Queering Contemporary Comics and Culture.

The representation and integration of queer, crip and trans ethics and identities in the serialized narratives of North American mainstream comic books.

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(characters: 205.791)
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Summary.

(front page illustration from: Nightcrawler #2 (Marvel Comics, New York, 2004)
Author's Notes:

For the sake of convenience, I will refer to DC Comics as either DC or DC Comics. However, many of the DC titles and characters were originally created under one of two companies, National Comics or All-American Comics, which merged in 1944 under the name of Superman-DC (later shortened to DC). Marvel has also seen its share of name changes, from Timely Publications in the 1940s, over Atlas Comics in the 1950s, until it became Marvel Comics in the 1960s. Again, I will refer to the company as Marvel or Marvel Comics; in the context of the contemporary comic book superhero, any attempt to distinguish would be less than useful, since the two publishers have both gone to great lengths to ensure that the characters today are a part of the companies’ cohesive continuities.

Unless specifically stated, when dealing with the history of a particular character, I draw on issues that are a part of the main continuity of the original series in which (s)he appears. Both Marvel and DC have a number of alternate universes, perhaps most notably Marvel’s *Ultimate* universe, in which the characters are familiar from main continuity, but the stories are not. Nothing that happens in these series has a direct impact on the main continuity of the original series: a character might be gay in one series and straight in another, dead in one and alive in the other, etc. Similarly, when dealing with movies, I assume a similarity to the original material to be present, but with this in mind I advise the reader to treat the movies as alternate imaginings of familiar characters, not as stories with a direct connection to any ongoing storylines or established facts in the comic books.
Currently, there are no set rules for quoting from comic books. To confuse matters further, some issues might not have a credited writer, and page numbers in comic books falls somewhere between non-existent and random. When citing a single-issue comic book, I list title/issue if no writer is known, but since there are no agreed-upon guidelines for pagination I adhere to the system set down by Bradford W. Wright in *Comic Book Nation – The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (2003), and leave out page numbers entirely.
Introduction.

Queering the superhero, in comic books and film.

These past few years have seen a veritable cornucopia of superheroes brought to life on the big screen, allowing a mainstream audience to share the delight in these stories that comic book fans have felt for years. This is one major reason why the following chapters draws so heavily on the movie adaptations of a number of comic book superhero adventures, most notably the X-Men trilogy of movies, as well as the prequel to the series, X-Men: First Class (Marvel/20th Century Fox). It is not that I do not find the actual comic books interesting in their own right, but nothing has done more to bring the world of superheroes back from the brink of mainstream obscurity than these grandiose blockbusters. However, the very core of the superhero genre will always be the comic book, since the superhero is defined by nothing else quite as much as by the unique open-ended continuity created by the continuous publication (Clock 2003: 27) that allows a hero to grow and change with the times in a coherent and timely fashion. In this sense, a movie is simply a blip in time, a more easily accessible view of the comic book superhero at that particular moment; what makes the X-Men movies different from many other such ventures is the way the creators managed to sustain a sense of continuity that could be stretched across three movies and almost ten years without feeling dated or awkward1. As such, this is still an exploration of a world defined by

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1 The 2011 prequel movie X-Men: First Class does, at least to the dyed-in-the-wool comic book fan, feel like it is set in a slightly different universe. While it was widely marketed as a prequel to the X-Men trilogy, there are a number of issues in the movies' internal continuity that makes it debatable whether or not this is entirely
the rules of comic book storytelling, regardless of how far I may stray into the various other forms the superhero story takes today. As the then-president of DC, Jenette Kahn, said in 1995:

> We can be on-line, we can be CD-ROM, we can be video games and interactive toys, or we can be movies, television, animation. [...] and each one of those different areas helps all the others – as long as we never lose sight of the fact that the comics made all these other things possible.

(Daniels 2004: 267)

It is due to these adaptations that the superhero comic book, while not the only type of contemporary comic book on the market, is perhaps the one that most people are aware of. There is no shortage of serious graphic novels out there, with Art Spiegelman's Pulitzer Prize winning *Maus* (Pantheon Books, 1980-1991) being the perhaps most famous example. Horror and the occult is a stable in the wildly popular DC Vertigo series, such as *Hellblazer* and *Lucifer*, which may be comic books, but could only be called superhero comic books if one is willing to separate the superhero from the usual markers of identity, such as a clearly defined mission statement, spandex tights, and/or a secret identity. Yet the superheroes, in all of their larger-than-life glory, are a pervasive presence in American popular culture, and far more correct, such as the appearance of the mutant known as Beast in an apparently fully human form in the first movie, *X-Men* (2000), while the “prequel” shows his transformation from a human form to a monstrous, blue-furred simian form decades before the first movie takes place. Then again, perhaps this is one of those things best left unquestioned. Glitches in continuity do happen regularly in comic books, so they are bound to show up in the adaptations as well.
easily recognizable than the tortured heroes of the (often British) occult comic books, or the holocaust-surviving mice in *Maus*. So, while I do draw (briefly) on mainstream comic books whose heroes are not immediately recognizable as being “super” (such as *Transmetropolitan, Fables,* and *The Walking Dead*), the lion’s share of this thesis revolves around the traditional superhero, whether (s)he is the archetypical loner such as Batman, a part of the vibrant and multi-faceted universe of the superhero team (like the X-Men), or something in between. The only other criteria for appearing in this thesis has been a high degree of mainstream appeal; I have seen little point in including superheroes that are so obscure as to be virtually unknown to all but a core of die-hard fans, which is yet another reason why the vast majority of titles and characters used in this project are from titles with an all-ages rating, rather than the somewhat more edgy adult lines of comic books (such as DC Vertigo or Marvel MAX).

Though working with comic books, I am not particularly interested in doing a by-the-book literary analysis of superhero comic books; Geoff Klock did that in his 2003 book, *How to Read Superhero Comics and Why,* and it stands as a backbone in my approach to reading comics books as a researcher as well as a fan – there is little to no point in simply replicating his meticulous approach. Nor am I particularly interested in approaching the comic book from a historical starting point; while listing the numerous LGBTIQ characters in comic books would

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LGBTIQ stands for: lesbian/gay/bisexual/trans(gender)/intersexed/questioning. The acronyms used in contemporary queer culture are ever changing, and so other variations include GLBTIQ, LGBT, GLBT, GLB, etc. Other letters that might pop up in the mix are A for asexual, P for pansexual or polyamorous, SA for straight allies, C for curious, TS for transsexual and/or transvestite, and ? for questioning, in which case an already present Q would stand for queer. The individual placement of the letters may reflect the inner power structures of whichever organization is using the acronym, or simply the idea of which variation in gender identity or sexuality is the most widespread. Then again, since the placement and inclusion of the letters is not standardized, it may also just reflect the personal preference of whoever is using the acronym at the time.
be a commendable piece of work, I find it less intriguing to look at what is obviously and intently placed in the text than it is to look out of the corner of our eyes and see that which has been allowed to grow in a less controlled fashion. This is precisely why comic books are so gloriously fun to work with; comic books are not closed texts, and often far from intentional as well. How could they be, when each one is an amalgam of canonical history, the intentions of the editors, the effort of several creators, and the media-specific literacy of the reader? The fine line between intended messages and unintended character development is blurred, when even the de-facto creators themselves hardly know the entire span of that which has gone before them, and no one in their right mind would ask a reader to go through all of the available materials before voicing an opinion. But as Klock points out, there are certain things that are assured in the superhero genre, regardless of the fuzzy details of continuity and creation, notably the fact that "each superhero is fighting for an overall change in society, even if in each individual issue the hero is usually reactionary in maintaining the status quo" (Klock 2003: 43) – which in all of its simplicity is perhaps the most perfect way to explain exactly why the link between superheroes and activism (scholarly as well as community-based) is so relevant to explore. Superheroes have functioned as role models for generations of children, teenagers and even adults, especially to those who felt that the superhero experience of being on the outside of normality mirrored their own, as fangirl-scholar Roz Kaveney explains in her 2008 book, Superheroes! Capes and Crusaders in Comics and Film: “Those of us isolated by temperament or sexuality in our teens need a literature that consoled with the possibility of finding friends of the heart, and comics provide it, but not in any simple wish-fulfillment form” (Kaveney 2008: 9). But superheroes provide more than the simple reassurance that it is

Building up a full knowledge of even a single character’s continuity would essentially entail reading every comic book containing references to that character’s universe – as well as watching every relevant TV series and movie, playing any licensed role playing games and computer games, trudging through numerous off-print tie-in novels, and possibly attending at least a few fan conventions as well.
possible to find a purpose or a group in which to belong. Their very existence as seekers of societal change means that they are often very clear examples of the contemporary approaches to activism, whether each individual hero is taking an assimilationist or a radical approach, and whether they are doing so as an intensely personal project or as a part of a group effort. A major part of the non-comic book related theory in this thesis is therefore based on the work of scholars who acknowledge (and embrace) the activist approach to theory, most notably Dan Goodley, Robert McRuer, Cordelia Fine, Judith Butler, and Michael Warner.

This thesis is divided into four parts. The main introduction is immediately followed by a brief introduction to the concept of the activist scholar, while the main body if the thesis consists of three main chapters. While the idea of the activist scholar is not the main focal point of this project, an understanding of the tradition in which the following is written, as well as my place in it as a writer, is essential to understanding the general aim and tone of this thesis; as such, I have chosen to add the introduction, while keeping it separate from the main body of the text itself. After this, the first chapter is dedicated to an exploration of the links between comic books, non-normative identity, and contemporary American mainstream culture. I deal with issues such as stereotyping and status in relation to the othered individual (and look at the comic book fan as an example of the otherness usually associated with, e.g. an LGBTIQ or

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4 Queer theory has often been colloquially referred to as the studies of “otherness” or simply “the others”, meaning identities which are other-than-normal; individuals and identities are “othered” by society when a deviation from the norm of any kind (in mind, body or overall lifestyle) is translated into otherness or strangeness in relation to current societal standards. Trans people, for example, are othered in relation to a culture based in the hegemony of the cisgendered male/female majority, while a superhero is othered by assuming an identity that is not “normal”.
disabled identity), the validity of the comic book as both a signifier and an instigator of social change, and the existence of the openly LGBTIQ superhero. I will (briefly) touch upon the concept of neuroplasticity and the receptive audience as a baseline for the idea of normativity and the othered existence as malleable concepts related to personal autonomy and power.

In the second chapter, I take a closer look at the obvious parallels between the superhero identity and othered (queer/trans/disabled) existence in several key areas, such as: the act of coming out as a signifier of the othered identity, the strategies of empowerment (in which the superhero closely mirrors both crip and queer activism), and finally I explore the delicate balance between personal traits (whether in the form of super-powers, impairments, or a queer variation in gender or sexuality), personal and communal pride, and heteronormative society as a controlling instance. I also look at the difference between assimilationist politics and radical liberationism in the personal and public performance of the othered identity.

In the third and final chapter, I link the previously explored concepts of pride, power and status with the intensely personal performance of identity, through the use of (post-)trans theory. I take a closer look at the performance of sexuality and gender in superhero comics books, and wrap it all up by examining a quite peculiar feature of many comic books, in which

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5 When dealing with disability studies I use both the terms “disability studies/theory” and “crip studies/theory” depending on the context. In disability studies, it is widely accepted premise that society is disabling: a person can have a significant impairment without becoming automatically disabled, as long as (s)he is not placed in a cultural context where the impairment (such as amputations, blindness, or non-neurotypicality) is seen as something profoundly damaging in terms of personal identity. "Crip" denotes the presence of a deliberate attempt to reclaim personal autonomy, in both the realms of the personal (being crip) and the political (crip pride).
the superhero most clearly becomes the embodiment of the strategy of (re-)claiming the body: the widespread use of nudity as a uniform.

The traditions of writing about queer, crip, or trans: the activist scholar.

If there is one thing I have noticed while reading up on the academic approaches to the comic book and its history, it is that many of them begin with a preface explaining exactly why the author in question has chosen to delve into this world of spandex-clad archetypes and four-colour pages. Roz Kaveney, Geoff Clock, Mike Madrid, Bradford W. Wright (to name but a few); whether their starting point is in (e.g.) comparative literature, psychology, or philosophy, so many of these men and women appear to feel compelled to acknowledge and explain the personal nature of their interest. This is not, of course, a unique feature related to the study of comic books. In fact, for someone well-versed in queer-, crip- or trans theory it is as reassuring as it may seem strange, since this recognition of the personal starting point is a stable in the work of many an activist scholar as well, such as Stephen Whittle, Robert McRuer, bell hooks⁶, Michael Warner, or Cordelia Fine. The dynamics governing this decision to involve the personal are not entirely similar, though; choosing to work with comic books is, after all, not quite as controversial as setting out to (re)define the building blocks of heteronormative society, and potentially upsetting the gender-based cultural hegemony while at it. I take a closer look at the dilemma of the fanboy-turned-scholar in the first chapter of

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⁶ bell hooks is the chosen pen name of social activist and feminist Gloria Jean Watkins, and is intentionally written with no capitalizations.
this thesis, so let us put aside that particular curiosity for now, and instead focus on the
questions faced by what could be called the activist scholar.

In studies of queerness and dis/ability alike the question of personal identity and experience,
and of the stance one claims as either a knowing part of the grouping of identities described
or as a relative (normative) outsider, is one that carries more weight than might seem obvious
to a casual observer. Many of the pioneers in the fields of queer-, trans- and crip theory are, in
one way or another, queer, trans and/or crip themselves. They are writing from a point of
view as relative outsiders, not to the world that they attempt to describe and explain, but to
the world defined by those uninitiated individuals that will eventually make up a significant
part of their audience. But “many” does not mean “all”, and in the history of academic writing
the question of whether it is even possible to remain objective while being an active part of
the system that is under observation has been the source of a great deal of heated debate.
Either starting point is equally likely to land you in a world of trouble. In her infamous critical
review of the 1990 trans-identity documentary *Paris is Burning*, feminist activist bell hooks
criticizes the validity of the entire project, based on the fact that this documentary about the
lives of a group of African-American queer men and trans-women was made by an outsider
(the white, Jewish, cis-female Jennie Livingston) who, hooks claimed, did not have the equal-
footing access to her subjects needed to truly understand trans culture on its own terms
(hooks 1991). On the other hand, disability studies researcher Dan Goodley’s 2011
introductory work, *Disability Studies – An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, refers to the concept
of “sentimental biography” (Goodley 2011: 28); the idea that working directly from the
starting point of being personally invested in a community, or a related activist movement,
will somehow compromise the expertise of the scholar, effectively rendering any claims to
objectivity void and leaving the resulting work as nothing more than a well-worded
biography. And so it is, that (not) being queer, dis/abled or trans – and, more importantly, drawing on one’s own personal experience with these identities – may be both a distinct advantage for the individual scholar, and a sure-fire way of marking one’s work as unfit for serious contemplation. Goodley describes this as a vital part of a dilemma that will ultimately lead to the scholar finding her-/himself embodying one of three approaches to the field they work with: the non-participatory, the participatory, and the emancipatory approach, with a strong prevalence towards either non-participation or emancipationist ideals (Goodley 2011: 24). In an attempt to list the most common questions that disability studies researchers (should) ask themselves to clarify their position in relation to their subjects and/or the material at hand, Goodley and his team managed to create a master list that in many ways could just as easily have been written for The Transgender Studies Reader (Stryker 2006), or for a handbook for budding queer studies researchers:

- inclusion (of the subjects themselves)
- accountability (to whom is the researcher held accountable)
- praxis (does the research make a (positive) difference in the lives of the subjects)
- dialectics (how is the studies influenced by, or have an impact on, current social conditions)
- ontology (whose knowledge/life experience count as valid)
- disablism/impairment (focus on disabling effects of society, or meaning of impairment?)
- partisanship (whose side is the researcher on?)
analytical levels (politics, society, culture, interpersonal, or the individual?)

(Goodley 2011: 23)

If one substitutes “disablism/impairment” with words such as stigmatization or prejudice, this list dovetails almost flawlessly with the questions addressed by queer studies researchers everywhere – and in the case of trans studies, even this substitution would hardly be needed, since a major factor in trans lives is the way society tends to classify the non-cisgendered body/identity as pathological. These questions are the bullet-point representation of the need to identify who are being studied, why they are being studied in the first place, and what the researcher is bringing into the equation in terms of methods, personal views, and sway over what the results will be used for.

In the language of second wave feminism, this need to clearly define the scholar as either “in-” or “outside” in relation to her/his subjects is a major difference of opinion that lies between the “female” stance of attempted all-inclusiveness, relying heavily on the personal and bodied experience, and the “male” Cartesian mind/body dichotomy that favours clinical objectivity and the study of a well-defined subject. And while this distinction is undeniably geared towards portraying these approaches as being as far from one another as possible, it also emphasizes why the playing-fields of crip-, queer- and trans studies are populated with activist scholars who make a point out of drawing on their personal experience; one cannot attempt to separate the disabled body from the mind, just as one cannot attempt to grapple with the lives of, e.g., trans persons or homosexuals, without first acknowledging the importance of bodily experience as a major defining parameter of individual otherness – which in turn makes the Cartesian approach to research somewhat unattainable. In an
unusual bit of tongue-in-cheekery in the otherwise deliberately all-inclusive *Disability Studies – An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, Goodley puts forth the following (knowingly provocative) statement: “It could be argued that one should come to disability studies with a profound desire to understand and change the conditions of contemporary society. If not, why bother”. (Goodley 2011; 27). Why bother indeed. The trenches are dug out for a war between the activist scholar and the non-participatory scholar; one is shamelessly indulging in biased sentimental biography so far removed from the kind of (academically) useful description that can be easily assimilated by the reader that it is in danger of crossing into the realm of interpretative art, while the other is using her unknowing subjects as a meal-ticket, a way to cement her own respectability while remaining safely ensconced in the world of academic research with no actual real-life impact. In actuality neither is, in its purest form, a valid strategy for the researcher, of course, any more than it is possible to be entirely one or the other. Nevertheless, the participatory and activist approach to any study of the othered in contemporary society is so inherently a part of much of the work done in these fields that even Goodley, in a text that is by no means a radical manifesto, asks the obvious question: “Can you carry out disability research if you are not disabled?” (Goodley 2001; 25). The answer being, of course, that you are perfectly capable of it – if you remember to keep in mind your place in the hierarchy of this on-going struggle for power and recognition happening between (normative) society as a whole, and its othered members.

For a student trained in the classic manoeuvre of removing the author from the text, this need to acknowledge the impact of the personal is a daunting challenge, if not outright nerve-wrecking. It is hardly as if there is a field guide to navigating the dangerous waters between objectivity and immersion, when even tentative explorations of the topic will reveal that veering off to either side might possibly be seen as compromising one’s work. At the same
time, the close ties between activism and both queer studies and disability studies mean that choosing (or remaining in the fields of) these particular topics could be seen as indicative of personal interest in itself. The pre-emptive strike of acknowledging a personal stake in the topic at hand is at once a way of ensuring that neither writer nor critic can be accused of placing the text outside of the relevant parameters, and a way of giving fair warning to the reader of the text, in regards to actual content. So to honour the tradition of the many scholars whose work I have used while writing this thesis, I will take a page from their book, and acknowledge the importance of the personal.

I neither can nor wish to deny that this thesis is a direct product of my background. I picked up my first comic book when I was five years old, and in the quarter of a decade that have passed since then, I have hardly stopped reading. Characters like Mystique, Batman, the Darkness and the X-Men have been my constant companions, in comic books, movies, computer games, TV shows, and at conventions. When I was younger, they served as a window into another world, in which I found characters that seemed somehow easier to relate to than those in the mainstream TV shows and movies my peers watched avidly; growing up in a three-generational family commune, surrounded by people adhering to several different religious beliefs (including a dark-skinned grandfather of Jewish descent) shaped the way I saw the world from an early age, and fostered an acute awareness of prejudice in the forms of cultural/religious bias and racism. At the same time, being non-cisgendered as well as non-heterosexual has, for me, meant that I started participating in various LGBTIQ activist groups at the age of fifteen. Finally, I have a family history of both physical and mental impairments – like several members of my family I am technically disabled, and have spent many years exploring the significance of “crip pride” in my personal life as a result of this. This thesis has grown from a life in which some key aspects of
“normality” have been unattainable ideals, rather than defining commonalities, and however much I have attempted to keep any personal bias from influencing my work as a whole, it is probably as impossible as it is undesirable to deny that this is written from a somewhat radical activist background, in which gender is neither stable nor pre-determined, sex is never shameful, impairments do not equal disabilities, and where identities that are anything but average (in so far as that can even be said to exist) are the perfect windows into an exploration of the mechanisms governing the workings of the so-called “normal” world. Fortunately, this attitude is exactly what comic book superheroes are all about, once you start picking them apart.
Chapter 1.

Between censored and subversive: the liminal space occupied by superheroes – and their readers.

Maladjusted geek or competent reader?

Stereotyping, status, and otherness.

