication

of gayness. In contemporary superhero comics there is a corralling of gayness that seeks to be a tip of the cap to diversity and substantiate the still overwhelming heterosexuality that pervades the medium. Homosexual superheroes must then demonstrate their sexual preference in ways that endanger or compromise their hero status.

One example of this effect work could be found in the Marvel's 2006 comics that comprised *The Young Avengers* series. These comics center around a group of teens that fight crime while paying homage to The Avengers group of superheroes. Two of these teens are Teddy Altman and Billy Kaplan. Altman and Kaplan are also known as their crime-fighting personas Hulking and Wiccan. The teens are involved in a budding romance that is often alluded to throughout the adventures of The Young Avengers. But unlike their heterosexual fellow-crimefighters, Hulking and Wiccan's relationship is portrayed differently within the comic panels. While Ironlad and Stature and Patriot and Hawkeye also have flirtations and intimacies depicted in The Young Avengers stories, Hulking and Wiccan's relationship is often relegated to innuendo and implication, rather than being more directly illustrated. In *Young Avengers #5* for example, Ironlad and Stature steal a kiss after narrowly escaping the grip of the villain Kang the Conqueror's time portal (Heinberg). Similarly, the super solider Patriot and Hawkeye take part in flirtation banter after Patriot tackles her in an effort to save her from a shot of Kang's ray gun (Heinberg). Despite the fact that Hulking and Wiccan are the only members of the team actually portrayed in an actual relationship, this relationship is often only indirectly alluded to. While other members might kiss or flirt, Hulking and Wiccan's relationship is often only discernable through the intensity of each teens fear of death or danger for the other. For instance, in *Young Avengers #4* when Hulking tries to hinder a distraught escape from Ironlad, Ironlad blasts the shapeshifter with a burst of energy – causing Hulking to plummet to the ground. One panel of the

comic shows the rest of the team (Stature, Patriot, Hawkeye and Wiccan) watching Hulking's free fall (Heinberg). Wiccan is the character foregrounded in the panel, and he looks more horrified than his counterparts. Though Wiccan is not the first or only character to speak in the panel (Patriot voices his dismay by saying "Oh, my God …"), the comic's letterer chose to differentiate his exclamation of "Hulking!!" by enlarging the print in the speech balloon and coloring it red, as opposed to the standard black color. The way that panel is composed directs the reader to the two different intensities of responses between the character. In this case, Wiccan's cry of his love interest's name is a way of demarcating their romantic relationship, without any semblance of romance or flirtation. As the Young Avengers continue to battle Kang the Conqueror in *The Young Avengers #5*, a similar method is used by the comic creators to allude to the same-sex relationship. In this instance Wiccan is attempting to use his newly-discovered spellcasting abilities to disable Kang's force field. One panel shows the collision of Wiccan's body and the power of his spell with the villain's force field. There is a single speech balloon in the panel that indicates a scream coming from off-panel. The type of this speech balloon is larger than the average size throughout the comic, and there is a red outline around it. The following panel shows Hulking and Hawkeye ascertaining the condition of their battered colleague following his spell. Hulking is the closest character to Wiccan and he touches Wiccan's shoulder with a look of concern on his face. The first speech bubble the reader encounters on the panel is Hulking asking Wiccan, "You okay?" (Heinberg). These two situations demonstrate that the two teens same-sex relationship is often conveyed to the comic reader in a much more allusive manner than the heterosexual members of the Young Avengers. Hulking and Wiccan's relationship is often indicated solely by the intensity of each teen's respective, and reciprocal, response for the impending injury or death of the other.

Though they are very often portrayed next to each other in different panels throughout the comics, there is very little in the way of dialogue between the two of them addressing their relationship. In the first 12 issues of *The Young Avengers* series, Hulking and Wiccan's relationship is most directly addressed two times. The first comes in *Young Avengers #6* when the teens are sidelined from crimefighting due to Captain American's threat to tell each child's parents of their superhero status. In one series of panels the group of uncostumed young adults are walking up a street thinking about their next move and Billy Kaplan's/Wiccan's need for a new code name (he was originally referred to as Asgardian). When Billy asks "Why do I need a new code name," Hawkeye/Kate Bishop explains that "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" (Heinberg). Clearly, the Hawkeye/Bishop character is pointing out a pun between the phonetic pronunciation of Kaplan's supposed race (Ass-gardian) and the sex the teens are engaging in, given their same-sex relationship. What is interesting about this instance is that there is a direct acknowledgment of the relationship between the boys, but at the same time the "joke" that implies sexual acts between Wiccan and Hulking is attributed to "the press." Whether intentionally or not, the statement seems to sever the young men in a same-sex relationship from same-sex sexual acts -- sexual acts that are never seen or even subtly implied between the teens. This is not surprising or necessarily objectionable, given that none of the other Young Avengers partake in explicit sexual acts in-panel. Yet, this sexual dislocation of the young men from gay sex, coupled with the overall allusive nature of their relationship and the much more direct depiction of heterosexual romance in the comics (kissing, flirting, etc), demonstrates a somewhat reticent tendency on the part of the comic creators in illustrating a relationship between two young men.