More than thirty years have passed since Umberto Eco effectively put comic books in good cultural standing, in his 1979 book *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, which contained an essay entitled “The Myth of Superman”. Yet almost every scholarly work on comic books starts out with some form of introduction (be that a full chapter or a single sentence) dedicated to pointing out that not many such works are written, and that comics are, despite all that is commonly assumed about them, worthy of recognition as works of literature and art, with a high degree of cultural significance. Presumable this insecurity of the scholar stems from personal experience, rather than an actual sense of comic books as a disreputable source in its own right; reading comic books is, in the mind of the casual observer, still associated with certain personal traits that are not immediately reconcilable with serious, intellectual contemplation. Historically, comic books have been seen as objects of interest for two primary target audiences: (male) children, who are supposed to outgrow this hobby soon after they hit puberty, and then the rather sad grown up individuals who did not outgrow their comic book collections. In the M. Night Shyamalan movie *Unbreakable*
(2000), the main protagonist Elijah Price (or “Mr. Glass”) is a man who not only collects comic books, but has developed an unhealthy obsession with them, to the point where he can no longer tell truth from fiction. In the movie, it turns out that he is right in that superheroes do, in fact, exist. What is problematic about his continued consumption of comic books is therefore not that he believes in the tropes and morals of the stories themselves, since these are basically a continuation of the so-called American Dream; that an individual (often a loner on edge with the mundane law but not with divine law or common ethics) can make a difference, that everyone can excel in life, and of course the newer addition that with great power comes great (personal) responsibility (as the Spider-Man comic books and movies point out time and time again). No, the problem is that Price can no longer relate to real life tragedy, or even distinguish between plot based necessities and acts of terror. He has, in fact, become a perfect model of the stereotypical adult geek; a socially inept individual who is lost in a private world of pretend that should have ended with childhood – comic books have corrupted him in the exact way generations of parents have feared since psychiatrist Frederick Wertham’s book, Seduction of the Innocent, was published in 1954, claiming that adolescent comic books consumption could lead to all kinds of mental health issues and symptoms thereof, including (but not limited to) homosexuality, childhood hypersexuality and prostitution, sociopathy, emotional disconnect, and delusions.

7 To say the least. His ways of “furthering the plot” includes derailing a train, thus killing 131 people, and at another occasion causing a plane crash – death toll unknown.
Another portrayal of this stereotypical comic book fan (or “geek”) is the character Michael Novotny (from the U.S. version of the TV series *Queer as Folk*), who is absorbed in this world of comic books to the point where he gives lectures on comic books, owns a comic book store, and creates his own amateur comic books. Likewise, The Comic Book Guy (from the iconic animated TV series *The Simpsons*) owns a role playing games/comic book store, and Elijah Price owns a gallery dedicated to original comic book art. On-going television sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* (CBS, 2007-present) is centred around four friends, all socially awkward – bordering on dysfunctional – individuals who collect comic books and related paraphernalia.

And in the 2010 movie *Kick-Ass*, comic book collecting teenager Dave Lizewski even decides to become a real-life superhero. In fact, in most modern portrayals of geeks, there appears to be a number of common denominators that storytellers adhere to when depicting a comic book geek; white (with the notable exception of Mr. Price), male, socially inept, absorbed by their childhood hobby to the degree where a large portion of their lives revolve around the worshipping of said artefacts, and finally an inability to clearly define where fiction ends and real life begins, or even where it is appropriate to set said boundaries. And as a result of this perpetual reinforcing of stereotype, to many mainstream-oriented individuals, the image that first comes to mind when thinking about comic book readers is the stereotypical image of the

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8. Produced by Showtime and Temple Street Productions, the series ran over five seasons (2000-2005), with a total of 83 episodes produced and aired.

9. The show is centred around four characters, all scientists; Sheldon, who is the stereotypical genius with a tendency towards hyper-focus, no sense of empathy, and a limited ability to understand basic human interactions. Rajesh, a man so painfully self-aware that he is literally rendered mute in the company of women (and feminine men). Howard, who has no sense of appropriate behaviour and is prone to fetishizing women, and finally Leonard, the most highly functioning individual in the group, though he is also shy, socially awkward, and insecure in most situations outside of the group.
overweight, white, straight male geek as personified by The Comic Book Guy from *The Simpsons*.

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People (scholars) who work with comic books are usually fans, since only fans (or extremely dedicated researchers will have the in-depth knowledge of continuity needed to perform what Roz Kaveney (*Superheroes! Capes and Crusaders in comics and films*) consequently refers to as *deep readings* of these *thick texts*; texts so layered with meaning contained in outside sources that only the most informed of readers will be able to glean out a majority of the information contained within the readily available materials, by a combination of applying prior knowledge and making informed leaps of faith, by trusting personal inferred associations between various features of the specific text and other parts of the ever growing circuit of (popular) culture, such as:

- The continuity established in other issues or titles, or sometimes in other forms of media, such as when the producers of superhero movies leaves in references that are only meaningful to actual comic book readers of varying levels of competence\(^1\), or

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\(^{10}\) (Promotional image from *The Simpsons* (FOX))
• Associations created in the interplay between fans (and authors/actors/publishers etc.); Joss Whedon (creator of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Firefly, Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* and many more, as well as a comic book writer in, among others, Marvel Comics’ *The Astonishing X-Men*) is an excellent example of a fanboy-turned-creator who, in recognition of his background, encourages his fans to look for these connections, and plays into it by producing not only TV shows, but comic books, movies, and web series (to name a few examples) in which he deliberately uses many of the same actors, picks up on and expand ideas and concepts from his other titles, and encourages his actors to create original material for their characters\(^{12}\).

The result of this awareness of continuity, (un-)intended references between texts, and social interconnectedness within the community of fans can lead to what Kaveney calls *competence cascades* (Kaveney 2008: 26); an ability to navigate within and re-create the geek aesthetic from both sides of the fan/creator divide. The fanboy (or fangirl) scholar stands in a precarious third position within this system; occupying a position that is firmly rooted in the competence cascade, but without the freedom of a fanboy creator to express said competence in the materials without solid proof in the form of theory and actual research to back it up.

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11 Examples: In the 2004 movie *Spider-Man 2*, Spider-Man shares an elevator with an unnamed fanboy character, played by Hal Sparks, the actor who also played comic book fanboy Michael Novotny in *Queer as Folk*. In the first *X-men* movie, Wolverine scoffs at the teams new leatherette uniforms, to which Cyclops comments: “What would you prefer, yellow spandex?” – a reference to the uniforms worn by the X-Men for years in comic book continuity.

12 As an example of this, actress Amber Benson (who played the character Tara Maclay in the TV show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*) wrote a storyline for the hardback collection of comics published under the title *Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Tales* in 2011 (Dark Horse Comics).
Even admitting to some level of fannishness means opening up to accusations of lacking objectivity, while writing a text that practically invites the reader to experience the sense of the uncanny that comes with being on the outside of a particular system of references, which is presumably a major reason why so many fanboy scholars apparently feel the need to defend their choice of materials once they step outside of the purely social circles in which comics are recognized as a valid pastime for adults. And this experience of internal conflict is enhanced by the fact that comic book fans as a group exist firmly within that world of otherness that is so fundamentally queer a place to be; the geek as a creature is often met with highly stereotyped expectations and is somewhat of an outcast, mirroring the experiences of minorities and subcultures everywhere. This is not just a result of cultural (mis)understandings though; it is also the result of a common (possibly pre-emptive) strategy within fandom itself, where the fan is collectively defined as something other-than-normal, occupying an enlightened position removed from or even elevated above the world of ignorant (mainstream) people (Milner 2006: 41-42), and where the individual can find a sense of community and empowerment within a group of like-minded othered individuals. In his 2004 book, *Freaks, Geeks and Cool Kids – American teenagers, schools, and the culture of consumption*, sociologist Murray Milner, Jr., describes this strategy as an alternative attempt to achieve personal power in the world of status-based interpersonal relations (more in Chapter 1: “Status, consumption and conformity”); if the consumption of comic books leads to a lowered status due to (negative) stereotyping, opting out of the mainstream and seeking status in the nominally self-contained world of geeks instead is a viable alternative, and one that is perhaps preferable to giving up on comic books altogether.
The pervasiveness of stereotyping.

Since the actual real life comic book geek is a highly camouflaged species in general, and is not easily recognizable as such when at work (unless it is in a comic book store, of course), or when riding the subway (unless (s)he is reading a comic book at the time), most people only come into contact with someone they recognize as a comic book fan when they happen across the phenomenon known as cosplaying. People who engage in cosplay in one way or another are imposing their inner world over the physical world they share with the observer, thus affecting not only their own experience of the here-and-now, but the perception of the same by the casual observer. The fact that this inner world originates in a larger, shared narrative, and that the act of successfully performing this fantasy hinges on the recognition of the original elements duplicated in said performance, is easily lost on the observer, who sees only a grown man wearing red knickers over a blue romper suit – in public.

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Cosplay is a form of performance based in mimicry of fictional characters, usually by people who are fans of the character/show/comic book/movie/etc. being portrayed. The word cosplay originated in modern day Japan, and is a contraction of costume and play. It is often pronounced or written in a Japanese English accent, and is then known as kosupure (コスプレ). Costumes range from the simplest homemade outfits, to elaborate and expensive pieces complete with props such as e.g. wigs, weapons or even trained companion animals. Cosplay is a performance based activity, and as such, for it to be cosplay rather than simple Halloween type costuming, most fans also attempt to affect the mannerisms and modes of speech of their chosen character. Cosplay is used in a variety of, often public, settings; fans can dress up to go to a movie premiere or a fan convention, or they can choose to participate in actual competitions, though the latter is often seen as more of a pageant than actual cosplay.

While many cosplayers self-identify as “geeks”, only a minority of comic book readers engage in cosplay. The two are not meant to be used interchangeably.
So not only is the geek thought to be engaged in childish behaviour, which implies a childish lack of understanding of what is and, more to the point is not, appropriate behaviour; the unease that many adults feel when confronted with other adults who shamelessly indulge in displays of shared fantasies, is compounded by the fact that the mainstream consumer largely associates the world of actual physical performance of fantasy (at least, outside of the world of theatrics) with something sexual and intensely private. The practice of being a fan thus falls into the realm of the uncanny\textsuperscript{14} (org. *Das Unheimliche*, literally translating to “the unhomely”): something that is familiar in that it is easily recognizable as a mode of play, and yet unfamiliar or foreign in that it is not a public activity one expects to see an adult engaged in. The observer experiences a certain amount of cognitive dissonance, resulting in a desire to at once explore this practise, and withdraw from it, and the result of this tension is the creation of the “comic book geek” as a stereotype; the various elements resulting in this uncanny feeling are collapsed into a manageable, and largely harmless, form that does not induce the same degree of cognitive dissonance. So when one takes the uncanny feeling of having the personal, immediate perception of the here-and-now thrown off-kilter by an unexpected Superman-wannabe, and combine it with the slight sexual connotations to the act of fantasy based performance, and then top it off with sprinklings of inappropriate childishness and potential social dysfunction, it is hardly a wonder that most people never truly revise their perception of who actually reads comic books, and thereby also which topics they might plausibly cover.

\textsuperscript{14} The concept stems back to a 1906 essay by Ernst Jentsch, who explores this state in his essay *Zur Psychologie Des Unheimlichen* [The Psychology of the Uncanny], though it was not fully developed until 1919, when Sigmund Freud published his *Das Unheimliche* [The Uncanny].
Contemporary issues in comic book storytelling.

In order to debunk these myths of the stereotyped comic book geek, let us take a look at the comic books themselves; after all, short of doing an elaborate long-term study of the demographics of comic book consumers, they seem to be the best indicator of the levels of maturity and the background knowledge required to read them. Let us start out by applying assumption A): that comic book readers are meant to be male children. To a certain degree, this is a plausible presumption. Comic books such as *Uncle Scrooge* (Disney) or *Scooby-Doo* (DC Comics) are, with their fun, not-too-scary storylines, and their relatively simple plot, obviously geared towards younger readers. But from here on out, it becomes necessary to adjust any prior assumptions. Comic books such as the Disney comic books series *W.I.T.C.H.* are obviously intended for a primarily female audience, for example. And on the other end of the scale we have TopCow’s *The Darkness*, a series about a mafia hit man who gains control of a demon army, and spends a great deal of time in the subsequent issues killing and torturing people in very imaginative ways, lovingly pencilled out in great detail. Is that truly aimed at an audience of pre-teens? Not to mention *Transmetropolitan* (DC Vertigo, 1997-2002), a futuristic series revolving around the cynical reporter Spider Jerusalem, whose job it is to observe and describe The City – a world dominated by public sex, drugs, capitalized cannibalism, and regulated police brutality. The only time *Transmetropolitan* even superficially appears to be aimed at children is in the “Spider Jerusalem – Helping Young People to Understand Politics” splash page in *Vol. 3: Year of The Bastard*:

You want to know about voting. I’m here to tell you about voting. Imagine you’re locked in a huge underground night-club filled with sinners, whores,
freaks and unnameable things that rape pitbulls for fun. And you ain’t allowed out until you all vote on what you’re going to do tonight. You like to put your feet up and watch "Republican Party Reservation". They like to have sex with normal people using knives, guns, and brand new sexual organs you did not even know existed. So you vote for television, and everyone else, as far as your eye can see, votes to fuck you with switchblades. That’s voting. You’re welcome.

(Ellis 1999: 51)

Hopefully it is fairly clear to the reader that this is more of an attempt to mock the idea of this particular comic book being read by children, than it is an actual explanation of voting aimed at pre-teens, however much one might agree or disagree with the description itself.

Assumption B) would be the idea that comic books are somehow less-than-valid as cultural capital; that even if they do deal with topics that might not be inherently childish, they still do so in a simplified way that render them culturally insignificant. This view is still supported by some scholars, such as historian Bradford W. Wright, author of *Comic Book Nation – The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (2001), in which he claims that:

[...] writing by comic book fans and fan-scholars has tended to accentuate [...] comic books as a mature art form worthy of serious critical evaluation. Such an emphasis, however, distracts from the fact that the vast majority of comic
books produced over the years has amounted to junk culture cranked out by anonymous creators who had little more than a paycheck on their minds.

(Wright 2003: xiv)

He does, however, make a mistake when he declares that a majority of comic books are “junk culture”, and this mistake is inextricably linked with his equating a single issue with the overall nature of a comic book in general. When viewed in terms of sheer numbers, there is a certain validity to his claims that the “vast majority” of comics have no greater cultural significance. What he fails to recognize is the fact that the actual content of every single issue reaches far beyond the storyline represented on the pages of any one single book. After all, even if kryptonite is not present in a specific issue of Superman, it is still very much present as a threat in the reader's mind. When Batwoman was announced to be DC comics’ new flagship lesbian character in 2006, and was given her own title in 2009, it sparked articles in *The New York Times* and on the CNN, BBC, ABC and FOX News websites, just to name a few news sources\(^\text{15}\). In comparison, Alison Bechdel’s LGBTIQ comic strip, *Dykes to Watch Out For*, ran for 25 years (1983-2008), yet remained largely unknown to the majority of mainstream America.

Of course, this is not tied up in sales figures alone. It is an effect supported by what in some cases amounts to more than half a century of unbroken publication, and the sheer weight of that continuous exposure on our cultural frame of reference (Kaveney 2008: 231). Superman, one of the oldest superheroes that are still published on a regular basis, has been around since 1938. Any American would recognize the characteristic blue-and-red ensemble and the

\(^{15}\) CNN: “Batwoman’s other secret identity turns heads” (Williams 2006)

FOX: “Batwoman to Come Out as Lesbian” (FOX 2006)

ABC: “Holy Lipstick Lesbian! Meet the New Batwoman” (Robinson 2006)

BBC: “Batwoman- hero returns as lesbian” (BBC 2006)
stylized yellow “S” emblazoned on the chest of the outfit. Very few, if any, think that the character is a villain, or that he would abuse his powers for personal gain. Most would even be able to hazard a guess as to what these powers were, and what would constitute unethical use according to this character's personal set of morals. Yet most people do not read comic books on a regular basis, and as such, most people have never actually read even one Superman comic book, let alone enough issues to form a complete picture of what this character would and would not do in any given situation. This superficial confidence in the knowledge of a character stems from his status as a cultural icon, in which he is reduced to a set of simplified markers of normative societal values, not from any first hand experience or research.

This is significant for two reasons. First of all, we as individuals are simply put more inclined towards noticing deviations from the norm than we are to pay attention to a bland pattern of repetition. And the simpler the matrix we navigate in or by is, the more any change stands out. So if Superman killed someone, an avid fan who had read every single issue in which he appeared might be able to pinpoint the moments in time that foreshadowed this event. (S)he might even be prepared beforehand. Yet to a casual observer, it would potentially be infinitely more jarring (or uncanny), because one thing everyone “knows” about Superman is that he does not kill; that fact is one of his primary signifiers in the mainstream awareness of him as a character. The second reason is somewhat simpler. By transforming Superman into an overall example of culturally acceptable (or even desirable) qualities, anything done with the character itself will ride the wave of this appropriateness – as long as it does not go too much against the personal beliefs of the readers. If Superman suddenly developed a fondness for groping minors, or placing landmines near playgrounds in Africa, the audience’s willing suspension of disbelief would come screeching to a halt more or less instantly. But if he told another character that he was pro gay marriage, then to the vast majority of consumers it
would likely slide into place, and become one more signifier of what makes him a so-called “good” character in a simplified sort of hermeneutic circle; he is a good character, so what he does must be good - yet these actions are in their turn what makes him good. So to contradict Wright, it would seem that even a bad comic book issue is a vessel for a complex and layered message about morals, ethics, and socially acceptable behaviour, as established throughout the run of the individual series or the existence of a specific character.

Assumption C) would be the idea that any adult comic book reader would be a male, socially awkward and childish outcast. If the previous sections did not disprove the idea of comic books as a solely male domain, a simple Google search\cite{google_search}, a trip to the nearest fan convention, or even a stop by the local comic book outlet, should provide ample evidence that women can and will enjoy comic books every bit as much as their male counterparts. And just as The Darkness deals with murder and torture as tools of power, and Transmetropolitan deals with politics and corruption, there are comics out there that deal with a wide variety of highly complex topics, emotions and situations. Robert Kirkman’s post-apocalyptic comic book series The Walking Dead (Image Comics, 2003-present) merely utilize zombies as the catalyst for telling a story about the dynamics of interpersonal relationships and the societal norms that guide them\cite{walking_dead}. Brian K. Vaughan’s Y – The Last Man on Earth (DC Vertigo, 2002-2008) explores modern day feminism, Nietzschean philosophy, and the power of the hereditary patriarchy through a story about the only man to survive a virus that kills every other male creature on the planet. Bill Willingham’s Fables (DC Vertigo, 2002-present), particularly the

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\cite{google_search} Example: a combined search for the phrases “female geek” and “comic book” in the google.com search engine results in more than 74,300 primary hits (as of April 29, 2012).

\cite{walking_dead} The Walking Dead was released as an AMCTV television series in 2010, and is so far set to span at least three seasons, with season 3 premiering in fall 2012.
1001 Nights of Snowfall storyline, can be read as both erotica and (possibly somewhat accidental, since this is not the declared intention of the creator) as an odyssey through the history of feminism and female sexuality as expressed in classic fairy tales. When held up against the thoughts expressed in Umberto Eco’s 1979 text, *The Role of The Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts*, this is clarified further. In this work, Eco discusses how any text is a tightly layered network of semiotic signifiers, that lend itself to decoding on several layers, depending on the pre-existing knowledge and experience of the reader. In the case of comic books, the so-called ideal reader (the person who would, theoretically, be able to decode every intended layer of meaning in the text, intended meaning those put in there deliberately by the creators) is someone who has read every comic book ever written and would therefore catch every reference and historical nuance; the result of such a reading and interpretation would be what Roz Kaveney referred to as the competence cascade, performed by the competent fanboy reader. But even a less-than-ideal reader (it is debatable whether the ideal reader even exists, as it would also imply someone who only picked up on the things the creators intended to display in the text) will glean some form of meaning from the text; who is the protagonist, is (s)he stereotypically good, bad, or somewhere in between, etc., and finally which messages are, more or less intentionally, displayed in the text on the level in which it functions as a display of cultural (anti)values. If Superman does not kill, but still supports the war efforts, he is not following a pacifist belief – then what are his reasons for not killing? If a character is gay, but is never shown in a romantic relationship – or any other kind of sexuality-related situation – then what are the comics really telling us about the publisher’s view on homosexuality? This is no idle question; many characters today are either homo-

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18 At the very least. Creators such as Alan Moore and Neil Gaiman are famous for packing their texts with references to (e.g.) British science fiction, fantasy, horror, erotica, westerns and folklore from around the world, and a basic understanding of storytelling morphology would certainly help the reader as well.
bisexual, but are still rarely shown on-panel while kissing (or engaging in any other forms of physically displayed affection) the way most straight characters are.

These above mentioned titles are only a few examples of highly popular contemporary comic books with a degree of complexity in narration and conceptual framework that serve as heavy indicators of the fact that comic books are not just read by kids and the stereotypical comic book geeks, but by people of all ages, from all walks of life. Comic books are valid as cultural capital for the contemporary reader in the sense that they are a pervasive presence in contemporary culture, as well as the vessels for on-going narratives that deal with current social trends and complex moral reasoning. The person picking up the latest issue of *The Walking Dead* could be a woman looking for a new entertaining story about blood, brains and the shambling undead. It could be a male professor looking for new teaching materials for his class in social anthropology. Or it could be a teenager looking for a window into the increasingly popular genre of zombie literature. And the comic book publishers are well aware of this fact, and use it well by aiming comic books at the largest possible audience who combines a willingness to buy comic books with the largest amount of disposable income. As Wright points out, it is important to not forget that the comic book industry is just that – a well oiled machinery geared towards raking in as much money as possible. Certainly there are niche publishers and artists who do what they do for the love of the art, or the desire to spread a specific message, whatever that may be. Martin Eden’s all-LGBTIQ superhero comic book series *Spandex* (2009–present) is an excellent example of this, with Eden playing the

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19 Sales figures for March 2012 (North America only) place the then most recently published single issues of *The Walking Dead* and *Fables* at respectively 33,916 and 17,384 issues sold for redistribution (Jackson 2012). Figures for *Y – The Last Man on Earth* were unavailable, as the series was concluded in March 2008, though it is still regularly reprinted in trade paperback collections.
parts of not only writer, but also artist, editor and distributor. But these series are just that: niche. With sales figures so small they do not even make it into the standard sales figures lists, most are unlikely to ever reach a wider audience, and thus achieve the kind of impact iconic series such as *Batman* or *The X-Men* can potentially lay claim to.

This link between the need to turn a profit, and the way comic books are also in a very real sense works of art (even in mainstream publishing), means that we are left with a product that is uniquely suited to the purpose of examining contemporary mainstream culture. If the 1991 editors at DC Comics had felt that revealing the homosexuality of their character the Pied Piper (in *The Flash* #53) would somehow damage the sales ranking of that particular series, the simple fact is that it would never have happened. Superman does not just refrain from killing people because he is a nice guy; he is never depicted as actively homicidal because it would damage his coherence as a character, and thereby his marketability. So when DC Comics’ Batwoman comes out as a lesbian, or when Marvel Comics’ Xavin the Scrull reassigns “his” biological gender from male to female in order to facilitate a physical relationship with “her” lesbian fiancé (*Runaways* vol. 2 #8, 2005), it is a sign that the publishing houses have conducted some form of research (though possibly only in the form of the chief editor’s personal evaluation of contemporary societal norms) and have come to the decision that the majority of their intended readers will be accepting of depictions of these topics. And this is not a decision that is taken lightly by any of the parties involved. The fact that comic books are a serialized narrative, bound by the need for well defined and reliable continuity, means that nothing can ever be undone, since even attempts at affecting retroactive changes in continuity (“retconning”) to simplify a series will only add another layer of continuity (Klock, 2003: 21). And the individual comic book series is not standalone either. When The Pied Piper came out, it did not just mean that there was now a gay character
in the universe of the series *The Flash*, since the individual series published by a company are interconnected. Basically, the structure of the system of meaning (and of coherent storytelling) in the comic book universe is organized as follows:

- The smallest legible unit is the *single issue*. Issues are meant to be somewhat accessible to new readers with little or no prior experience with the universe, without being so simple as to be boring to a seasoned reader.
- Then there is the *story arc*: a collection of single issues telling one larger, more complex, story, usually over the span of 3-7 issues.
- The largest unit in this character-defined system is the series as a whole, gathering the entire story told about a particular group or single character.
- Overarching these separate units of individual series is the universe comprised of the totality of the publisher's titles; commonly, what happens in one title is treated as canon in any other title. This ease the storytelling techniques used to make plausible in-house crossovers (as when Superman and The Flash star in the same single issue despite "belonging" in two different titles), and makes it easier for new readers to branch out into different titles, thus again reinforcing marketability of the individual titles.
- And finally, the practice of creating inter-company crossovers (such as when DC Comics' Batman appears in the same issues as Marvel Comics' Wolverine) means that potentially any one comic is connected to any other. Batman's appearance in a crossover with Wolverine, created a subspace (or a meta-verse) in which what happens in the DC universe affects what happens in the Marvel universe. Batman has also appeared in crossovers with characters from Image TopCow Comics and Dark
Horse Comics, and would so (even if there had not been crossovers between these companies and Marvel Comics, which there have) act as a tenuous bridge between the statements and value systems of all of these publishing houses; they are linked through the Batman-centric multi-layered metafiction storyverse, subsections of which can even exist separately from the publisher(s)\textsuperscript{20}.

So when a publishing house decides to (re)create a non-normative sexuality or gender identity for a character, it affects not only direct consumer-oriented marketability of one title, but potentially multiple series, not to mention the power dynamics between one publishing house and another. It was no coincidence that Marvel Comics outed their first openly gay character, Northstar, less than a year after DC Comics threw The Pied Piper into the arena. In a scene where the major players (DC, Marvel, Image and Dark Horse) are constantly fighting to garner and keep a majority of the same basic group of readers, it is do or die. Marvel Comics could either continue to \textit{not} have a major gay character, which might make them seem homophobic or simply unwilling to deal with the important issues of that day and age, or they could get a gay character, and choose a character that was even \textit{more} of a major character than DC Comics' the Pied Piper. And so, while DC Comics simply had the Pied Piper announce his sexuality to his friend the Flash in an aside to a completely different storyline, Marvel Comics had Northstar adopt a baby dying from AIDS, coming out in an epic battle orchestrated

\textsuperscript{20} In this particular application of the word “storyverse”, it denotes the totality of works in which a character is mentioned. This includes unofficial works, such as fan fiction, deleted scenes from movies, derivative art, etc. In the case of Batman, for instance, even this thesis now resides in the borderlands of his storyverse.

\textit{Small Demons (www.smalldemons.com)} is a website dedicated to the ambitious project of interlinking every character, concept, place, etc. in existence, through overlapping points in storyverses, and is well worth a visit for anyone interested in metafiction and participatory culture.
by a former superhero turned villain\textsuperscript{21}, and finally appearing on the cover of several fictional news papers, declaring his sexuality for the world to see:

Visibility is an all-round important tool for the comic book companies when it comes to declaring a stand on potentially controversial subjects. Bestselling author J. K Rowling, creator of the Harry Potter phenomenon, announced in October 2007 (three months after the final book in the series was published) that a main character was gay, thus establishing a non-canonical yet essentially true position of all-inclusiveness\textsuperscript{23}. In contemporary popular culture this move is often dubbed \textit{the Word of God}; God (the creator) has said that Albus Dumbledore

\textsuperscript{21} In a ridiculously complicated twist of the overall plot, the hero-turned-villain had recently lost a gay son to AIDS, and initiated the battle to bring attention to the fact that gay men dying from AIDS were not getting the same respect and sympathy as the baby adopted by Northstar. With both AIDS awareness and LGBTIQ equal rights in the healthcare system as major plot points, and a gay man adopting a baby besides, Northstar coming out was the icing on a rainbow coloured cake of truly epic proportions.

\textsuperscript{22} Page scan from \textit{Alpha Flight #106} (Marvel 1992)

\textsuperscript{23} BBC NEWS: “JK Rowling outs Dumbledore as gay” (BBC 2007)
(a mentor to the main character, Harry Potter) was gay in the *Harry Potter* book series, so a die-hard fan can legitimately choose to accept this information as a truth central to the character’s storyverse – though a scholar performing a traditional literary analysis may find accepting an internally non-existent premise quite jarring. Comic books, on the other hand, are continuously published (and turned into movies, and books, and TV series, etc.) and therefore do not have the same luxury of playing the what-if or by-the-way angles of fact creation outside of the published canon. Even less so since they are the products of multiple co-creators who do not own the rights to the world they are creating in; therefore the only entity with the ability to officially play the external voice of God is the comic book company representatives, who have no real interest in interfering in the production beyond setting down guidelines for what can and cannot be done with a character. Unlike an actual author, they can be fired for misrepresenting the interests of the company, after all, so better to leave that kind of responsibility to the de facto creators, or steer clear of it altogether. But this also means that any major change in the company stance on certain topics has to be highlighted to an extreme degree to be official. When Marvel Comics characters Rictor and Shatterstar were outed in the comic book *X-Factor* #45 in 2009, their original creator Rob Liefeld immediately went on record saying that: “As the guy that created, designed and wrote his first dozen appearances, Shatterstar is not gay. Sorry. Can’t wait to someday undo this. Seems totally contrived” (Melrose, 2009). But there are some major problems with his statement in this

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24 It is worth noting that the two characters had been the subject of fan speculations for more than a decade before this point; by 2009, Rob Liefeld seemed to be one of an increasingly small number of people who did not (more or less) presume that the characters were written to be gay and heading towards a relationship. Several creators who did runs writing the characters have later stated that there were plans underway for developing their relationship into a romantic one; Eisner-award winning writer Jeph Loeb have repeatedly stated that this was editor-approved to happen already during his run on the *X-Force* series in the late nineties, but that he left the series before the plans were set into motion. (Cronin 2007)
context. First of all, Liefeld may have written the character’s first appearance, but since he was contracted by Marvel at the time, he never owned the characters to begin with. Second of all, there are no permanent truths in comic books unless they are clearly stated inside the text itself. Liefeld never wrote and published a scene in which Shatterstar not only claimed, but irrevocably proved, that he was unable to be attracted to other men, under any circumstances whatsoever. Thus it was never actually canon that he was not potentially gay or bisexual, but simply assumed. For something – anything – to be canon, it must therefore be:

- Unequivocal and straightforward, rather than hinted at and obscured.
- Preferably repeated often enough to establish itself as fact, even in the minds of new readers.
- And left standing as truth for a significant period of time.

The last addendum might seem a bit unnecessary, but remember that comic books take place in a world of impossibilities. Dead characters are regularly brought back to life, or revealed to have been clones when the original character comes back. Memory wipes and personality transplants are a common occurrence in a world of telepaths, such as Marvel Comics’ X-Men universe. If Marvel did in fact choose to reemploy Rob Liefeld, and gave him free reins in the X-Factor universe, Shatterstar could potentially discover that he was indeed straight, but had been mind wiped by [insert evil telepathic villain and reasoning behind this act here]. That is, if the group did not find out that he was an evil clone sent to infiltrate their base. If it was not
first revealed that he and Rictor were both victims of the highly contagious Rainbow Plague, with the most common symptom being homosexual behaviour\textsuperscript{25}.

So when a major, pre-established character comes out (as anything) it needs to be a move accompanied by all the bells and whistles of a major declaration. At least it does if the company wants to formally signal a degree of certainty and coherence in their decision to portray a character in a certain way. So The Pied Piper got several pages of near motionless close-ups, in an action comic no less, to sit quietly on a rooftop and explain his views on sexuality before he came out. Northstar got splash pages, fake newspaper interviews, and a baby with AIDS. Rictor and Shatterstar got an on-panel kiss after several years of not even appearing in the same titles (See examples in appendices 1 & 2). But what about the minor and/or new characters? Are they surrounded by the same restrictions and precautions as the high-profile flagship characters – do they need the same amount of attention to solidify their identity as characters? The obvious answer would appear to be a cautious “no”. First of all, there simply is not the same associated risk of incurring a decline in the marketability of a title if a minor character turns out to be less than a crowd pleaser. This is why DC Comics chose someone like the Pied Piper as their first openly gay character; as a recurring character he was already well-known enough to have some of that established cultural value that would back his impact as the carrier of an important statement – while at the same time being minor.

\textsuperscript{25} Fact: in a universe that has seen characters that were hyperintelligent clouds of cosmic gas, a virus that specifically targeted mutant DNA and basically left the victims as normal humans, and even Shatterstar himself – a body-switched time travelling bioengineered alien mutant clone from another planet, created to be a gladiator slave in a show constantly broadcast on live TV for the entertainment of an elite group of non-vertebrate aliens, about 200 years in the future – a hypothetical Rainbow Plague, or some version thereof, does not seem all that silly.
enough that it would not be too conspicuous if he had to be “phased out” of circulation (for a while or permanently) to reverse any negative impact in the form of a decline in sales figures. Second of all, it is easier to camouflage any non-normative or controversial behaviour when it is applied to a less visible and possibly less established superhero, so that the message grows with the hero rather than being imposed over the fabric of an already existing character. In fact, a lot of things can be implemented in a way so that the reader hardly even realizes that their expectations, and their default modes of interpretation, are being steered in a particular direction. In some cases, it is even questionable if the publishers are deliberately engaged in subversive acts of shifting the reader’s perceptions of what constitutes (heteronormative, socially acceptable) identities and actions. Often a close reading of a comic book will fail to reveal whether the message inherent in it is a remarkably complex and sophisticated strategy, or a random side effect of the pursuit of an interesting story. An excellent example of this uncertainty would be the apparently female Marvel character Mystique: a shape shifter who regularly, and apparently voluntarily, spends time in a functionally and biologically male body (though it is unclear whether her powers do, in fact, affect her body down to reassigning her chromosomal alignment). Within the traditional gender binary, this would presumably make her a transsexual (insofar as an “occasional transsexual” could be said to exist). In a more gender-flexible system she might be considered intersexed, third-gender oriented or even gender-fluid. That, or simply a slightly more anatomically correct transvestite/drag king. Yet her actual gender identity has never been the focus of attention the way the previously mentioned representations of queer identity were. Inside the comic book narratives themselves, no one have truly wondered if a man sleeping with her might be considered other-than-straight, since she appears to be other-than-female. She is not even discussed seriously as other-than-female (though she is, at least, generally portrayed as bisexual) despite it never being deliberately stated that she was born in a female body. Yet her performance of gender seems to be equally perfect in either form; in the X-Men trilogy of
movies she assumes the male form and identity of an anti-mutant rights politician for months on end, yet no one appears to question her (his?) apparent gender identity, indicating that her overall gender performance is flawless – or that there is no special patterns of performance that define each gender as separate from the other(s). Meaning that what you see (or infer from visible biological characteristics) is what you define as truth, regardless of the simultaneously displayed aspects of performativity. So the question then remains: does Marvel Comics even realize that they are making a rather bold statement about the (lack) of interconnectedness between biological, physical, and believed gender; that there might be nothing in the human psyche that is inherently male or female? Or is this non-normative reinvention of gender identity simply an unintended side effect of creating a character with near limitless powers of creature-based mimicry? Does it really matter if it is intentional or not? After all, the effect on the reader is largely the same: slowly and almost unnoticeably, genderqueer as a concept is moved from the realm of the deeply uncanny, and into the realm of things a reader has previous experience with. The cultural matrix of an entire group of readers is shifted ever so slightly, to include non-heteronormative expressions and concepts as valid cultural markers of identity.

So the comic book as a text puts its characters to work on two different (though not entirely separate) layers. One is the upper layer, the layer of largely unadorned messages carried by major characters, such as the signalling value of Batwoman coming out, yet remaining an important player in the DC universe. Another is the deeper layer of embedded meaning left to roam the unregulated middle ground of the technically unsaid; that which will, to some degree, often escape the conscious attention of a casual reader. A reader using *Fables – 1001 Nights of Snowfall* as a masturbatory aid because of its erotic nature might never realize the full potential of the text as a reinterpretation of feminist history and queer identity. Few
people who are not queer themselves consciously look at Mystique and label her as an activist for the genderqueer movement. And when Rictor and Shatterstar were outed, the subsequent sales figures of the X-Factor title were not noticeably affected, proving that the readers – even the kind of (white, straight, male?) readers who would have no cultural background leading them to expect such a development as a natural part of an emotionally intense male-male relationship regulated by the rules of friendship – were fully capable of accepting not only a homosexual romantic relationship, but one between a (technically illegal) immigrant from Mexico and an alien (read: not technically human) clone who appears to be Anglo American. And if this is the reality of the level of sophisticated reasoning in queer rhetorics that comic book readers bring to the table today, then there is genuine merit in attempting to unpack the hidden semiotics of the text, the less-than-intentional messages, the double entendres of seemingly innocuous characters like Mystique, who may or may not be the carriers of a wholly different level of meaning than they express themselves as at a glance.
Censorship and the marginalized experience.

Originally, the X-men and their fellow mutants in the Marvel universe were intended to mirror the experience of ethnic minorities, and later they became the ultimate playground for stories about the changing interplay between the sexes, women’s liberation, and even explorations of the masculine identity (Kaveney 2008: 7, 156). But the similarities between the different types of experience in marginalized or otherwise non-normative identities meant that the X-Men were uniquely suited to step into a new function as metaphors for queerness, just as soon as this particular way of life came to the attention of even the mainstream members of the comic book audience. It is likely that the X-Men titles in particular, and superhero comics in general, were read by some fans as being about LGBTIQ identities even before this tenuous connection became well-established in actual canon (Kaveney 2008: 185). But for years said similarities were being deliberately de-emphasized, and fans were rarely openly encouraged to do these types of subversive readings. This was, in part, due to the need to comply with the Comics Code Authority (CCA) regulations, a system of censorship put in place by the publishing houses themselves, after Frederick Wertham in 1954 published what was effectively the world’s first queer reading of comic book material26, The Seduction of the Innocent, wherein he claimed that comic book heroes such as DC’s Batman were responsible for creating all kinds of pathological sexualities in children and young adults, by prepping them for the gay lifestyle. This perversion of sexual identity in the juvenile individual happened, he claimed, because of an early exposure to images of the (idealized) gay lifestyle as a desirable standard, through images that most people even then found mostly innocent and unremarkable, but that he saw as propaganda for the “wish dream of two homosexuals

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26 Or at the very least the first that was made publicly available.
living together” (Wertham 1954: 190). One example of the type of images that had Wertham up in arms is this following picture, in which it looks like Bruce Wayne (Batman) has been sharing a bed with his ward, Dick Grayson (Robin), though the presence of some very proper pyjama suits, not to mention the established father/son-like relationship, leaves quite a bit of work to be done for someone re-casting this as a rampant homosexual fantasy:

But however much one might be tempted, at least after reading through The Seduction of the Innocent in its entirety, to conclude that the only rampant homosexual lived in Wertham’s own subconscious mind, and that comic books were hardly to blame for the so-called moral descent and sexual liberation of the 1950s youth, the harsh truth is that the CCA had all of the major publishing houses consciously working to avoid accidentally invoking associations to LGBTIQ issues in superhero comic books (though with a somewhat more relaxed stance in the

\[27\] Batman and Robin in bed, in: *Batman #84* (DC Comics 1954)
so-called “adult” sub-labels, such as DC Vertigo, or Marvel MAX, that did not have to comply with the CCA), lest they lose the seal of approval that meant that non-specialized distributors (such as supermarkets and bookstores) could and would sell these comics to their nominal target audiences; kids and young adults.

But along with the increasingly relaxed attitudes towards sexuality in mainstream society, this industry standard started to change over time, in a motion that culminated in the late 1980s/early 90s, with DC Comics taking the first few tentative steps out of the closet, and Marvel Comics close on their heels. By 1991, DC Comics had their first major openly gay (male) character in The Pied Piper, and the final shreds of Wertham’s hold over the industry gave way in 1992, when Marvel Comics’ Alpha Flight member and well known mutant Northstar tore his way out of the closet in a multi-colour splash page, complete with hand traced lettering emphasizing the loudness of his shouted: “I AM GAY!” (Alpha Flight #106, 1992). In fact, not only did these characters help their publishers break the by then largely unwanted hold of the CCA over some of the publishers’ flagship titles. The initial reader responses to these two characters were positive enough that their publishers kept them in circulation, and over time added more queer characters to their mainstream titles. The long-term effects of this newfound authorial freedom was, amongst other things, that it is somewhat a given these days that the X-men, one of Marvel’s flagship superhero teams, is an intended metaphor for queer experience as much as it is one for racism, sexism or even ageism, which is precisely the historical and social context acknowledged by Bryan Singer in X2: X-Men United (2003), through his take on the way non-normative individuals are inevitably faced with the task of “coming out” (more in Chapter 2: “coming out in comics and life).
The queer superhero.

What is particularly interesting about the openly LGBTIQ superheroes is not as much the fact that they are present at all (in 2012, it would be more noticeable if they were still largely absent), as it is the way they are portrayed. In their 2009 book, *From 'Ambiguously Gay Duos' to Homosexual Superheroes*, Gareth Schott and Gemma Corin distinguish between two types of queer superheroes: those who are queer (meaning that this quality is used by their writers as a primary signifier of their identity, and remains the pivotal point of their portrayal), and those who happen to be queer (Schott 2009: 13). This may seem like a fairly straightforward distinction, but it is also one of immense relevance. There are miles of difference between the way a character like Northstar was turned into a flagship character in storylines tailored to draw attention to Marvel's LGBTIQ-friendly politics post-CCA, and the way a character like Mystique after 34 years of continuous publication continues to slide under the radar, as what is by now arguably one of the most well-established trans characters in modern day on-going storytelling. That is not to say that any one way of handling a queer character is the better option; merely that one is, effectively, subversive, while the other is deliberately overt. The implications of this could easily form the basis for a study in its own right, based on questions such as: which characters hold the greatest appeal as role models for people with LGBTIQ identities, and why? Which type of storytelling has the greatest impact on the way non-queer readers receive and interpret the characters and the messages they impart? But however tempting it is to delve into this particular topic at present, it is not the task at hand; what is important here is merely to keep this division between subversive and overt in mind. When Wertham performed his infamous queer reading of the superhero comic book, he was merely doing what many queer people do almost subconsciously on a daily basis – namely scanning the text for bits and pieces that can, in some way, be taken as representing or mirroring queer
experience. Based on what may be termed the queer skill set, certain readers are naturally performing aspects of a deep reading; the skilled reader can, with the right set of “tools” granted by experience and circumstance, perform a largely automatic dismantling of the layers of the thick (or multi-layered) text, to reveal a meaning that is not immediately obvious to the reader whose skills lies elsewhere (Kaveney 2008: 24-26). This is a major factor in explaining why the Marvel characters Rictor and Shatterstar would regularly crop up on fan-made lists of LGBTIQ superheroes for years before they were outed in the official canon, and even had fan-sites dedicated to group efforts of looking for clues in the comics that would support the theory that they were a couple; fans everywhere performed readings of the comics that made it seem obvious to them that the two characters were romantically involved, and in return, Marvel eventually decided to make their relationship canon – likely in part based on the increasing number of “are-they-or-aren’t-they” questions asked by fans in online fora, at conventions, and in letter columns. This recognition of fannish wishes is not altogether surprising, since the interaction between fans (and sometimes original creators) in comic books is probably one of the most established such links in mainstream culture, in terms of official recognition from the creators as well as in terms of sheer permanency. This particular kind of interaction has, after all, been a constant since the first comic book letter column appeared in Target Comics #6 (Novelty Press) in 1940, and it continued to gain

28 Shattering the Earth was probably the most famous example, though the page was dismantled not long after the relationship became canon, as the moderators of the site found that it was no longer needed, and too expensive to maintain for nostalgic purposes. References to the page can still be found scattered around the internet (Melrose, 2007) and a full back-up copy of the original site as it was just prior to being dismantled in November 2010 exists (with the moderators’ permission) in my possession; I have included prints of two pages (“appearances” and “pairing”) in appendix 3 (a + b) for reference. The internet is, unfortunately, at once the best archive of fan interaction in popular culture and the most fickle, since many sites disappear completely once the people running them withdraw from the fan-based communities.
momentum until it truly hit its stride in the 1960s and 70s, though the less constricted rapid-response communication made possible by e-mail and online foras means that the in-issue letter column is, perhaps inevitably, on its way out of mainstream comics (Stuver 2002). The letter column officially disappeared completely from DC publications as of 2002, only to be tentatively reintroduced over the last few years, in various DC titles such as *Fables* – and currently they appear to have disappeared again, no explanation given (Hare 2012).