The second instance where Hulking and Wiccan' relationships is directly referenced is in *The Young Avengers #7*, when the two boys are trying to figure out how to tell their parents that they are superheroes. When Wiccan's parents overhear the teen's furative discussion and ask them what they are hesitant to disclose, Wiccan replies "Uh … Mom? Dad? There's something you should know. And it might be hard to deal with at first, but –" (Heinberg). His mother interrupts him saying, "It's okay honey, we know. We've always known … And what you have to know is, we love you and we're proud of you … and we're so happy that you boys found each other." In a similar fashion as the pervious example, though there is no pun made, the situation is cast in a humorous light, due to the similarity of Wiccan's intended speech disclosing his superhero identity to the cliché "coming out" speech that many gays make in the process of becoming a public member of the larger gay community.[6] There is a certain uncharacteristic reflexivity involved this move by the creators of The Young Avengers, whereby there is an direct acknowledgment between the larger identity-based similarities between superheroes -- who almost always must keep their hero identities undisclosed and secreted – and gays who are often forced to keep their sexuality secret.

Though the "coming out" story/issue has been relevant to the gay community for decades, it is also one of the elements of a larger gay culture that has translated to the point of cliché into a larger mainstream, heterosexual consciousness. Another example of a gay issue that has made its way into mainstream comic panels is that of gay marriage, which was most recently portrayed in Marvel's *Astonishing X-Men. #51*, when X-Men member Northstar married his non-

[6] Later in *Young Avengers #7*, there is another pun made when the rest of the team asks Billy "You come out to your folks yet?" While the question concerns Billy telling his parents that he is a superhero, the question also evokes Billy's homosexual status. In fact, Billy replies "Yeah … just not in the way that I intended to … the good news is that may parents think that Teddy's the perfect son-in-law." (Heinberg)

mutant boyfriend Kyle (Liu). Given the age difference between Northstart and Kyle (who are adults) and the teens Hulking and Wiccan, it seems that the comic book industry is more relaxed in its depiction of flirtation and acts of intimacy between two adult characters. When Kyle finally accepts Northstar's marriage proposal after a near-death experience, the two characters are shown kissing passionately in front of several members of the X-Men – including Wolverine (Liu). Later, after exchanging vows, the grooms get so caught up in the their kiss that Northstar levitates both himself and Kyle into the air above their wedding party (Liu). DC comics has also increased the in-panel intimacy between its homosexual superheroes. As part of The New 52 re-launch undertaken by the company, the superhero The Green Lantern (also known as Alan Scott) has been rewritten as homosexual. As Scott arrives in Hong Kong for a get-away with his boyfriend Sam, the two reunite and share a prolonged kiss (Robinson). In addition, Scott proposes to his boyfriend before their train explodes. There is no doubt that the comic book industry is slowly creating more homosexual characters that are depicted as gay not only through their explicit proclamations, but also through the increase in same sex intimacy. Yet, these characters are still lacking a larger gay readability or referentiality.

It is no surprise that these gay issues that somehow involve the public or publicizing or making gayness public are more easily translatable to mainstream publications. The integration of homosexual characters into mainstream comics means that popular knowledge of gay life must be reconciled with the notions of what constitutes legitimate gay sexuality for the gay community. As scholars like Halperin have demonstrated, there is a fundamental difference between the communal sense of gay and mainstream, overt representations of gayness that are becoming more and more popular in contemporary culture. In "Below the Belt: (Un)Covering *The Well of Loneliness*," Michéle A Barale focuses as the way that mainstream culture

appropriates the lesbian and integrates her image and text in order to uphold a heterosexual paradigm. She explains normative culture has a vested interest in assimilating non-normative cultures:

> When a subculture's texts become an offering by and for dominant culture, one is tempted to surmise that a change is taking place and further tempted to interpret such change as progress. This notion of progress assumes that the existing ideology has permitted entrance of the previously unspeakable because a new and uncensored discourse has begun. Such cultural self-visioning proceeds from a larger more encompassing vision of history itself as a process of ideological liberation, and provides a means of appropriating the subcultural text so as to enable it to seem consonant with existing ideology. The text, in other words, is colonized; and it is colonized precisely because it is useful in maintaining the colonizer's structure. (Barale 235)

What Barale is exposing is the complicated manner of "progress" that comes with mainstream "colonizing" of subcultural texts, but the same sentiment of this logic is directly applicable to the comic industry's appropriation of gay themes and issues within their panels. Rather than being evident of a "new and uncensored discourse" when it comes to characterization of gays, Barale demonstrates the self-serving effect that these cultural subsumptions have in maintaining the "structure" of tradition. Homosexual superhero comics align with this proposition because of the way that the gay characters and storylines have so easily been cast into the 80-year-old superhero genre. This intercultural translation is made possible due to the way that gayness on a variety of levels (cultural, sexual) is manipulated into a form that best fits the standards of a genre bound by the conventions of a largely normative community. If the Hulking and Wiccan examples

provided above are indicative of anything, it would be that the homosexual superheroes can proclaim their gayness but remain strangely opaque and dislocated from their cultural and sexual origins. Barale posits that this opacity of homosexual characters and assimilating of gay culture and themes has an effect on gay readers and viewers:

> Once again, I do not think that the lesbian book browser is being welcomed to the text, but rather that dominant culture knows and uses for its own ends representations and codes whose significance for sexual subcultures it cannot always foresee or control. In turn, subcultural readers can subvert these codes for their own meaning and pleasure, thereby finding within a heterosexually controlled image an unregulated representation of themselves. (Barale 250)

Subversion is the solution that Barale proposes to the quandary of gays not being "welcomed" to images, storylines, and characters proclaimed to be representative of their lives. Though camp as a reading practice has its origins in subversion amidst a dearth of gay representations, there seems to be a relevant place for the method in restoring the "meaning and pleasure" of finding relevance by making texts and images their own. Camp as a means of bypass toward "unregulated representation" presents a viable option for gay reader-viewers. Despite explicit proclamations of gayness and that effectively exist in cultural and sexual vacuums, gay consumers can do have a means of filling in the gaps made by the manner in which they are characterized and represented by mainstream culture.

Conclusion

In the twenty years that have passed since Marvel's Northstar declared his gayness in *Alpha Flight #106*, the comic book industry has increased the number of homosexual characters. Northstar is now in good company with Hulking and Wiccan of the Young Avengers (who shared their first on-panel kiss in 2012, seven years after their story began), and The Green Lantern. Additionally, there has also been a change in the manner that sexuality is portrayed. While gay sex has yet to be depicted in-panel, same sex intimacy is depicted more directly.[7] The development of the homosexual superhero evident in contemporary comics is the result of several larger trends stemming from within and outside the gay community. Clearly before there were popular representations claiming to exhibit or proclaim a certain form of gayness, gay men engaged in camp as a process of reclamation, of appropriation in order to cultivate identities and codes to serve a budding gay community. Yet as this community changed, there was less of a need to be closeted and camp evolved as well. Camp appropriation in the 1970s is evidenced through the outlaw subculture of the clone, whereby the practice helped cultivate a masculinity free from perceived stigmas attributed by a heteronormative society. The intersection of this subculture and commercialization via the pornography industry results in the establishment of the nongay homosexual character – a character that engages in gay sex, but rejects the gay cultural associations that might impugn his masculinity. A similar relationship to gay culture is presented in the homosexual superhero becoming ever more common within the comic industry. Like the nongay homosexual, the homosexual superhero, while verbally proclaiming his gay

[7] It should be noted that sex, even heterosexual sex, is a rarely depicted in mainstream comics.

status has no associations with gay subculture. The lack of a relationship serves to ensure that the masculinity of the homosexual superhero is aligned with the norms of masculinity that have been established for the eighty-year-old genre. Though the comics industry and scholars such as Schott and Corin are quick to label these representations "gay," the lack of a sub/cultural association or resonance makes these characters "homosexual," due to their same-sex object choice. These homosexual superheroes and the overt, vocalized proclamations of homosexuality, create an opacity that gay reader-viewers must negotiate. Just as camp was important to forming unregulated conceptions and identities when there were not representations of gay available, camp also serves as a means of reconciling today's representations that claim to espouse gay sexuality.

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