But while the queer aspects of the text became overt, the fan communities dedicated to subtextual readings dwindled in corresponding measures. When the references that a dedicated fan or reader may pick up on move from the realm of hints and into the upper layer of the text, the meaning they impart are presented directly to the reader in an easy-to-digest way, rather than as part of a thick text “whose contingent, collective and polysemous nature renders them especially satisfying” (Kaveney 2008: 203), resulting from, and in turn requiring the presence of, Kaveney’s competence cascades to fully grasp. Umberto Eco states (in a clarification of his previous work on the interpretation as an open-ended happening or negotiation between formal author, intended vs. actual recipient, and the open text) that:

[... ] every act of reading is a difficult transaction between the competence of the reader (the reader’s world knowledge) and the kind of competence that a given texts postulates in order to be read in an economic way.

(Eco 1996)
In a sense, the upper (overt) layers of a text are somewhat “locked” into this economy of reading, allowing a narrowed scope of potential interpretations as set down by the limitations established within the text itself, while that which is unsaid or unspecified leaves the reader in a better bargaining position, when it comes to inferring meaning in a text through this transaction guided by levels of relative competence. At least insofar as the text have a trustworthy narrator, that is, but the multiple voices in most comic book issues (not just multiple characters, but literally multiple storytellers; writers, artists, editors, and sometimes fans themselves), as well as the outside point of view usually enforced by the use of a media that relies so heavily on a visual type of storytelling, have meant that many mainstream comic books utilize a strategy that depends on lying to the reader only through omissions, ensuring an at least nominally trustworthy dominant voice. In effect this means that as long as a character is neither confirmed nor denied as (e.g.) a gay character, there is room in the text for the fans to speculate, and even form communities based on corresponding conclusions to their deep readings – but if ever someone working for Marvel Comics decides to go through with a storyline in which Mystique definitively declares herself to be born female, or to be solely female-identified, the seemingly limitless potential for interpretation within the text, and thus several different possible points of shared experience and identification between her and the reader, would be culled. Mystique would no longer potentially represent the MtF\textsuperscript{29} trans experience, the genderfluid experience, or the cis-male bisexual experience, to name but

\textsuperscript{29}MtF, or “Male to Female” transgender person. MtF and its sister term, FtM – Female to Male - are commonly used to clarify the dynamics of transition in a trans person’s life, to avoid the confusion some people might feel when confronted with a trans person, such as how to respond to his/her current gender performance. The most common confusion is often based in the transitional nature of the trans experience, and so many people flounder when trying to find and use the correct gender-related terms in conversation; basically FtM/MtF is a way of helping the observer find a linguistic standpoint when trying to figure out if they are supposed to use the gender specific pronoun for the gender their eyes are seeing because the person in front
a few. So, when a character like Northstar is, in some ways, more gay than he is a superhero (to use Schott and Corin's terminology (Schott 2009: 13)), the text is locking around him, making him less representative for the wider LGBTIQ experience rather than more; he becomes a flagship symbolizing the willing inclusion of queer identities and ideals into (in this particular case) Marvel's universe, but he himself is greatly reduced when it comes down to what he can invoke and carry off in terms of reader identification and/or recognition of comparable real life experiences. In the worst case scenario, he becomes little more than a tired stereotype as an ever growing succession of writers take the easy way out when it comes to imbuing the text with the kind of qualities readers will recognize and accept as an expression of competence; if he is gay, that trait can be enforced by having him act according to contemporary cultural expectations (in this specific case: vain, catty and “feminine”, according to Schott and Corin (Schott 2009: 27) without having to venture into the unknowns wilds of describing what could actually be said to be meaningful in terms of sexual identity, such as romantic feelings or specific sexual acts. In the world of mainstream comic books, breaking the taboo of dealing with the unruly body and the way it challenges the heteronormative hegemony is a particularly daunting task, even post-CCA, since the comic book industry is steeped in the ever present awareness that a bad audience reaction can have a devastating effect on the long term sales figures of an entire title; this is a business in which the (dis)pleasure of the audience hangs like the sword of Damocles over the heads of writers and editors alike. Which goes a long way towards explaining the often less-than-nuanced characters that embody the essence of what editors believe to be an overt statement that is still immediately acceptable to a mainstream audience. The characters who display the qualities of what genderqueer activists such as Leslie Feinberg or Kate Bornstein refer to as...
the real warriors, outlaws and rebels\textsuperscript{30} of the non-governable queer (or othered) identity, are most fully realized in the sub-levels of the text, and their messages are so subtle as to sneak by a reader whose competence lies elsewhere.

The direct representation of queer identities in comic books.

These days, there is no real shortage of queer superheroes, at least if the reader is willing to take their queer credentials at face value. Entire online communities are dedicated to the sole purpose of ferreting out these heroes, and compiling lists of characters that in any way appear to be relevant to the LGBTIQ community as a whole, whether based on their apparent gender, their sexuality, or something completely different, such as speculations about relationships portrayed as unusually intense at the emotional level – it was not unusual to find characters such as Rictor and Shatterstar included and debated on such lists, even prior to their being outed in 2009. The Queersupe website has one of the most comprehensive lists of LGBTIQ characters in comic books, titled the \textit{A-Z LGBT Character Superlist – an alphabetized listing of over 300 LGBT characters from comic books (including superheroes, supervillains and supporting cast characters)} (Fanboi 2009). The list is organized into four distinct categories: lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender, and allows for a relatively easy browsing experience, but the most astounding aspect of the list is the sheer volume of characters on it, many of

\textsuperscript{30} Widely adopted into everyday use by the genderqueer movement, these terms are used to define the non-cisgendered activist identity and history, most notably in two works of non-fiction: Kate Bornstein’s post-gender book, \textit{Gender Outlaw – on Men, Women, and the Rest of Us} (Routledge, 1994), and Leslie Feinberg’s \textit{Transgender Warriors: Making History from Joan of Arc to Dennis Rodman} (Beacon Press, 1996).
whom are highly recognizable characters from well known publishing houses. What this (and in fact most lists like it) lacks is a basic system of ranking these characters based on visibility and/or coherence of queer performance – for any reader starting out on the journey of exploring the LGBTIQ world of superheroes, it is almost impossible to get a good idea of how these characters and their non-heteronormative features are played out. There is a world of difference between, say, Northstar and his never-shown-on-panel theoretical sexual activities, and someone like Wanda, the MtF character whose gender identity plays a pivotal role in Neil Gaiman’s 1991/2 Sandman comic book story arc “A Game of You” (DC Vertigo).

Over the years, Marvel has faced quite a lot of abuse from readers who were less than happy with the fact that their flagship gay character, Northstar, was literally never show as being physically affectionate with another man. In fact, his sexuality was showcased as being a relatively big deal in that one issue where he came out, and then it was basically shoved back into the closet even if he was not; Northstar is apparently living the single life forever, and if on-panel activity is anything to go by, he is also largely celibate. Presumably, he is to busy saving the world to engage in one-night stands. On the plus side, he gets to hang out with his female teammates a lot, sipping drinks and exchanging catty banter, while nursing his one-sided crush on fellow mutant Iceman. This goes a long way towards explaining exactly why it was such a major happening when Rictor and Shatterstar got an on-panel kiss when they came out. While queer characters are not unheard of, actual portrayal of physical affection between same-gendered characters is close to non-existent in mainstream comic books (though titles from adult imprints such as DC Wildstorm, DC Vertigo, and Marvel MAX are

31 The incarnation of Northstar in The Ultimate X-Men, Marvel’s non-interconnected alternate universe re-imagining of the pre-existing canon, has been dating (Ultimate) Colossus, however, so there is still some hope for the original Northstar.
somewhat more likely to portray this type of physical intimacy, these books are specialized
titles that can hardly be considered mainstream). And Marvel is treading dangerous waters
these days. In their mini-series *Young Avengers* (comprised of 13 issues, published 2005-
2006), teenaged couple Wiccan (Billy Kaplan) and Hulkling (Teddy Altman) were in a
confirmed relationship, but were never shown displaying any kind of physical affection
towards one another, and it remains unclear whether this was a decision based on the fact
that both characters were minors, or simply a continuation of the (by now infamous) Marvel
reluctance when it comes to overtly showcasing non-heterosexual intimacy.

Even when these mastodontic publishers do attempt to develop believable relationships
between same-gendered or genderfluid characters, they often end up walking a fine line
between showing true acceptance by including LGBTIQ characters, and simply reinforcing
stereotype by parroting common assumptions about LGBTIQ life in general. While it is
perfectly acceptable to be a catty, gossip-loving, fashion-obsessed gay man with more female
than male friends, it is also a stereotype that can be very difficult to overcome for any gay man
attempting to come out without being labelled (as anything other than a man who prefers to
perform non-specified acts of physical intimacy with other men), since it is constantly
reinforced in mainstream media. As such, it is problematic that this is *exactly* the route Marvel
chose to go with their first major player on the gay scene, Northstar. And while the new and
revamped DC flagship character Batwoman (Katherine Kane) was a welcome addition to the
ranks of lesbian superheroes when she arrived on the scene in 2006, it is interesting to note
that her relationship with Renee Montoya (who went on to take up the mantle of the
Question) was distinctly mired in the stereotypical butch/femme dynamic;
Again, this particular interpersonal dynamic is as perfectly valid a part of personal lifestyle as any other, but it is also, one cannot help but feel, the easy way out for the writers, who, in lieu of doing actual research on the subject, will not have to look any further than to the well-established “truths” told and re-told by their heteronormative contemporaries, playing into a feedback loop that has little or nothing to do with the reality of a majority of actual LGBTIQ lives. What may be the reality for some, but certainly not all, LGBTIQ individuals are elevated to a form of apparent queer-normativity; gay men display traditionally feminine traits, a

32 Katherine Kane and Renee Montoya (52 #7, 2006)

The dialogue reads:

Montoya (thoughts): “...by which time it’s far too late for me to do anything but stare.

Kane: “I trust you’ll be searching me first?”

Montoya: “If you insist...”

Montoya (thoughts): “Pictures never do her justice.”
lesbian relationship cannot exist without someone playing the part of substitute man, and in the case of the long-underway romance between Marvel characters Rictor and Shatterstar, the current portrayal of their relationship plays heavily on the all-too-common assumption that bisexuals neither can nor will settle down in a committed monogamous relationship (since this means limiting themselves to only one gender at a time) with the character Shatterstar cast as the stereotypical bisexual.

There is something deeply incongruous about the fact that powerhouses like Marvel and DC will gladly pair up heterosexual, cisgendered characters with almost anything even vaguely humanoid, and with a number of varying relationship dynamics, but seem reluctant or unable to allow their queer characters access to a wider range of expression. In DC continuity, Supergirl has been romantically paired with her telepathic, flying horse (though, since he was briefly inhabiting a human form at the time, and did not tell her that he was, in fact, her horse, the relationship is at once the embodiment of innocent dreams of teenaged girls everywhere, and deeply uncanny). At one point, Marvel character Invisible Girl (later Invisible Woman) left her husband Mr. Fantastic and carried out a brief fling with her old flame, the merman superhero known as Namor the Sub-Mariner. A brief examination of the romantic and/or sexual liaisons of both DC and Marvel characters show that both publishing houses gladly portray heterosexual relationships between human and: aliens, merfolk, cyborgs, hyperintelligent clouds of cosmic gas, were-creatures, mutants with physical manifestations that render them decidedly monstrous, and in a few obscure cases even intelligent animals. They date, get married, break up, have feelings for several people at once (one obvious example is the Wolverine/Jean Grey/Cyclops love triangle elevated to iconic status by the X-Men movies trilogy), enjoy seemingly endless strings of one-night stands (Ironman is a good example of this, particularly as he is portrayed in the 2008 Marvel/Paramount Pictures movie
of the same name), or decide to forgo relationships entirely. And still, these powerhouses shy away from depicting simple homoerotic relationships with any degree of real depth or diversity, lest they deviate from what basically amounts to a completely arbitrary concept of what is acceptable behaviour for a queer individual in mainstream society.

However frustrating this disparity may be to the observant reader, its presence is also understandable. The publishing houses are constantly navigating a tricky path when it comes to minority and/or non-normative characters, be it characters of colour, non-Christian characters, LGBTIQ characters, or even disabled characters – not that there are many of those. While any storyteller (authors, directors of popular TV shows, or artists, to name a few) runs the risk of invoking the anger of fans everywhere if they develop a character in a direction that runs contrary to the expectations and desires of their audience, no other type of storytelling has ever cultivated a quite so intense relationship between readers and the group of people bringing them their stories. Letter columns, and later online chat rooms run by the publishing companies themselves, function as a direct feedback channel for the editors of a title, and have served as a starting point for the development of a series of conscious strategies in which fan participation has a more direct impact. In 1988, readers of the DC title Batman could call a hotline to register their vote on whether or not the most recent incarnation of Robin, a superhero sidekick whose costume have been filled by a number of characters over the years, should live or die. This move was mirrored by the NBC TV series Heroes in 2008, when the NBC.com website started running an online poll called Create Your Hero that handed over at least some control over the creation of new characters introduced in

33 “A Death in the Family” (Batman #426-426, December 1988-January 1989, DC Comics). More than 10,000 votes were called in; the figures made publicly available by the then DC editor Dennis O’Neil states that 5,343 votes were cast to kill off the character, while 5,271 voted in favour of his survival.
the series (and its spin-off titles, such as the web series *Heroes Destiny*) to the viewers, by taking into account votes cast in the polls regarding certain specifics in the character’s composition, such as gender, race, age, powers, and personality (though, of course, there were few to none options for viewers with a desire to see character with qualities such as “gender: other”, “sexuality: not straight”, let alone “dis/ability: mental or physical impairment”). But, simply put, there are always an abundance of pitfalls awaiting the writer who employs non-normative characters, and more so for any writer that is not directly engaged with the subculture that usually grows up around a grouping of specifically queer individuals. Writers like Chris Claremont (creator of Mystique) and Neil Gaiman (who created Wanda) provide prime examples of just how beautiful non-normative (specifically trans) characters can be, if handled properly, and even they have faced their share of abuse from fans and critics alike. In an official introduction to the collected edition of “A Game of You”, Samuel R. Delaney lamented that Wanda as a character was used to enforce stereotypical gender roles in fantasy (Delaney 1993). On the other hand, David Bratman, author of the critical essay “A Game of You – Yes, You” in *The Sandman Papers – an exploration of the Sandman mythology*, (2006) goes so far as to re-cast Wanda as the true main character in the story, since he sees her as essentially the most powerful, well-rounded character in the entire series (Bratman 2006: 48). If nothing else, it is rare to find a character that can invoke such forceful oppositional points of view, and dealing with these levels of emotional intensity in a fan-base is certainly not desirable for the creator (and publisher) who is more focused on the immediate marketability of a character and title, than on taking a stand on controversial contemporary issues such as transgenderism or queer ethics.
From innocent to subversive?

How censorship allowed othered characters to flourish in comic books.

Northstar, Xavin, Batwoman, Wanda, and other characters like them have queer semiotics wrapped around their very core – in some ways, it is a primary signifier of their identities, and a remarkably overt one at that. And multiple works deal with this type of queer readings of the upper layers of comic books, in a tradition that started with Wertham's anti-queer rhetorics in Seduction of the Innocent in 1954, and that has so far culminated in pro-LGBTIQ works, ranging from academic papers such as From Ambiguously Gay Duos to Homosexual Superheroes (Schott 2009) to photographer Terry Richardson's punk art reinterpretations of Batman and Robin as objects of (mutual) desire (Richardson 2008: 65-68). But when I propose the idea that non-normative behaviour that is not overt, and that is possibly not even consciously put in the upper textual layers in a comic book by the creators, can affect the way a reader (even one who does not consciously focus on extracting these layers) approach the world in general, there is a bit of legwork to be done to back up this claim. The idea of the comic book as a medium for subversive messages is hardly a new one, and even if the superhero genre did not take this approach deliberately before Wertham (something that is still open to debate), the playful attempts to sneak things under the CCA’s radar since the mid-fifties have certainly meant that comic books have become a media of subversion. When Mystique managed to saunter by the CCA officials in all her naked glory or when Batman/Bruce Wayne developed a split personality due to PTSD, and attempted to

34 Even when appearing dressed, Mystique is usually naked, something the avid fan will eventually pick up on though it is not obvious as such; see Chapter 3: “The (naked) hero: liberated and heroic or fetishized and outcast?” for more on this.
assassinate himself in the 1980 three-issue miniseries *The Untold Legend of the Batman*, serious contemporary issues such as gender identity or the pathological compartmentalization of personal experience in traumatized individuals (e.g. war veterans) were dressed up in child friendly finery and brought into living rooms all over the U.S.

What made Wertham and his peers so set on minimizing or obliterating these messages and questions in the first place was, of course, the belief that they could affect impressionable (young) readers, and lead them to adopt a non-normative (and thus, at least in Wertham's arguably somewhat skewed view, pathological) set of moral standards. The obvious issue of content here is not whether or not he, and others like him, were right in supposing that non-normative equals morally questionable (which is largely a question of historical context and semiotics), but whether or not he was right in presuming that the presence of said content might have a (detrimental) effect in the first case, and whether the resulting move from overt imagery to subversive textual layering eliminated or enhanced said “threat”. When DC Comics’ Abigail “Ma” Hunkel openly cross-dressed in order to fight crime as the male superhero Red Tornado in the 1940s, the message was not only that (some forms of) cross-dressing was acceptable, but that readers (and in the relevant cases their guardians) knew what they were in for, and were welcome to vote for the title’s continued survival with their feet, so to say – by not buying comics with a content they found objectionable, or could not relate to. But once the non-normative subset was forced to go undercover by the CCA, this transparency of content was lost; Wertham would likely have rolled over in his grave if he realized that his attempts to shelter America’s youth meant that even readers who would have objected to a character like Red Tornado ended up exposed to the far more subversive Mystique, for however long it might have taken them to realize her exact nature on their own. But can this continued exposure to a non-normative expression of (e.g.) gender actually affect the reader
long-term? Being queer has, after all, never been proven to be a communicable disease, and neither has being black, a feminist, an atheist, disabled (well, in most cases), or any other of the innumerable othered identities encountered in comic books. If superhero comic books foster any kind of change in the identity of the reader, it is likely through emphasizing tolerance over exclusion, and by aiding identification through familiarity, rather than alienating readers from a character from the get-go. Personally, at least, I have never seen a LGBTIQ-friendly comic book pushing for flat-out conversion to the dark side of queer morality, so for now we will leave Wertham and his fears behind.

**Neuroplasticity, cognition and constructivism.**

**Why comic book readers make for a receptive audience.**

In terms of human identity as affected by normative vs. subversive inputs, there are two significant epistemological tracks in humanities research: cognition and constructivism. Cognition is the basis for the search for the universally essential, the normative, the stable, and the similar, whereas constructivism is far better suited to the exploration of the world through that which is contingent, non-normative, changeable/instable and varied. Neurophilosophy and semiotics are examples of fields within humanities research that rely heavily on cognition and the idea of the absolute, while the ideas of performativity (which is of major importance in queer- and disability studies) and the malleability of social experience and personal identity are based on a constructivist point of view, which carries with it a rejection of the possibility (and necessity) to achieve and maintain perfect objectivity and absolute knowledge, since the very tools we, as researchers, have are a part of the condition we are
trying to understand; language, concepts, and pre-existing “knowledge”. Post-structuralist philosopher and feminist theorist Judith Butler summed up this reluctance to trust the idea of the perfectly stable and normative identity in her book, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990), when she stated that “Identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Butler 1990: 25). Cordelia Fine, neuropsychologist and author of the book *Delusions of Gender* (2010) takes this one step further, when she challenges neuroscience (and in extension cognition) on its own terms, and points out that you cannot infer causality from differences (or similarities) in (e.g.) basic biology; while there may appear to be basic pre-existing differences in brain structure of males and females (or Anglo American and African Americans, or homosexuals and heterosexuals, etc.), the degree of which is still not fully determined, and likely will not be with only the current technology at our disposal, drawing conclusions as to how this translates in terms of personal expression and experience is optimistic at best – and fraudulent at worst. Rather, she claims, gender and identity should be approached as the somewhat fluid and malleable result of social and cultural conditioning, the application of which is enforced based on visible variations in the human body. An approach that ultimately attempts to reconcile the cognitive and constructivist stances through the presence of neuroplasticity, resulting in the basic idea that the human brain’s ability to form new neural connections is affected (or steered) by experience, essentially re-wiring the brain (though possibly in a limited number of ways as determined by biology) – meaning that the brain becomes a cultural product that reflects and reacts to human experience, rather than determines it absolutely (Fine 2011: 239). So: you cannot infer causality from correlation, but it is not a stretch to link cause and action in terms of cultural input vs. individual reaction, and to work from the assumption that personal strategies of social interaction and cultural identification are formed, and sometimes rejected, not based in some universal human condition, but as the products of the intersection between ever-changing surroundings and the strategies carried over from previous encounters of a
similar nature. We still have no idea if people are truly born somehow predisposed to identifying as straight/gay/bi/cisgendered or trans, or if it is solely a matter of cultural inputs, but if comic books are an important part of someone’s everyday environment, superheroes are certainly in the right position to inflict a bit of (re-)wiring when it comes to the reader accepting (or even mimicking) certain non-normative performances of sexuality or gendered identity in real life.

**Status, consumption, and conformity.**

*Communal strategies of identity in othered individuals.*

Biological neuroplasticity indicates that even the smallest input can have a profound effect on personal identity and expression, especially if it is enforced through repetition or circumstance – a basic premise in contemporary neuroscience. While this link between brain function and culture is still in its infancy in terms of hardcore research (conclusive brain scans, for instance) it goes a long way towards explaining the theory of status relations, and the power structures surrounding it, as set down by Murray Milner, Jr., in his 2004 book: *Freaks, Geeks and Cool Kids – American teenagers, schools, and the culture of consumption*. In this work, he explores interpersonal status as something composed of, and controlled by, four basic elements: conformity to the norm, associations with people of similar (or higher) status, the idea of status as being located in the minds of others, not as something inherent in the individual mind, and finally the idea of status as a self-regulating mechanism that responds to inflation by changing the nature of that which is seen as desirable and exclusive (Milner 2006: 30-33). While Butler explores the link between gender and power, and Fine explores the
relationship between (Western) cultural gender identity and peer relations, Milner goes one step further and steps outside of the interpersonal relationship and the ideal of gender conformity, to take a closer look at the way a culture based in consumption works to (literally) shape personal identity. Status in the eyes of peers can bestow an individual with power, just like the ability to wield force, or controlling the availability of goods can; in a society where a majority of people are not self-sufficient, are not producers rather than consumers, and are not free to use brute force at will to control their peers, status becomes the most readily available basis for personal power. The idea of the norm is the very cornerstone of the theory of status relations; to be non-normative (queer, disabled, coloured, or even female) means a limited access to people of higher status, being vulnerable to the judgment and sanctions of those higher in the social pecking order, and (perhaps even more frustratingly) by being a part of the self-referential system in which some people assert their higher status (and thus power) through the very existence of people that are somehow “less than”, based on said normative ideals – as set down by those already in power.

Superhero comic books and their by-products (films, toys, apparel, etc.) are, in many ways, the epitome of products born out of the American consumer culture. In 1941-2, a time where less than 10,000 American households had television sets (Genova 2001), a single monthly issue of DC’s Superman sold 1.250,000 issues, while the 100 major comics book titles in publication in total sold more than 12,500,000 copies a month (Gordon 1998: 132); a conservative estimate would be that each individual comic book was swapped and read by at least three people, with comic book historian Ian Gordon stating that “By the mid-1940’s more than 90 percent of children aged six to eleven across the country read an average of fifteen comic books a month” (Gordon 1998: 132). While the sale of monthly issues have dwindled in recent years, with sales figures of about 20,000 sold copies being a good result for most titles and
even the top-sellers usually staying just shy of 100,000 (Johnson 2007: 65), the consumption of by-products such as collected editions sold as trade paperbacks, tie-in novels, movies, TV series etc. means that the superhero “comic book” as a genre is still going strong on the mainstream market, even as the production and distribution of individual comic book issues mainly depends on hardcore fans to ensure that the publishers break even. With this in mind, applying the idea that certain products can enhance, bolster, or lower the status of an individual becomes supremely interesting; the product as cultural capital is the starting point, the goal, and the means to get there for modern day superhero comic book publishers. And very few types of products carry within them quite as disparate associations as those belonging to the superhero genre, at least once this transcends the media of the actual booklet. We have already talked about the outcast status of the conventional geek, but comic books have also provided family-friendly camp entertainment (such as the iconic Batman TV series that ran on the ABC network in 1966-68), glossy Hollywood blockbuster action movies that reach a wide mainstream audience as well as a supremely geeky subset of pre-existing fans, and literary award winning graphic novels such as Art Spiegelman’s Maus (Pantheon Books, 1980-1991) or Neil Gaiman’s The Sandman: Dream Country - A Midsummer Night's Dream (DC Vertigo, 1990). Superheroes are used as brands on everything from lunch boxes and shoes to biscuits and toothpaste, marketed directly to children and often feeding on the nostalgia of parents who grew up with said heroes. And the mechanisms surrounding the consumption of said items are highly intertwined with the distribution and regulation of status. For a child, a Batman lunch box might earn her quite a bit of respect from her peers, but sooner or later it becomes a liability to status for one of two reasons: the hero may decline in popularity over time, leaving the lunch box outdated, or the child enters puberty, where the association between comic books and childishness may kick in, forcing the child to choose between a favoured lunch box and peer acceptance. Likewise, going to the movies to see the new Avengers movie is perfectly acceptable for a teenager, but going dressed up as Iron Man
might not be. And reading superhero comic books is fine if you are a child, but for an adult, reading comic books, (or displaying overly enthusiastic fannish behaviour at least) is often seen as uncanny and non-normative behaviour, and as such something that decreases the status of an individual by association, when viewed in the context of American mainstream culture. Yet even this is changing over time. Contemporary TV series such as the CBS sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, whose four main (male) characters are classic geeks, both reinforce this link between comic book fandom and social awkwardness, and debunk it, in that the characters are all highly intelligent, and imminently likeable despite an approach to social interactions that is anything but normative; their in-group interactions are shown as valid and well-thought out social strategies that form a viable alternative to the mainstream approach. In a rather amusing nod to the trope of the fanboy-creator, they are also the perfect incarnations of the competence cascade, in that their productivity is aided, rather than hindered, by their ability to draw on multiple references to comic books/computer games/movies etc.

The counter-cultures of fandom are beginning to inch their way into mainstream awareness, and more than that, are beginning to be accepted as a part of the contemporary cultural landscape despite a rocky start, in the case of comic book fans as consumers of cheap and disposable pulp entertainment for kids and misfits. Because despite all manners of sanctions, whether set down by Wertham, the CCA, or higher status peers, adults make up a primary target audience for many comic book titles. There could be several primary reasons for this: the reader might be in what Milner calls a pluralistic social environment (Milner 2006: 100-101), in which there are no immediate sanctions for certain types of non-normative behaviour. The reader might be a part of a cohesive group of individuals, in which reading comics are not associated with a loss of status – inherently non-normative individuals such as Milner’s geeks and freaks, or queer/disabled/non-Anglo American/etc. people, will often form
communities in which in-group status is obtained through othered modes of behaviour (Milner 2006: 28), dress or consumption, and which attempt to remain self-contained in terms of collective vulnerability to social sanctions originating outside of the group; the boys of *The Big Bang Theory* form one example of this type of self-contained group, based in certain non-neurotypical traits (of personality) that leaves them effectively disabled by society. Finally, reading comic books might simply be worth the risk; the ability of superheroes to invoke feelings, mirror contemporary social issues, and provide non-normative role models could well be worth the slightly outcast or suspect status to some individuals, since they may help develop and bolster a viable strategy of personal performative identity. How many other genres of entertainment have an abundance of seriously kick-ass women, a veritable plethora of non-cisgendered characters, intense, on-going debates about personal responsibility in contemporary society for those gifted, wealthy, or powerful, and are almost guaranteed to provide long-term entertainment that surpasses the staying power of most popular TV series? In sheer volume, very few types of narratives can compete with the comic book; while she may be exaggerating (I must honestly confess that I have no intention of doing an actual page count of the respective bodies of texts to confirm this statement) Kaveney points out that “by now these two [the Marvel and DC] continuities [are] the largest narrative constructions in human culture (exceeding, for example, the vast body of myth, legend and story that underlies Latin and Greek literature)”35 (Kaveney 2008: 25).

Furthermore, superhero comic books are tailored to invoke a recognition of the social mechanisms surrounding social status, power, and personal autonomy, though some are more so than others. Michail Lyubansky writes, in his 2008 essay “Prejudice Lessons from the

35 Brackets added for clarification.
Xavier Institute” (in The Psychology of Superheroes – an unauthorized exploration), that “at their soul, the X-Men are less about superpowers and more about human tendencies to fear and hate those who are different, and the various ways we deal with such tendencies” (Lyubansky 2008: 76). For someone whose experience of life is already a marginalized one, due to e.g. sexual identity, the fact that comics books are not only rich in characters expressing themselves through more or less overt non-normative performances of identity, but are, in fact, looking directly at the way both individuals and entire communities deal with their outcast status, means that comic books provide a sort of training guide to real life, a step-by-step manual to dealing with the forms of prejudice and sanctions one might encounter when navigating mainstream society as a non-normative individual. And since the characters that most clearly experience this sense of marginalization and convey it directly to the reader are almost\(^\text{36}\) invariably the heroes (the hated and feared X-Men, Batman in his long-suffering Bruce Wayne persona, or the literally alien Superman), a very basic message in comic books is cantered around the validity of the non-normative identity, the strength of the individual even when rendered powerless and low-status in society, and the validity of the personal narrative in the face of public persecution.

\(^{36}\) Though only almost, since a character such as the demon-summoning mafia hit man Jackie Estacado (the protagonist of TopCow’s The Darkness) could hardly be called a hero in the traditional sense. Yet even he is essentially queer (enforced asexual lifestyle), disabled (being demon-adjacent at all times is not all that it is cracked up to be, and might literally kill your social life), has a very strong sense of (non-white) ethnic identity, and is remarkably likeable; the entire series revolves around his attempts to find and maintain his own moral code despite being at odds with the rest of society through both birth (his demon-summoning powers are inherited) and cultural upbringing (adopted by a mafia Don, he was raised to become the number one enforcer in a crime syndicate).
Chapter 2.

Coming out in comics and life.

Strategies of acknowledging otherness – queer, crip or mutant.

Have you ever tried not being a mutant? [...] We still love you, Bobby. It’s just that this mutant problem is a little complicated. [...] This is all my fault.


This conversation between Iceman and his mother is, of course, a take on the most classic of American coming out stories, with the word gay (or trans) replaced by “mutant”, and it is obvious enough to be recognizable as such even by people who have never stood in this specific situation themselves (on either side of the equation). The director of X2: X-Men United, Bryan Singer, is himself an openly gay man, which is one reason why it makes perfect sense that he could hardly resist the chance to spell out the similarities between mutant and queer experiences, by adding a by-the-book “coming out” narrative to what was already a story about searching for (and finding) acceptance and a sense of belonging in a community made up of other outcasts. Singer distilled the emotional truth of the mutant experience into the sense of being othered, and then translated this into the familiar language of the LGBTIQ “coming out” story, and as a strategy for creating a sense of understanding of, and familiarity with, the mutant experience, this turned out to be immensely successful. So much so, in fact, that when the official comic book adaptation of the movie came out (also in 2003), the entire
scene\textsuperscript{37} was cut down to one frame, in which Madeline Drake is seen asking her son: “Have you ever tried ... not being a mutant?” (Austen 2003). By making it back into the comic book adaptation\textsuperscript{38}, the single moment in the entire movie that most closely mirrored queer experience was doubly highlighted as the most important pivotal point for defining the characters and their interactions in this particular sequence, and an important factor in maintaining the overall emotional truth of the story as a whole.

But while this scene was arguably the first that spelled out the similarities between mutant and queer experiences in such uncertain terms, the coming out narrative has been played out more discreetly any number of times in comic books, with a number of twists. The superheroine with her secret identity, or the mutant with his secret powers, are characters steeped in otherness, and as such large portions of their stories are dedicated to the continuing process of embodying an identity that is defined primarily in terms of being opposite (and sometimes exaggerated or lacking) when compared to the standards of the heteronormative matrix. Interwoven with this exploration of identity as defined by what it is \textit{not}, lies the careful examination of what this entails on the practical level in terms of the

\textsuperscript{37} In the movie-\textit{version} of the scene, Bobby came out as a mutant and demonstrated his powers to his family, his parents found out that he was attending an all-mutant school without their knowledge, and Iceman’s classmate and fellow mutant Pyro detailed the hereditary nature of the X-gene using pro-mutant rhetorics, to the by then rather shell-shocked suburban family.

\textsuperscript{38} Though not particularly relevant in this particular discussion, it is an interesting fact that the movie itself, and the two major adaptations (the novelization, and the comic book) all have slightly different endings – a decision that was made to ensure that the “real” ending (in the movie) was still somewhat secret until the premiere, and as a fan-service to ensure that the individual stories were not unnecessarily spoiled (or deemed too repetitious and unsatisfying) for the die-hard fans most likely to fork out the cash needed to pick up all three versions.
pressure to reveal, explain, defend, and/or keep secret said otherness, depending on the situation and the people involved. When Batman recreated Bruce Wayne as a foppish playboy, a smokescreen for his true identity as a vigilante loner, he was creating his very own closet identity. When Wertham picked up on the intense and self-contained nature of the relationship between Batman and Robin (or their civilian alter egos, Bruce and Dick), he was not merely (over)reacting to the implications of a few scenes depicting an apparently shared bedroom, but to the way the characters cohabited an intimate and intensely private world, in which only a handful of people, themselves included, had a full knowledge of their private lives and identities. Northstar, on the other hand, is a part of a team of super-powered individuals whose identities are, to some extent, available to the general public – and so is his sexuality, if not the actual details of his private life. As such, he is vulnerable to slander and prejudice, he presents a direct target for disgruntled villains, and he does not have the luxury of anonymity in his private life that Bruce Wayne affords Batman; on the other hand, he does not have to maintain a carefully crafted lie that effectively compartmentalizes his life into the separate areas of public vs. private performances of identity.

In queer theory, the coming out narrative is generally accepted as a defining factor in queer life and identity, and with good cause. As an experience, coming out (and its less benevolent sister, “being outed”) function as endlessly defining markers for queerness; not only is it (to varying degrees) universally shared, but it remains a perpetually on-going process that will shape the lives and actions of any queer individual. There is no escaping the importance of it – even to avoid being “out” means making a conscious decision to stay “in”, something that for most people will require substantial on-going efforts such as the constant search for gender neutral expressions when describing a date to colleagues (if not outright lying), or simply rigidly sectioning off specifically queer life experiences from the portions of life one shares
with the heteronormative majority of one's peers. The act of outing is a shared experience, a point of similarity in otherwise different lives, but the specifics of it are varied and intensely personal, which leaves the instance itself largely meaningless when it comes to consolidating a communal queer identity. What makes coming out important is the way the experience is translated into a personal narrative that can be shared with a group in the first place. Basically:

- Being outed by someone else (accidentally or intentionally) is in itself defining only in that it leads to other circumstances, specifically in terms of acceptance or discrimination.

- Coming out is a conscious decision to challenge the status quo, for any number of reasons, but is again only defining in that it sets in motion a slightly more controlled change of social environment for the person coming out.

- *Telling* the story of coming out, however, is a wildly different story. Any visit to a LGBTIQ themed group (whether it is the local high school gay/straight alliance group, a political fundraising gala hosted by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), or a night at your local BDSM themed bar) will introduce you to one of the most basic forms of social bonding and affirmation in the LGBTIQ communities; the swapping of coming out stories (Schott 2009: 23).

This is important because it is, at the most basic level, the only thing that a majority of queer individuals have in common – the coming out, the planning of it, or the fear of it are universal, whether someone is homo-/bisexual or genderqueer, is working in the sex industries, or have a thing for porn involving adult diapers, a billy-goat, and seven dwarves in bodypaint. The fear of, and need or desire to, come out on some scale (from telling one, important person to
“burning the closet” for good by letting the entire world know) transcends the temporal and physical reality of any single moment in a person's life, and becomes a direct point of contact between two individuals – the point where their lives match up and intersect. To call coming out a rite of passage would not be incorrect, but it would be oversimplifying things; to become aware of the need to come out (and keep coming out for the rest of one's life) would be the rite of passage, perhaps. But being out, or alternately *knowingly* being in, is not an act signifying an underlying queerness. It is not something that has to be done in order to achieve the right to call oneself queer. Rather, the in/out dynamic *is* queerness, which is, of course, why queer theory is sometimes lovingly defined as studies of otherness. So when Batman/Bruce Wayne is divided into context-specific performances to the degree where it is difficult to pinpoint exactly which persona is more dominant, with Batman almost overwhelmingly, fabulously “out”, and Bruce Wayne deeply closeted and paranoid, he is mirroring a fundamental marker of queerness. Conversely, the X-Men team and its sister teams, such as X-Force and X-Factor, are made up of “Out and Proud” individuals, with a significant part of these characters' storylines and dialogue dedicated to the on-going process of establishing and maintaining a consistently non-normative identity that in turns mesh with and clash against contemporary societal norms.
Strategies of empowerment – when crip and queer intersect.

In *Disability Studies – An Interdisciplinary Introduction*, Goodley describes how the eugenics movement, and in particular the way it was appropriated by the Nazi regime, kicked off what later turned into “disability pride”-based activism, by making clear just how much at a disadvantage people with disabilities and impairments were in the power plays of contemporary Western society, and how dangerous the idea of the normal or average could be when it “located the burden of disability in the unproductive flawed individual” (Goodley 2011: 6). But after a century or so of being viewed mainly in thinly veiled terms of the cost/benefit analysis – no matter how politely such a crude view of human value has been re-phrased by teachers, politicians, and doctors – people with disabilities are becoming increasingly visible as valuable and welcome participants in general society, with the same right to be hard as everyone inhabiting an able body (TABs39); it is indicative of the current rise in disability awareness that Barack Obama mentioned people with disabilities in his President-elect speech – not as a burden to society, but as a people whose voices were every bit as important as those of the “young and old, rich and poor, Democrat and Republican, black, white, Hispanic, Asian, Native American, gay, straight, … and not disabled” (Malcolm 2008). In the academic setting disability studies has become increasingly visible, as an important angle in contemporary cultural studies, equal to, but not separate from, race, social class, gender, and sexuality (to name a few). Yet the connection between queer theory and what Robert McRuer ( queer theorist and disability studies researcher, and author of the 2006 book *Crip Theory – Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability*), calls “crip theory” might not

39 TAB: Temporarily Able Bodied (person). The term is meant to emphasize the fact that being able-bodied is not necessarily a permanent state, and to bring attention to the fact that able-bodiedness is still seen as a primary marker of the “normal” individual.
seem obvious at first glance. And with queer theory priding itself on being a field of inclusion, it would not be entirely wrong to claim that crip theory is already included to a certain degree. The problem is that queer theory, despite its many persistent claims of being a field of inclusion, is every bit as likely to trip and fall into the normativity-trap as every other field of study out there. Queer theory may have its feet firmly planted in the fields of feminism and gender studies, but Goodley points out that, until recently, “disability studies have been sidelined [...] In cultural studies, the triad of race, gender and sexuality have been theorized without reference to disability.” (Goodley 2011; 34), something that is tied up the concepts of compulsory heterosexuality and compulsory able-bodiedness, a view supported by McRuer when he states that “Able-bodiedness, even more than heterosexuality, still largely masquerades as a nonidentity, as the natural order of things.” (McRuer 2006; 1). The concept of “compulsory” markers of the bodied experience, a term which is used by Goodley and McRuer alike, is centred around the idea that certain traits are both taken for given, and seen as a default setting of the human experience. Noncompliance with the norm, whether deliberate or not, marks the queer or disabled individual as being other-than, or even less-than, normal, and for the queer individual with disabilities, this occurs even within a subset of society in which the LGBTIQ experience is a defining factor, such as gay/straight alliances or queer community centres; making a conscious effort to include crip theory when analysing works detailing the queer experience, the way McRuer does, is a much overdue attempt to lend a voice to a subset of the queer world that is, in many ways, voiceless.

The power structures that govern the LGBTIQ world(s) are more or less regulated through the exact same types of power plays as those used to keep the queer world on the outskirts of polite society, which means that for those who have little or no power to grab a chair at the table, and few people who are willing or able to speak for them in the first place, the fight for
the right to speak out and be heard turns just as ugly, just as geared towards omitting certain 
voices from the whole, as in every other cultural revolution this world has ever seen. Which is 
doubly problematic since the disabled mind and/or body is queer by definition, though this 
may not be readily apparent. Heterosexuality is almost inseparable from able-bodiedness; as 
the impaired body or mind dictates sexual practises that are considered non-normative (such 
as sex assisted by a personal assistant, going to a prostitute to avoid the anxiety invoked by 
the potential for body-shaming or unmanageable emotional entanglements, or having non-
genital sex as a preferred method due to physical impairments) the disabled person becomes 
queer by default. At the same time, queerness may affect both body and mind of an individual; 
feminine behaviour or modes of speech adopted by some queer men as a cultural signifier 
may be seen as enough of a negative trait so a to be effectively disabling, while simply being 
seen at a social gathering in a queer context can have a serious, lasting impact on someone's 
personal life or career - two effects that loosely match up with the clinical definitions of 
disability. In the chapter “Defining disability: from pathology to politics”, Goodley asserts that 
the clinical view of disability generally includes the following criteria for defining a disability: 
impairments (physical or mental) that are substantial, with a long-term adverse effect, 
influencing the individuals ability to perform or join in regular day-to-day activities (Goodley 
2011: 5-10). This dovetails seamlessly with Cordelia Fine's definition of the personal 
experience, according to which we cannot separate the active self from the social setting, but 
are constantly (re)defined under a number of parameters, including cultural expectations, 
peer-relations and status, and physical performance (see Chapter 1: “Neuroplasticity, 
cognition and constructivism”). In crip theory, a base premise is that society defines disability, 
and enforces this in the daily life of (dis)abled individuals by collectively deciding and 
enforcing which activities are considered normal, and thus desirable in their own right, and 
which ones are not; a TAB running a marathon is doing something praiseworthy, while 
someone doing a marathon in a wheelchair is liable to be met by the presumption that (s)he is
simply making an impressive attempt to imitate normative behaviour, since disabled activity is most commonly perceived in one of four ways, manifesting as what McRuer calls:

- the *wondrous* gaze (even simple accomplishments are seen as significant achievements)
- the *sentimental* gaze (the disabled activity is seen as a substitute for TAB oriented activities)
- the *exotic* gaze (disabled activity is seen as a spectacle or actual entertainment)
- the *realistic* gaze (often constructed and deliberate in the face of unexpected otherness)

(McRuer 2006: 171)

With these categories laying the foundation for the reception of disabled activity, it becomes more obvious how the person in question is unwaveringly seen as embodying the failing individual, rather than the ideal, which would be the able-bodied (and heterosexual) individual. And roughly the same mechanisms apply to queer life. Same-sex weddings, for example, are still seen as somewhat suspect by many people, and the idea is often challenged by society through a number of problematic approaches, which vary from outright hostility to the dreaded approach of unintended condescension disguised as praise for wanting/doing something that is (almost but not quite) “normal”. In a society that is not geared towards acknowledging the inherent value in non-normative behaviour, activities that bear only a faint resemblance to so-called normal activities, such as living out life as a serial monogamist with
ties to the BDSM circuit, or competing in a disability-based sport such as goalball\(^{40}\), are unfailingly treated as substitutes for the good (read: normal) things in life, rather than legitimate, productive and fulfilling choices in their own right. It could be said that this is precisely because they are not equal to the normative options, and that treating them as such is a dangerous path; they may be equally or more desirable options to pursue for some (queer/crip) people, but they do not infer the same amount of power, or status, to an individual – something that would, on the other hand, make them equal. The heteronormative majority’s options are privileged and better, by sheer dint of being normative. When seen from the point of view of a disabled and/or queer activist, such as McRuer or Michael Warner, to act as if the options available to othered individuals are equal to those afforded to heterosexual TAB’s is to be guilty of wishful thinking, and to remain an active part of one’s own oppression.

The solution to this crisis of status is not to “opt out” of neither the disabling nor the disabled societies altogether, but to take an active stance against queer/disabled groups that utilize what Judith Butler in “Critically Queer” refers to as the “institutionalized and reformist” (Butler 1993: 20) politics of unity that often overlooks marginalized (non-white, non-privileged, etc.) experiences and their importance, in an attempt to gain status by distancing itself from the stigma associated with certain traits or practices rooted in the personal, bodied experience. In his 1999 radical take on queer theory, *The Trouble With Normal*, social theorist Michael Warner defines stigma as a “spoiled identity” (Warner 2000: 28), something that befalls an individual or a group, not because of their public conduct, but because of who they

\(^{40}\) Goalball is a team sport, in which players on two opposing teams attempt to score goals against each other, using a ball with a bell in it. Non-blind players are required to wear blindfolds, though they are considered to be at a serious disadvantage, and as a result are rarely encouraged to compete as professional players.
are; the way society in general regulates the behaviour of individuals is through the politics of shaming, and so an individual is liable to lose status through overt association with that which is spoiled and shameful. Having sex in public parks, dressing in drag, or wearing clothes that showcase a physical defect rather than hiding it brings attention to the inherent indignity of the bodied experience, as do all other instances in which one manifestly does not conform to the norm, and an easy way to distance an entire group of people from this shame is by disassociating the mind from the body yet again. Expressions and associations that may lead to shame are disavowed by many mainstream queer communities, though this course of action in itself is so tied up in distancing the group from the inherent indignity of sex/impairments/etc. that the individual member is effectively paying what Warner calls “the price of contradiction” (Warner 2000: 40). Claiming to be beyond that which defines the othered individual leads to activist group effectively enforcing the in-group stigma of those individuals who either cannot or will not live up to the emphasized normative standards, whether these include performing a non-sexualized lifestyle, a static gender identity, or a credible attempt at imitating the life associated with able-bodiedness. Arguably, this is precisely what happened in 1998 when Matthew Shepard (1976-1998), the victim of a particularly vicious gay bashing that resulted in his death in Laramie, WY, was chosen as the focus for political and activist campaigns against homophobic hate-crimes by associations such as the HRC. In terms of group status it is perhaps all too easy to see why a young, apparently sexually conservative white college student was deemed a better poster-child than, for example, the Hispanic and African American trans-identified prostitutes whose lives (and in one case apparent murder) are documented in the 1990 documentary Paris is Burning; voluntarily associating the overarching umbrella of general queer identity with the shame of promiscuity, the diseased body, or the uncanny case of the non-aligned mind and body is not, strictly speaking, a winning power play for any organized group aiming to be seen as essentially “normal”.


Just like some parties in the feminist movement eventually set out to re-involve the body (in a move against the dominant Cartesian mind/body dichotomy) the queer movement has fostered a series of counter-moves to this assimilationist strategy of contradiction. One such strategy, and an increasingly viable and important one, is the inherently anti-authoritarian queer ethic which is rooted in the dignity of shame, rather than in the disassociation from it. In this world of embraced shame, Warner claims, “everyone’s a bottom, everyone’s a slut, anyone who denies it is sure to meet justice at the hands of a bitter, shady queen, and if it’s possible to be more exposed and abject then it’s sure to be only a matter of time before someone gets there, probably on stage and with style” (Warner 2000: 34). Dignity is re-cast as an inherent quality in an individual, one that can be emphasized by sincerity of the performance of identity, rather than as something bestowed by society in general and tied up in status. Since (at least ostensibly) no single individual is allowed the luxury of disavowing the body and basking in what Warner refers to as the type of dignity that is associated with (the ability to afford) soap, meaning that it is inferred by status and financial standing (warner 2000:, 36), the kind of conformist behaviour that involves shrugging off shame, and thus ultimately handing it down, adding to the load of those weaker than oneself, is not rewarded but punished as a form of betrayal. A key note in this school of thought is the idea that true acceptance of non-normative behaviour, identity and ethics can never be won on a battlefield governed by the (heteronormative) politics of shame, since this hinges on a type of assimilationist politics that involve effectively dodging shame by moving the lion’s share of it to yet another group rather than removing it entirely, and remaining vulnerable to shaming all the same since the newfound status (and thus power) is bestowed despite this indignity of the body, rather than inherent because of it.
When McRuer categorically insist on using the term “crip” theory (rather than disability theory), it is a mirror of this strategy of empowerment reflecting his background in queer theory, as well as an attempt to lend disability studies some of the devil-may-care attitude embraced by the queer movement when it re-appropriated the slur “queer”. As Warner says, “One of the reasons why so many people have started using the word ‘queer’ is that it is a way of saying: ‘We’re not pathological, but don’t think for that reason that we want to be normal’.” (Warner 2000: 59), and the same could be said to works as a baseline for the rapidly emerging “cripple” consciousness. McRuer calls this self-conscious attitude a “resistance to being normate” (McRuer 2006: 198), a healthy starting point for the creation of collective spaces in which it is possible to perform a re-thinking of the difference between personal and public identity, the self and society, and the links between performativity and outside affirmation, leading to ever-expanding and adaptable strategies for recasting the crip or queer identity (Goodley 2011: 160). Since there are no voices that are excluded by default, the result is somewhat the opposite of what Butler referred to as the institutionalized politics of unity; dynamic politics of diversity is one, of course highly idealized, way of framing it. Another would be “pride”, as in disability pride or queer pride, which is essentially a communicable sense of worth that is bolstered by the formation of (un)official communities aiding personal empowerment. Unlike the strategy of displaying a dignity achieved through disassociation from the body in order to be granted status from higher ups in the pre-existing heteronormative hierarchy, though, this is a strategy that is depending on achieving recognition for the equal dignity and worth inherent in every individual, despite the circumstances of their life and/or body, and on creating a space in which each individual is given the chance to be recognized as productive members of society on their own terms, rather than being held up against the compulsory standards of the TAB heterosexual majority.
Superhero powers, pride, and the disabling society.

Goodley describes the development of official definitions of disability as “administrative definitions” (Goodley 2011: 5) that allow a nation to identify those who qualify for welfare, while at the same time defining the individual in terms of her/his disability, slapping them with a label that effectively links their personal identity to their impairment. This allows for the development of a cultural state of mind where “societies are predisposed to understand disability as a personal tragedy inflicting damage upon the mind and body, requiring treatment, rehabilitation or (at its most logical extreme) cure” (Goodley 2011: 5-6). In X-Men: The Last Stand (2006), the central plot revolves around the invention of a “cure” for the mutant condition, while the trilogy as a whole revolves around an on-going sub-plot involving the attempts to develop and implement some kind of centralized registration of all known mutants, possibly by testing newly born babies for the X-gene that denotes mutation in an individual (most individuals are born “normal”, and will not develop powers or physical signs of mutation before they hit puberty). In fact, this development is mirrored in almost every superhero universe ever created, and is such a staple for comic book writers everywhere that it would not be entirely presumptuous to call it genre defining in the most basic sense of the word. The most well known examples of this include the ever-present Mutant Registration Act (MRA) and the Superhuman Registration Act (SRA/SHRA) of the Marvel universe, as well as the Keene Act first described in The Watchmen (DC Comics). A variation of it even shows up as a major plot point in the Pixar animated feature film The Incredibles (2004), where super-powered individuals have to register with the National Supers Agency (NSA): the children of the family are discouraged from using their powers, since revealing their mutations to the “normals” would literally mean disrupting the stable life of the family, forcing them to move away and resume new identities to remain hidden from the judging eyes of society.
Some heroes comply with the registration acts, sometimes even going so far as to deny their powers in an attempt to be assimilated into society, like the family in *The Incredibles*. Others rebel and form communities revolving around the need for mutual confidentiality and acceptance. In *X2: X-Men United*, Iceman’s own parents are unaware of the fact that he is attending an educational institution for mutants, despite the fact that he is portrayed as a teenager (though the exact age of the character in the movie is never revealed, the original comic book character was 16 years old when he joined the team in 1964), indicating that the headmaster, Xavier, has deliberately kept information from them when he offered Iceman a place at his boarding school. This is not an uncomplicated issue. If we work from the not unreasonable presumption that Iceman was a minor when he moved to the X-mansion, Xavier has been withholding crucial information from his legal guardians in order to get Iceman to a place where he could be trained in the kind of techniques that would later allow him to fight in an organized team of militaristic vigilantes. And none of this is revealed to them until their son seeks refuge with them after an attack on the (largely unprotected) school. At the same time, it could be said that Xavier is simply protecting Iceman’s personal secrets by allowing him to choose whether or not to share this information with his parents. Since being a mutant is not something that can (or should) be cured, at least at that point in time, and Iceman’s mutation does not meet the requirements of a disability (impairment of a severe nature, with long-term adverse effects, and a negative impact on day-to-day activities) it does not fall under the category of medical issues that must be disclosed to his parents. Rather, it falls under the category of queerness, as an identity voiced through (non)performance of normative behaviour. Mind you, the identities of people who are crip and/or queer are not

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41 One that is orchestrated by an anti-mutant government operative known as William Stryker, who has found out that the mansion houses a hand-picked collection of children who are all amongst the most powerful mutants on earth, and who are left relatively unprotected while Xavier and his team are away on a mission.
terribly different in this aspect, at least in an individual with a sense of communal pride and empowerment like the one described by Goodley, McRuer, and Warner. The difference is primarily to be found in the lack of actual impairment, which is what makes all the difference in this case; the failing individual is considered one that should be fixed or pitied (Goodley 2011: 5-6), meaning that impairments of any kind make it perfectly legit for society at large to interfere in a person's life, often in the form of a parent or guardian in the case of minors. The queer mind, on the other hand, is usually considered off-limits (at least in a society that does not equal queerness with mental illness) – a clear example of the impact official classification and legislation can have on the life of an individual that embodies any form of otherness. Of course, legislation still holds a great deal of sway over the queer body; (the lack of) marriage equality laws, the prohibition of certain forms of sexual behaviour (sodomy, though that is rarely invoked even in the states that still have anti-sodomy laws, public sex, and the use of certain types of pornography), the (lack of) the right to determine one's own gender on legal documents, and even rules on family life and co-habitation (polyamorous relationships, adoption laws, etc.).

The cure for mutancy is certainly a very visible representation of society and government as phobic and oppressive influences in the life of the othered individual. But is that really all there is, or does the cure for mutancy somehow mirror a deeper layer of the dynamics between mainstream society and the non-normative individual? With the cure comes a promise of security and recognition whose only price is promising to fit in with polite (heteronormative) society: an instant upgrade in status would arguably be a lure for many, especially those who have not (yet) found a place in some pride-based community, but are still stuck in an unwanted position as the perpetual outsiders. While there is no known “cure” for being queer it is not for lack of trying, from both sides of the divide: the various ex-gay
groups (secular as well as religious) literally attempt to cure queerness, while the on-going search for some kind of proof to back up the theory that sexuality is immutable and genetic is an unfortunate detour into some strange world where sexuality is apparently primarily legitimate and acceptable if it is not a personal choice at all (Warner 2000: 9). In the case of disabilities, a cure could be translated into many things such as rehabilitation, correction, condition management, etc., all of which holds a chilling potential for being applied in a deeply invasive and unwanted way, when pushed at an individual who might not see her condition as an impairment at all. In “The Mutant Cure or Social Change”, Ramona Ilea explores the (non)pathological nature of the mutant condition by holding it up against the prevailing noncompliance with the social model of inferred disability as expressed by many deaf people, when they decline offers of cochlear implants that may offer them some semblance of normal hearing, since they do not presume hearing to be inherently preferable to not-hearing, but rather as an alternative that holds little to no personal appeal to them (Ilea 2009: 175). Another good example would be the anti-cure ideology of the Autism Awareness movement, and in Mad Pride – a Celebration of Mad Culture (Curtis 2000), a manifesto of the crip pride movement, writers who have been diagnosed with a number of different mental conditions detail the many and varied advantages their othered minds have provided them with, thus rejecting not only the idea that their conditions can be automatically categorized as impairments, but also any outside attempts to translate said conditions into disabilities. Though if we are being realistic, a cure would possibly be more attractive for many disabled people than it is for people (in North America) who are LGBTIQ, despite an equal sense of pride – symptoms such as chronic pains, or the certainty of an early death, would be enough to add extra incentive when it comes to distancing oneself from the ideal of an ungoverned body, for all but the most dedicated “crip pride” idealists.
In the case of mutancy as defined in the Marvel universe, though, pain and death are hardly the most relevant concerns for those affected by it. McRuer states, perhaps somewhat laconically, that “A rehabilitation that makes disability disappear (or that promises to do so) is apparently preferable to the degradation of living with disability out in the open” (McRuer 2006: 129), and in the case of Marvel’s fictional America (which the writers often excel in using as a tool to expose the flawed logic of a society that is unashamedly phobic yet largely ignorant of what, exactly makes some people different from everybody else) the existence of said degradation is certainly shown to be true. In *X-Men: The Last Stand*, the character Rogue is used to explore this link between identity, vulnerability to shaming, and impairments (physical and social); her mutant power is to suck the life out of people she touches by draining their powers and memories, and in *X-Men* (the first movie of the trilogy) it is revealed that she almost killed her first boyfriend when her powers manifested while they were kissing. This mutation makes her incredibly powerful as a fighter in the vigilante group she is training to become a part of, but at the same time she is so scared of accidentally killing her new boyfriend while making out, something that is hardly desirable, that she is effectively disabled by her own fear. After all, being unable to sustain skin-on-skin contact is no requirement in physical acts of affection; presumably a full-body latex suit from the local porn shop could do the trick of creating a simulated nudity, and so the impairment is not merely that she cannot touch her boyfriend, but that she is unwilling or unable to accept that she is queered by the requirements for non-normative sex. Impaired sex is subversive even when it is performed by non-queer individuals, in part because it emphasizes what Warner consequently calls the “indignity” of the sexual act itself (emphasized when sex becomes entwined with the failing, and therefore supposedly asexual, individual, neatly collapsing the shame of the sexual act and overall body-shame into one glaring reminder of the undeniable lack of sophistication behind any sexual act), and in part because it is often technically different and thus non-normative. At the same time, Rogue does not have the sense of “pride”
that comes with being an integrated part of a community; in the first movie she was kidnapped and nearly killed by Magneto (a major player in the radical mutants liberation movement) who wanted to abuse her powers, which effectively means that the mutant community is not, ironically, a place for her to feel safe and empowered, but one in which her powers still mark her as an outsider and a target for abuse. In one of the final sequences of X-Men: The last Stand, Rogue takes the cure and is freed from the impairing effects of her powers, even while she is effectively disabled in the eyes of mutant society by giving up the one thing that allowed her to function within the parameters of both the mutant subcultures and the vigilante corps she was training to become a part of. She has always been able to pass for normal at a glance, since her mutant powers have not manifested as visible physical changes, so what she has bought by taking the cure is not immediately obvious in terms of peer reception; it could in fact be said that she has bought a newfound peace of mind, at the price of leaving everything else in her life behind. As she sees it, her move is a successful one (though a later scene, depicting a similarly though involuntarily “cured” Magneto, indicates that the cure may not be permanent), but her personal choice is also deeply political; assimilationist politics are pitted against radical liberationists, and the viewer is none-too-gently nudged towards questioning whether she is gaining something (acceptance or personal freedom), or if she is denouncing the validity and desirability of the many unique and valid experiences her powers afforded her – and if she is effectively though unintentionally betraying her (former) peers by taking this stance.

There has been an interesting development in the issues portrayed throughout the X-Men movies in that they have delved ever deeper into an exploration of the relationship between the normative society and radical activist approaches to otherness. If X2: X-Men United depicts a highly recognizable version of the queer experience, and X-Men: The Last Stand deals with
the idea of a disabling cultural norm, the 2011 prequel movie *X-Men: First Class* takes it one step further, and tries to grapple with actual activist strategies, such as pride, empowerment, and visibility. In this story, the mutant known as Beast ends up enhancing his own physical mutations (overly large feet with prehensile toes) in his desperate attempt to rid himself of physical signs of his dis/ability; his “cure” leaves him in a body that can no longer be disguised so as to allow him the luxury of passing for normal (or TAB). At the same time, Mystique, whose shape-shifting powers have always allowed her to pass at will, learns to treat the physical manifestations of her mutation (blue skin, yellow eyes) as something beautiful and, more importantly, valid in terms of personal identity, when she finds a place in a community of people who emphasize their mutations as a source of pride or even happiness. “Mutant – and Proud” as a motto is central to the movie and is the source of much conflict between the X-Men’s founding father, Xavier, a wealthy socialite who is essentially an assimilationist, and the orphaned Holocaust survivor Magneto, who embodies the radical stance – though possibly taken just a tad further along the road than most people are comfortable with, in terms of violent activism and anti-normative rhetorics (anyone familiar with the previous movies will realize that he is en route to becoming a terrorist). Magneto refuses to put himself in a position where his personal pride is based in his ability to pass for normal, and his ability to endure the hard and constant struggles to uphold this fixed illusion that passing would entail (Hopkins 2009: 8). While he may be a bad guy (by dint of activism taken too far, resulting in acts of terror against “normal” human society), he also powerful, charismatic, sexual, a highly likeable and nuanced character with clear motivations, and visibly different by choice.
Chapter 3.

The (de)sexualized body and the superhero – personal autonomy and the challenging gaze.

Trans theory and gender performance.

Trans theory did not truly cross the barrier between community activism and academic studies until the early 1990s (Whittle 2006: xx1), and it remains intertwined with queer studies as well as gender studies. Queer studies as a field relies heavily on an all-inclusive nature; if it is non-normative (and related to the way bodies and minds shape identities, be they gender-based or sexual) it is fair game for queer theory, which is one reason why trans theory is still commonly found presented as a particular field within queer theory, rather than as a field of studies that (as part of its development) have separated from it completely; it is impossible to grapple with trans lives without drawing heavily on the experience of the queer and gendered body and identity. Trans bodies are, after all, still bodies, and trans people are, whatever their personal experiences, still a part of a group of people whose presence challenge the heteronormative hegemony through sheer dint of ungovernable otherness, and so a critical point that trans studies excel in pinpointing is the transference of power through status and shaming, or as legal scholar and expert on transgender law Stephen Whittle puts it, in his introduction to The Transgender Studies Reader.
Real life affords trans people constant stigma and oppression based on the apparently unreal concept of gender. This is one of the most significant issues that trans people have brought to feminist and queer theory. Homophobia and sexism are not based on your genitals or with whom you sleep, but on how you perform the self in ways that are contraindicative to the heteronormative framework.

(Whittle 2006: xii)

Within contemporary American society, a trans person is, to put it bluntly, either claiming a higher position in the pecking order of human gender based relations than their (female) birth-body allows them, or – perhaps even more uncannily – trading in their (male) privilege and power for what Cordelia Fine, throughout Delusions of Gender, calls the woman’s “right” to dance backwards in high heels (an oft-used reference to Ginger Rogers who, dancing backwards and in high heels, matched Fred Astaire’s every move, yet garnered notably less fame and admiration for it). Because let us be completely fair; it is not the thought of awkwardly mismatched but completely invisible chromosomes that makes people react strongly to transgendered persons. Nor is it the often nigh-invisible surgery scars (presuming there are any) or even the presence of non-standard genitalia. The performing drag kings or -queens are not merely remarkable because of their creative costumes or skills in the art of performing on stage. What makes these people stand out against the backdrop of mainstream society is the simple fact that anyone not conforming to the normative standards of gender manage to simultaneously enforce and debunk most of this society’s gender related myths and presumptions, by bringing attention to the link between the performance of gender and the expectations of the person looking, as well as the (lack of) a direct and enforceable link between biological sex and gender that matches up to the defining heteronormative
standards. Whittle emphasizes how the trans experience, whether acknowledged or not, acts as a constant reminder that “the taxonomy of sex and gender seemingly has become disordered; sex and gender themselves no longer appear as stable external categories, but rather appear embedded in the individuals who experience them.” (Whittle 2006: xii).

Drawing on her background in academic psychology and cognitive neuroscience Fine puts forth a spirited and extremely well researched claim that, as far as we know, gender as we experience and express it is based almost exclusively in a circumstance-based and malleable mimicry of perpetuated cultural myths concerning a (apparently largely non-existent, as far as contemporary science can determine) link between biology and identity, or as she puts it at one point (here specifically regarding the myth that women and men process language differently, leading to differences in, among other things, ability to empathize, or process new information, but the point stands throughout the book):

So let us, with healthy scepticism, summarize all of this as clearly as we can. Nonexistent sex differences in language lateralization, mediated by nonexistent sex differences in corpus callosum structure, are widely believed to explain nonexistent sex differences in language skills. Confused? We've only just begun.

(Fine 2011: 138)

And if the mind funnels the lessons taught by society into the effort to match a specific pre-existing cultural gender, thus blurring the lines between identity and institutionalized conditioning (and possibly oppression of specific identities), the existence of gender based (male) privilege is rocked in its very foundations. Maybe all those female superheroes in
comics are only fighting crime backwards and in high heels (or at least while simultaneously juggling their extra tasks in the crime fighting teams they are often a part of, playing the parts of what Mike Madrid, in his 2009 book, *the Supergirls. Fashion, feminism, fantasy, and the history of comic book heroines*, essentially sums up as: secretaries, den-mothers, and eye candy for the press42) because those in power in the hegemony of gender have nothing to gain by changing that fact, but frankly quite a lot to lose. Starting with the idea of the dominant masculine identity as something inherent in an individual – meaning that those born into a male body have to face up to the potential consequences; that the very idea of “male”, and the cultural privileges bestowed on those fitting within the confines of that category, are enforcing the status quo in a gendered hierarchy where “female” or “non-male” individuals are the natural born losers. Not an easy pill to swallow, and less so since this is a point that is far too often ignored or outright disbelieved, based on the kind of faulty logic (that Fine excels in exposing) with which the presence of male privilege is ultimately brushed off as the outdated ramblings of militant feminists; an argument that seems rather hollow when studies in sociology and neuroscience consequently show that bringing gender to the forefront of a subject’s mind just before testing is enough to skew results in favour of the male identity, in everything from math tests (where women rate their own maths ability significantly lower if asked to tick off a box indicating their gender before taking the test than if no gendering occurs (Fine 2011: 9)) to evaluating applicants for a job interviews (Fine 2011: 61). And once we bring in the gender rebels (or Bornstein and Feinberg’s outlaws and warriors), this division of power in the gender based hegemony is teetering on the edge of the kind of instability that may seem everything from frightening to liberating, depending on who is looking. The ungovernable body is the body that challenges what we think we know, and since academic theorist and performance artist Sandy Stone first published her post-transsexual

42 More in Chapter 3: “The demeaning costume or the sexual gaze”.
manifesto “The Empire Strikes Back” in 1987, that challenge has moved from inherent but wilfully inactive, and into the foreground of trans activism everywhere\textsuperscript{43} (Whittle 2006: xii).

Whether or not one is willing to grapple with the complexities surrounding sex and gender from the starting point provided by neuroscience (which is certainly not the point of this exercise), it is an undeniable fact that the division of things into gender (in)appropriate categories means that for female superheroes the glass ceiling may hit harder than ever, in this time where hyper-awareness of gender stereotypes (also known as the \textit{Pink Princess Syndrome}, named after the prevalent role models for young girls in contemporary media) clashes with the prevalent motion in queer/disabled/feminist communities to reclaim the body and rid it of the shame attached to it by the cultural \textit{gaze} of heteronormative society. One of the main reasons the 2004 superhero movie \textit{Catwoman} is often called one of the worst movies ever made (it had the dubious honour of winning four Golden Raspberry (or “Razzie”) awards in 2005, for Worst: Picture, Actress, Director and Screenplay) was that it failed to maintain the expression of the empowered, sexual body and the othered individual inherent to the Catwoman character, instead descending into what was effectively a toothless display of BDSM themed costumes and overt associations between women, vanity, and the inability to understand the workings of major business corporations. At the same time, the glass escalator (Fine 2011: 65) means that any successful male character runs the risk of being elevated beyond his capabilities (or even desires), and unavoidably collapsing like a flan in a cupboard as a result of that; \textit{Judge Dredd} (Rebellion Developments/Cinergi Pictures, 1995), \textit{Daredevil} (Marvel/20th Century Fox, 2003), \textit{Hulk} (Marvel/Universal Pictures, 2003), and \textit{Fantastic4: rise of The Silver Surfer} (Marvel/20th Century Fox, 2007) provide excellent examples of characters that did not fare well in terms of general (comic book) fan reception when they made the transition to

\textsuperscript{43} See also Chapter 3: “The (naked) body: liberated and heroic or fetishized and outcast”.

the big screen44, primarily because the characters were simply not well-suited for the type of storytelling employed by this media. We will stick to one obvious example: Judge Dredd is rarely seen without his helmet in the comic books, at least not voluntarily, yet Sylvester Stallone seemed to spend more time flaunting his trademark smirk than actually wearing what is essentially the character’s “face” – a choice that makes sense in terms of cinematography, since acting traditionally relies heavily on facial expressions to convey meaning, but perhaps an excellent indicator of why this particular superhero should have stayed in the comic books. With remarkably few female superheroes as titular leads in their own movies, it would seem that the movie directors and comic book publishers are either outright unwilling to bring their heroines to the big screen as anything but supporting characters, or they suffer from a remarkably case of oversight that leads them to draw on unfit (male) heroes rather than exploring the possibility of transferring these women to the big screen in order to carve out a bit of the rising mainstream market for superheroes. If this seems like a somewhat radical or biased observation, I invite the reader to ponder the fact that there have currently been made 10 live-action Batman movies, 5 live-action Superman movies – and no live-action Wonder Woman movies, despite the DC character being one of the most recognizable superheroes since her debut in All Star Comics # 8 in 1941.

44 I have used Liam Burke's Superhero Movies (2008) as a starting point for identifying films that proved to be less-than-popular in general fan culture.
So why draw on the trans experience if one wants to take a closer look at the gendered individual, when superhero comics already provide such an ample playground for feminist readings? The easy answer is fairly straightforward:

> Anecdotes are not data. But these insights from the experiences of people who have lived on both sides of the gender divide offer an intriguing glimpse into the possibility that a person’s talents in the workplace are easier to recognize when that person is male. Empirical research points to the same conclusion.

(Fine 2011: 55)

What Fine is discussing here is, essentially, exactly a practical application of what Whittle referred to as one of the “most significant” (Whittle 2006: xii) ways in which trans theory can be applied in interdisciplinary studies: trans people's stories may be used as a starting point (or a guiding light) for the researcher attempting to take a closer look at the cultural gender, and the way personal identity is affected by peer expectations and the workings of gender-based status. Which is certainly an interesting starting point when dealing with works such as comic books, which are often defined by their attempts to navigate certain gender-based stereotypes that inevitably crop up when you place super-powered females in combat situations as a genre staple. However, that is not all there is to support the idea that at least a marginal knowledge of trans theory is relevant when dealing with the world of superheroes. Because comic books as a media, and the (literally) fantastic story lines they employ, are the playgrounds for a vast array of characters that are anything but tied up in the cisgendered body and the dichotomy of the male/female. Even the 1940s had heroes that challenged the
viewer alongside the crooks they fought; crime fighting crossdresser Madame Fatal (Richard Stanton) had her (/his) debut in May 1940, in Crack Comics issue 1, followed by Red Tornado (Abigail “Ma” Hunkel) in All-American Comics issue 22, in November that same year. Both appeared in titles owned and published by Quality Comics (later DC Comics), and remain in (sporadic) publication, with Madame Fatal last seen in a 2012 story featuring a flashback scene to 1944 (The Shade, issue 4), and Ma Hunkel reintroduced in DC continuity in 2004 (JSA, issue 55), though she was last seen directly in the CW series Smallville in 2010. In more recent times, Marvel character Mystique has been using her mutant ability (metamorphosing) to pass freely and at will between shapes that are male, female, or even both at once and is consequently shown to perform more than well enough to “pass” for either gender; as previously mentioned it is unknown if Mystique was even born female, though her staying in the (now fully human) female shape she was in while being injected with an anti-mutant “cure” in X-Men: The Last Stand could be seen to indicate that this is the case in the canon established within the closed-off universe of the movies. As the primary writer and co-creator of Mystique, Chris Claremont originally intended her to be the father of her son, Nightcrawler, though this idea was rejected by Marvel as being too at odds with the CCA, which still held some sway over the comic book industry at the time. In Claremont’s proposed storyline, a female mutant know as Destiny was supposed to be Nightcrawler’s.

45 “Absolute Justice” (Smallville season 9, episode 11; the 185th episode overall. Originally aired on the CW, Feb. 5th, 2010). Based on characters and stories owned by DC Comics, most notably Superman.

46 First appearance: Ms. Marvel #16 (Marvel Comics, May 1978)

47 Though the original interview in which Claremont reported this appears to have been lost in the mass-transition from print to digital media, leaving this information floating in the no-man’s land of hearsay and fannish lore, it has been confirmed by comic book researcher Brian Cronin on his blog, Comic Book Urban Legends Revealed (Cronin 2005), as well as by Claremont’s former co-writer at Marvel, John Burne, on his professional website, Burne Robotics (Burne 2007).
mother, and in a somewhat surprising show of magnanimity Marvel allowed this part of the storyline to go under the radar for decades, with the two cohabiting friends teasingly referring to each other as “my love”, until their relationship was openly confirmed in *X-Men Forever #5* (2001), establishing Mystique as a bisexual character. In *Runaways vol. 2 #8* (2005), a Marvel character called Xavin the Scrull switched effortlessly from a male form to a female one, revealing that the Scrulls, a humanoid alien species of shape shifters, sees changing their gender as something akin to humans changing the colour of their hair.

And the list goes on: Lord Fanny (DC) is a Brazilian witch and sometimes prostitute raised as a female, though born with male genitalia, and appears perfectly at ease in this non-chosen transgender role. The extraterrestrial intelligence know as Cloud (Marvel) switched between female and male human forms showing little to no apparent preference, and was shown as the

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48 Page scan from *Runaways vol. 2 #8* (Marvel, 2005)
target for the somewhat unrequited love of the nominally straight Iceman back in the mid-eighties. In Marvel’s *Ultimate* universe, the current incarnation of Spider-Woman is a clone of Spider-Man, with all of his memories and his gender identity intact as a basis for her personality. To Superman’s long-time friend and sidekick, the reporter Jimmy Olsen (DC), cross-dressing was apparently a standard disguise when he went undercover to secure a good story and/or fight crime, and he was so good at passing for cis-female that declarations of love from besotted men followed him everywhere he went – in the 1950s. Even TopCow Productions, which was not founded until 1992, has a rich history of writing trans characters, most notably Sanctuary, a nominally male transvestite who was able to access his/her powers more fully when performing a female identity. Let us stop the list here, and just conclude that there is no shortage of trans superheroes of every imaginable kind, even in the continuities of the major (mainstream) publishers, and that the list can be expanded even further if we start looking at the comic book characters who are not, strictly speaking, superheroes; an excellent example is Wanda, the MtF character from DC Vertigo’s *Sandman* universe, who is certainly portrayed as being heroic, but who is not in any way an actual superhero.

**The demeaning costume or the sexual gaze.**

Superhero comic books may be a playground for literally all kinds of gender-queer characters. But they are also populated with some of the most stereotypically gendered characters out there. Hell-raising heroines scale tall buildings and fight crime wearing stiletto heels and skimpy outfits that barely manage to cover what Kerri L. Johnson et al. in “Gender Typicality and Extremity in Popular Culture” proves to be their quite literally impossibly curvy and
flexible bodies (Johnson, 2008: 229-242). And once that work is done, they go back to their roles as demure den-mothers (Jean Grey, Marvel), wives (Invisible Girl, Marvel), and secretaries (Wonder Woman, DC) – while the men go back to being scientists (Iron Man, Marvel), soldiers (Captain America, Marvel), or socialite philanthropists (Batman, DC). Many superheroines have a strange duality of purpose; they are challenging traditional gender roles by being strong, aggressive and competent in the typically male domain of hand-to-hand combat, while enforcing them by being overly sexualized and slightly subservient to the male characters.

Or are they? The segment above is an attempt to pin down what appears to be some of the most prevalent complaints about the stereotyping of the female superhero in contemporary comic books (by fans, critics, and scholars alike). But it could also serve well as a rough summary of the observations made by fanboy writer Mike Madrid, in his 2009 exploration of the history of the female superhero: *the Supergirls. Fashion, feminism, fantasy, and the history of comic book heroines*. There is a very fundamental problem with this approach to the female superhero, however, and it essentially boils down to the fact that Mike Madrid actually puts a higher emphasis on the overtly sexualized image of these heroines than many (female) readers do. Admittedly, as a nominally female reader I for one continue to be exasperated by heroines facing obstacles set down by bad costuming choices rather than bad guys and villains, but in many ways this is negligible, and can be put down to Bad Art⁴⁹, rather than bad writing. It challenges the female reader to ask: “what would I do differently”, and can, in a

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⁴⁹ Bad Art is also known under the fan-coined moniker The Liefeld Effect, a tongue-in-cheek reference to comic book artist Rob Liefeld, whose work featured women with upper arms wider than their waists, nonsensical weapons bigger than the people who wielded them, and costumes literally covered in upside-down pouches and random tool belts.
way, aid identification and empowerment, rather than hinder it. And more importantly, the
general idea of the feminine costume as being somehow less practical or more revealing than
the masculine one is, to put it bluntly, wrong on most counts. When fashion/costume designer
Edna “E” Mode (from the 2004 Pixar animated movie, *The Incredibles*) firmly declared that
any costume designed by her would have “no capes!”, it was in part a way to point out that
male superheroes rarely have more practical costumes than their female counterparts,
despite the attention most often given to the impractical, sexualized nature of the female
costume:

![Image](image)

In fact, the entire superhero costume is probably best approached with basic biology lessons
in mind; like a peacock’s dragging, colourful tail feathers, the superhero costume is a way of
showcasing strength (and thus desirability), by drawing the gaze of potential partners and
natural predators (or in this case supervillains) alike. And while the female costume may
often feature cut-out shapes exposing heaving bosoms and dimpled backsides, the male

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50 Team members Black Canary and the Flash discuss costuming choices in *JLA Year One #2* (Marvel 1998).
superhero does not actually fare much better; slick-bottomed soft shoes may be easier to run in than thigh high boots with stiletto heels, but they are not much better for traction (and the stiletto heel itself could arguably function as a weapon in an emergency). The dreaded capes will trip you up as surely as any long flowing dress – just ask the cosplayers mentioned in Chapter 1: “The pervasiveness of stereotyping”, many of them will have the kind of expertise that comes with having worn both types of garments. Many heroes protect their secret identities by wearing masks seemingly held on by spit and hope. And skin-tight spandex may look great clinging to Superman’s muscled chest, but an urban myth that is wildly popular and oft repeated among comic book fans (and that I have unfortunately not been able to neither confirm nor debunk) tells the story of how an entire flight sequence from the 1978 Superman movie had to be redone because it had been shot over several days, and no-one had thought to make sure that the actor consequently “packed” either left or right; thus the first version of the scene (that almost made it into theatres worldwide) had the problem of the mysteriously side-switching bulge – a problem that quite a few comic book heroes must face on a daily basis, whether or not the story itself is actually true. In fact, if you focus on how a superheroine keeps her assets safely wrapped up, you must also wonder if every male superhero has perfected the art of tucking, since these costumes usually show the heroes to have genitalia about as well-defined as those found on a Ken doll.

To say that a female superhero is sexualized by showing skin or fighting in her skivvies is to shame her for the simple fact of having skin to show. In a chapter entitled “The Babe Years”, Mike Madrid tries to grapple with the effect of the male (or lustful) gaze on the female form, and how this may have affected the development of the female superhero, from the secretary of the past to the no-holds-barred fighting machines of the past fifteen years or so. And while he clearly sets out with good intentions, he does tends to fall into this trap of judging female
superheroes based on whether or not they possess an overt sexuality, such as when he claims that many iconic superheroines created in the 1990s “were so highly sexualized that it seemed to cancel out any of their power” (Madrid 2010: 283). This attitude veers dangerously close to brushing off almost every female superhero written in Image Comics’ universe as objects of lustful wish-fulfilment for the immature male reader, based on their impossibly curvy bodies, skimpily outfits, and liberal sexual attitudes. But this attitude falls just a tad too close to slut-shaming; while scantily clad, and obviously drawn as highly attractive creatures (at least to some readers), the women in these comics are so much more than mere eye-candy for a subset of randy male readers. Conventional views of (the female) sexuality dictate that these women with their exposed bodies are somehow fragile creatures ruthlessly exposed to a predatory male gaze, and while it is easy to follow the reasoning of countless readers like Madrid, it is a also seriously flawed argument, based on the presumption that the male gaze is, a) unwanted, and b) anything other than an outside point of view. To put it frankly: claiming that the male gaze is somehow demeaning to these women is the same as putting power into the hands of the men (and women) who are looking – and judging. After all, (semi)nudity is nothing shameful or demeaning in itself, and since the rules governing these fictitious worlds

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51 Slut-shaming: the (often subconscious) act of shaming a woman, or reducing the validity of her actions or statements, based on the fact that she has an open appreciation of the sexualized body and/or sexual acts. The more overt examples of slut-shaming include the oft-used strategy of assigning a part of the blame for a rape to the victim due to her mode of dress or behaviour, but examples from the other end of the ballpark include an unwillingness to believe that some female strippers (or porn actresses, prostitutes, etc.) have made a valid career choice, and are not exclusively victims to be coddled and saved from the unwanted male gaze and their own traitorous bodies.

While slut-shaming is most obviously directed at women in mainstream society, the basic mechanisms also come into play when dealing with gay/bisexual male promiscuity and/or polyamourosity, both from the surrounding heteronormative society, and within LGBTIQ communities.
dictate that costume and (lack of) armour does not, generally, affect a character’s skill in combat, it is also a non-issue in regards to practicality. Of course, these women are nothing more than fictional characters, and their skimpy outfits and idealized bodies were in part designed by their creators to work as gratuitous eye-candy. But impossibly well-defined bodies (often skirting a fine line between the obscenely beautiful and the outright monstrous) and deeply impractical and revealing costuming choices are a staple of the superhero genre, regardless of the gender of the character. In fact, it is tempting to claim that the only reason we do not automatically see the male superhero as equally absurdly fetishized is simply because it is not a part of our cultural heritage and ways of thinking to consciously consider the male body an object to be gazed upon. A prime example is a character like the Namor the Sub-Mariner; happily going into battle wearing aught but bright green speedos (or sometimes a strategically placed seashell) since 1939, he has still somehow managed to be taken seriously despite his perky nipples, bulging muscles and, well, other bulging features. For the questioning reader, it can be difficult to see exactly what makes the outrageous attires worn by male superheroes any different from those worn by females, if not simply an ignorance of the basic cultural expectations that directs the gaze of any and all readers, even scholars like Madrid, who inadvertently but highly effectively manages to reduce a character like Sara Pezzini (known as Witchblade) to a series of lust-inducing glimpses of a writhing mass of exposed buttocks and thighs, seemingly without realizing that this viewpoint is, in fact, nothing more than a more sophisticated version of slut-shaming. Which is how a strong, female character who worked as a tough-as-nails NYC detective even before she became a superhero is reduced to a product of a time “most comic book fans would just as soon forget [...] ever happened” (Madrid 2010: 271). By this reasoning, an independent and incredibly powerful character is somehow demeaning to women everywhere, based on the simple fact that she wears what Madrid describes as a “skeletal thong” (that actually provides a lot more cover than the previously mentioned emerald green speedos) when going into combat.
(Madrid 2010: 282). Never mind the fact that she is also the lead character in one of the longest running titles with a female lead in comic book history (1995-present, TopCow), that she starred in the 23 episode TV series *Witchblade* (2001-2, TNT), and that her power-giving armour (the so-called skeletal thong) appears in a 24 episode anime series (2006, Gonzo) and a still-on-going Japanese manga (2006-present, Akita Shoten Publishers). Finally, a *Witchblade* feature film is set to be released in 2013, again one of only a handful of superhero movies with a female titular character, despite the current popularity of the genre.

Superhero comics are, in many ways, a battlefield on which the dreaded battle of the sexes have been fought through the right to wear whatever the hero (well, his/her creators) finds best suited to the purpose, be that next-to-nothing, or a trench coat-and-fedora ensemble complete with gloves and combat boots that not only work equally well for female and male characters alike, but often effectively disguises the gender of the character at first glance. The point is that, as far as costumes go, the sexes are actually at an equal disadvantage, once we rise above the almost instinctive urge to cover up those poor women – for their own sake, of course.

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32 Though Filip Sablik, publisher at TopCow productions, has recently (Feb. 19th, 2012) announced on the TopCow.com official online forum that the movie is currently set back by the search for a new screenwriter, the projected release date is still set sometime in 2013 (Sablik 2012).
The superhero costume; fantastic disguise or fabulous performance?

The superhero costume is not, actually, particularly aptly named. Its functions are not limited to those of dressing-up or role playing, which would be the casual definition of the word, and the design and use of the costumes worn by each separate superhero over time is too varied for one to make an entirely convincing point that the choice of word is related to the less widespread uses of the word costume as meaning period garb, or even ethnotypical wear. Rather, the superhero “costume” straddles the line between combat gear, uniform, distraction, and identity marker, and in many cases a primary function is to protect the identity of the person wearing it. On top of this, it is often meant to invoke an association to particular qualities, in the minds of both the wearer and the casual observer. The perhaps most famous example is the Bat-suit, with its infamous design based on the chiroptophobia\(^\text{53}\) of a young Bruce Wayne, but twisted around to invoke a similar fear of the dark and mysterious in hearts of petty crooks and criminals everywhere. And one need not look any further than Spider-Man's infamous red-and-blues, adorned with web-like patterns and spider motifs, to get a feel for the often less than sophisticated strategies used to invoke these primary associations between abilities/identity and wearer. While this approach towards the meaning behind the word superhero costume is, in a sense, quibbling over minor linguistics variations, it is nonetheless a vital point. The main identifying marker of the superhero (apart from his/her code name) is, after all, often the costume: in the case of Batman, Robin, the Question, or Iron Man (to name just a few) several different people have worn the costume and used the moniker over time, thus assuming the superhero identity associated with it on a more or less permanent basis. And this association between costume and wearer works both ways; when

\(^{53}\) Chiroptophobia: “fear of bats”.
Captain America became disillusioned with the U.S. government, he temporarily switched his name to The Nomad, and adopted another costume to purge himself from the associations of his old red-white-and-blue star-spangled costume (in Captain America; issues 180-184, Marvel 1975). The costume creates a tangible link between identity and overt, orchestrated performance, one that goes above and beyond the mundane use of the signalling value of specific brands or fashions, or the playfulness of make-believe.

This interplay between physical performance (with an emphasis on the enhancement of specific body- and skill-related qualities) and mode of dress leaves us with one glaringly obvious association, of course; the temptation to equate drag\textsuperscript{54} attire with the superhero costume is ever-present. There are even similarities on the purely physical level – after all, both have a tendency to involve somewhat exotic fits and styles, not to mention more glitz, vibrant colours, and downright odd materials than functional everyday wear. This association can be taken one step further, though; both modes of dress are highly associated with the shift from one (usually fairly mainstream) identity to another downright fabulous identity, based on the performer's ability to impose his/her inner world over the space shared with the observer, which lends the shared experience of a successful performance a tinge of magical

\textsuperscript{54} Interestingly enough, the correct verb is to “do drag”, though versions such as “dragging up”, “donning the drag”, or even “dragging out” appears to be far more prevalent in contemporary everyday use. Historically, the correct term for a woman dressing to perform a male identity is “drab”, though this distinction appears to have vanished all but completely from the drag circuit. Thus, both genders “do drag”, and the gender-defining term lies in the endings affixed to the defining term (drag), namely “queen” or “king”. This is why it is not unusual to come across terms that replace the word drag with a gender-specific word, such as “kinging out” (for nominally female performers), “donning the diva” (male), or one of an increasingly large number of other terms, usually containing gender-performance related words such as “diva” (m), “Dame” (m), “lad” (f) and “boyz” (f).
reality. And if the superhero costume is an identity (or at the very least a heavy indicator thereof), and one often worn to protect a civilian identity, the costume becomes the superhero equivalent of glamming up and donning the drag on a Friday night, while staying comfortably anonymous every other day of the week. Some costumes, such as the non-anonymizing utilitarian uniforms worn by the Fantastic Four, are comparable to putting on a pair of comfy jeans and a nice shirt before heading out to the local pub. Other heroes, like the beefcakey Namor or the sultry Witchblade, are going all-out, flamboyantly showcasing their bodies as objects of (sexual) power, much like people dressing up in low-slung jeans and body glitter before heading out to the local nightclub. But the ultimate point of these exercises is the same; to put some distance between a functional everyday persona, and an alter ego with access to a wider range of expressions and actions, thus allowing the person behind it all a greater amount of freedom and anonymity in both guises. In the case of some heroes, such as Batman (and his elaborate billionaire playboy persona, Bruce Wayne), this dynamic is reversed, so that the civilian identity becomes the elaborate smokescreen protecting the true, somewhat more fabulous, identity (allowing Batman to stay in the closet, as it were), but the mechanisms are the same. The function and elaborateness of the costume, and the venues in which it is used, are highly determined by two things in particular: the degree of need and/or desire for anonymity, and the degree of separation between the mundane and fabulous personas. In an episode entitled “Pride” on the TV series Queer as Folk, the workplace-closeted gay man Michael Novotny ends up donning full drag attire as a way of joining the local LGBTIQ pride parade without running the risk of being recognized by colleagues he knows will be present as spectators; being the series’ ultimate comic book geek, it is hardly surprising that this way of creating a “secret identity” appealed to him – and in a surprisingly witty re-imagining of

55 “Pride” is the fourth episode of the second season of Queer as Folk (episode 26 in the full run), and was first aired in the U.S. on Showtime, January 27th, 2002.
one of the most common superhero creation stories, he later finds out that he “inherited his powers” from his estranged father, himself a famous drag queen under the stage name Devina Devore.

The (naked) body; liberated and heroic or fetishized and outcast?

Nowhere does the importance of costuming choices become more obvious than in the cases where the hero opts out completely. This may sound strange, but if wearing a ridiculously revealing costume is one of the defining features of the superhero genre, not wearing one becomes even more important (though possibly not in the way most people would expect). If the design of a specific costume can alter the way we perceive a character, by making them appear weak rather than sexually liberated, or queer rather than normative, the absence of a costume altogether creates a playground for the rebelliously queer characters, regardless of their actual gender or sexuality. And in this case, “not wearing a costume” does not mean simply wearing regular clothes - though that is interesting in its own right. But there is a very peculiar tendency in superhero stories to simply forego any kind of clothes and/or armour completely. Iceman, Mystique, Cloud, (to name but a few): What they all have in common is the somewhat strange habit of wearing absolutely nothing. In public. Some of them settle for showcasing their bodies while fighting crime, while others take it one step further, and spend almost their entire adult lives naked, whether sleeping, shopping, socializing, or working.
These superheroes are (presumably) not running around in their birthday suits because they derive some form of sexual pleasure from it; many of these characters were written and put in play on the visual field of comic books when Wertham’s anti-sexual rhetorics were still firmly in place as an industry standard, and so the simple fact that the comic book editors got away with letting these characters go into print is a lasting testament to the fact that they were not the subversive mouthpieces for any kind of language related to the obviously sexual, and were not immediately recognizable as extraordinary objects of sexual desire (though I, for one, thoroughly enjoy the mental images of certain rebellious editors at Marvel and DC giggling over getting away with showcasing the naked body while retaining the CCA’s explicit approval). Rather, they are the embodiment of a strategy of re-claiming the bodied experience, and removing or remodelling the significance of the cultural, sexual gaze. Even the “average” superhero is impossible to ignore, and too powerful to be effectively patronised or silenced. But the naked superhero goes one step further, taking away the power of the lingering, fetishizing gaze, by showcasing their bodies in a way that lays bare all that would usually constitute primary sexual signifiers. Their use of the body in this way mirrors what Goodley refers to as:

The queer feminist strategy of pulling the (male) homeless mind back into the body in order to think carefully about the close connection of private/public, individual/social, psyche/society and embodied/cultural worlds.

(Goodley 2011: 157)
The other side of this coin is the Cartesian body/mind dichotomy, in which the body is seen as too random and/or ungovernable to form the basis for a rational discourse – effectively leaving the personal, bodied experience by the wayside, the victim of a strategy that leaves little room for defining the non-normative in any terms but those of the inherently opposite. Reintegrating the body as a central part of a movement towards a more inclusive standpoint in cultural studies becomes relevant precisely because it is the body that is, at once, the one thing we all have in common, and the one that is most likely to influence the way an individual is recognized and treated by others, by sheer dint of perceived differences. The body is what makes us all “raced, gendered, trans/nationally sited, aged, sexualized and classed” (Goodley 2011: 31). And nowhere in real life is this quite as glaringly obvious as in the case of persons with disabilities. In this case, the private becomes public; whether an impairment is visible or simply has a profound effect on a person’s way of interacting with society, it is rarely something that can be hidden if it is significant enough to form the basis of a disability. While the queer individual have the luxury of (not) coming out, however troubling that choice may be, the disabled individual is perpetually outing by her/his own body – in conventional face-to-face interactions there is often no chance to pass (for “normal”), at least for long. This is a major contributing factor as to why disability studies can be so relevant when working with (e.g.) the LGBTIQ experience; the shared experience of being marginalized by normative society is enhanced by the inability to pass, and by the institutionalized interference of outside interests (as discussed in Chapter 2: “Superhero powers, pride, and the disabling society”). And while many queer individuals either cannot or will not pass for whatever temporarily constitutes normal, they are often marginalized even within the confines of the LGBTIQ communities. Michael Warner argues (in The Trouble With Normal) that this is the case when official organizations of the queer movement, from the Mattachine Society to modern-day organizations) such as the Human Rights Campaign) in their attempts to achieve marriage equality keeps a firm focus on the sub-set of LGBTIQ community that effectively
mirrors heteronormative society (Warner 2000: 45-52). While this move is likely an attempt to define queer behaviour as something only technically different from normative behaviour, and thus basically harmless or unthreatening if treated as equally valid, it means that those whose personal lives include less “acceptable” modes of behaviour (such as cruising for sex in public venues, polygamous relationships, or genderfluid performances of identity) are marginalized to an even higher degree. Furthermore, the cases of institutionalized interference may no longer be so immediately visible in the lives of people in many minority groups, such as queer people or non-Anglo Americans, but it is still present in terms of (e.g.) marriage laws, unofficial hiring policies, and the perpetual exposure to a hegemonic cultural gaze that is often running three steps behind the changes in politics and (re)appropriated language.

So, while these heroes are putting the sheer physicality of their bodied experience on display, they are embracing the identity of a (non-)passing individual, by foregoing all attempts to disguise their particular physical features, and instead inviting the judgment of the casual spectator. And the fact that they do so in a way that deemphasizes the importance of the genitalia in the performance of identity, if not outright disproves it, effectively makes these fearlessly exposed bodies a demonstration of what transgender activist Sandy Stone in “The Empire Strikes Back” referred to as the post-transsexual identity. Since the successful performance of a transgendered identity historically relies on the rejection of the pre-transitional identity, the transgendered person is existing in a position where the past can never be acknowledged, lest the current performance of a stable gender is reduced to a
broken illusion. Stone urged the post-transitional transgendered people to step up to the plate, and dare to acknowledge the physical reality of their bodies as objects that were situated in, and determined by, history (personal and public), rather than as carefully crafted vessels for a performance meant to aid assimilation into heteronormative society (Stone 2006: 232). Basically, a major point in trans theory boils down to the fact that ignoring the queerness of the in/out dynamic by locking oneself in a closet made up of wishes of normality does not make the queerness of the trans experience go away – it merely adds shame, rather than pride, to the transgendered life. And when the naked superhero denies that the physical reality of their bodies is anything noteworthy, they take away the power of the sexual gaze. They also refuse to do the “polite” thing, namely to craft a performance buffered by the denial of the body and its cultural history, and then seek the approval of society. Instead, they are empowered through the continuous creation of a situation in which their own perception of their bodied existence is showcased as being more important to the creation of a stable identity than compliance with societal norms. One cannot help but feel that Stone, Feinberg, and Bornstein would approve. And while they are embracing their own power over their bodies, these skyclad heroes are putting themselves in a similar position to the one occupied by people with disabilities – one that is radically different from the conscious display of queer identity showcased through the fabulous costumes of the clothed hero; by not attempting to steer the gaze of the onlooker away from, or towards, certain desirable features or qualities through behaviour or mode of dress, they are deliberately making pride the only bulwark between themselves and the conclusions (conscious as well as automatic) drawn by whomever happens to be looking.

56 In the 1933 semi-biographical text Lili Elbe- Man into Woman, (which was originally published in 1931 in Danish, as: Fra Mand Til Kvinde. Lili Elbes Bekendelser.), Lili is effectively portrayed as two different people pre- and post-transition. (Hoyer 1933)
Of course, once we get down from the metaphorical level these heroes have wildly different personal reasons to remain naked in public. The Marvel character Cloud, the physical manifestation of a cloud of hyperintelligent cosmic gas, is mainly unaware of the basic rules that govern most human societies. For Husk (also Marvel) clothes are the impairment; if she wants to use her powers and prove herself equal to her team members, she has to be naked, since her power consists of the ability to transform her skin into any type of material by shedding one “husk” and replacing it with another. Girl One (Top Ten comics, DC Wildstorm) is naked because her chameleonic skin makes nudity easy and unobtrusive, and her choice does not, in itself, infer sexualized behaviour on her part – she is shocked to learn that another character’s colour blindness means that he sees her as naked, since he cannot see the otherwise distracting patterns of colour in her skin (Moore 2000); it is not her costuming choice but his gaze, or more precisely the way he imposes his observations on her as something of relevance, that sexualizes her and impairs her performance. Marvel’s enfant terrible, Mystique, is of course almost a chapter unto herself. Since she can mimic not only organic creatures, but also materials of any kind, she uses these powers of mimicry to “create” clothes, shoes, and even more complicated objects such as backpacks from her own body, effectively meaning that she is almost certainly naked even when she appears clothed.

Interestingly enough, Marvel appears to be light years ahead of other companies when it comes to challenging the voyeuristic gaze of the reader in this way, in terms of sheer numbers, with a lineup that also includes characters such as the Silver Surfer and Iceman, though characters such as Swamp Thing and Dr. Manhattan (both from DC Comics) are right up there with the rest of them when it comes to letting it all hang loose. And in defence of DC, it should be noted that Dr. Manhattan in particular takes this one step further, as there is no attempt to camouflage his genitalia behind fur or scales, or by giving him the (non-)genitalia of a Ken
doll. There are no attempts made to draw him solely from certain angles, or to place him behind handy objects whenever he is facing the reader – two of the more common techniques employed by comic book artists to avoid drawing all those fiddly bits like labia or the scrotum. When *Watchmen* hit the big screen in 2009, Dr. Manhattans' merrily swinging CGI penis literally stole the show as far as many viewers were concerned – though of course they would have had a fair warning if they had read the comic books beforehand.

Dr. Manhattans god-like intelligence means that he sees clothing, and in some cases the physical act of having sex that clothes are supposedly there to distract from, as unnecessary.

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57 To be fair, *Watchmen* was always considered, and marketed as, a title primarily intended for the adult audiences, and the creators were allowed more leeway than in superhero comic books that are kept appropriate for readers of all ages. However, this distinction is largely unknown by the mainstream moviegoer.

58 Screenshot from *Watchmen* (2009).
and illogical human conventions – as shown in the movie when he creates several doppelgängers to have sex with his girlfriend, leaving him free to work instead. To him, the human rules dictating which bits of the body should be covered in public must seem particularly irrelevant to observe in most cases, since determining factors such as fashion and sexual morality can change multiple times in the span of a single human lifetime, while he sees even the full span of human existence as being so brief that it is largely non-existent when compared to the universe as a whole.

Despite their varying personal reasons for choosing nudity as their uniform, these heroes create a space in which the body is literally laid bare, open to a re-determination of purpose and meaning (linguistic and cultural), and in which they are free to act as the facilitators of a potential shift in the constitution of both social and cultural norms whose stability is usually taken for granted. Their bodies are not vulnerable but challenging, and rather than being bound by societal norms, they stand as the ultimate reminders of the simple fact that the personal becomes political in the very moment where individual and societal realities clash and merge.
Conclusion.

A brief summary.

Chapter 1:

An identity can be othered in any number of ways, in relation to both heteronormative society and subcultural groupings. The difference between the stereotyped comic book fan, the non-heterosexual, non-cisgendered, or disabled individual, or indeed the superhero, lies not in the basic nature of what constitutes individual otherness, but in the degree of marginalization in relation to society as a whole. As such, being othered means existing in a shared liminal space; while subgroups may form in such as space, based on which shared attributes have caused society to inflict said liminality, there is a great deal of correlation to be found between both personal strategies of identity developed to allow someone to navigate this othered existence, and activist efforts to inflict changes in the societal mechanisms of deciding who is othered, and what this means.

As culturally significant artefacts, superhero comic books are the carriers of several layers of semiotic signifiers, functioning as both overt snapshots of contemporary norms, and as subversive vessels for the voices of othered identities. Since comic books tend to take a slightly cautious stance on potentially controversial subjects, the most radical messages are often found hiding under layers of apparent heteronormativity, enforced by both internal and
external censorship in the comic book industry. Ironically, this focus on streamlining the characters of mainstream comic books to match up with contemporary normative behaviour has meant that mainstream readers are more likely to end up reading subversive texts, rather than less; the wildly non-normative expressions of identity have been moved deeper into the layers of the text, so that many queer characters remain invisible as such at first glance, and are left free to go rampaging through the minds of surprisingly susceptible readers everywhere, re-wiring brains (and potentially reshaping society) as they go.

Chapter 2:

The othered identity is no more set in stone than the wiring of the brain it springs from. In-house fighting between assimilationists and radical liberationists is a constant and pervasive presence in contemporary othered communities, whether crip, queer, or superheroic. Whether one chooses to opt out of the organized communities or not is really a minor detail; when it comes to (re)determining the parameters of the othered existence, whichever organization secures the place nearest the top of the doggy pile of status relations get to set the political agenda. But in the meeting with normative society, the othered individual must face a reality in which (s)he will often be seen as a representative for othered identities in general, meaning that the personal is recast as a political statement. As such, the communal strategies of empowerment through personal pride and awareness affect changes in both the personal lives of othered individuals, and in the wider scope of society as a whole. When the superhero comic book explores the consequences of taking a stand, whether it is on pro- or anti-cure rhetorics, sexual shaming vs. inherent dignity, or even the idea of non-normative personal traits as being either advantageous or pathological, they educate readers on the workings of a society that is based on the mechanisms of rewarding conformity to the norms
of the majority and silencing the minority voices through the loss (or flat-out absence) of status.

Chapter 3:

The bodied experience is a defining factor in othered lives, and recognizing and embracing it can be a powerful tool for change. The superhero is, by sheer dint of being super, an intense and powerful representation of the inescapable nature of the bodied experience. Whether (s)he is mutated to the point of actual disfigurement, stands out as the physical manifestation of the ultimate sexual body, or falls somewhere in between, the heroic (or failing) body is a defining feature of any superhero. Some of these heroes can pass for normal after zipping into a phone booth to put on a pair of glasses. Others cannot. Some flat out refuse to even try.

In closing.

Despite sales figures that have declined from literally hundreds of thousands of sold copies pr. issue in any given month in the 1940s, into the relatively modest 20-30.000 issues that an issue can realistically be expected to sell in a month today (with even top-selling titles topping at less than 150.000 in total), the superhero comic books is still going strong. As a concept, the superhero is as pervasive in contemporary American culture as it is iconic; when even people who have never picked up a comic book in their lives knows the setup in the most recent Avengers movie (Marvel/Walt Disney Pictures, 2012), it is merely a sign that the superhero narrative has been remade to fit a modern audience yet again, while remaining essentially determined by the open-ended reality of the comic book as a media. This has happened multiple times, such as when comic books changed in the 1950s to
fit a world dominated by Frederick Wertham’s anti-queer rhetorics and the CCA, and later when the advance of participatory fan culture facilitated a still-on-going shift into the world of the interactive, with polls conducted via phone calls (and later, online fora) determining their actual content. This delicate balance between more than seventy years of on-going publishing history, and the ability to capture the essence of a time in order to appeal to a consumer based culture, means that the superhero comic book is ideally situated to explore the underlying currents in society at large, and to track both larger shifts and subtle changes in the mainstream approach to a number of issues, such as politics, morality, and personal identity (to name but a few).

The superhero is perched precariously, with one foot placed firmly in the camps of both mainstream culture and outcast society; it is at once respectable and naughty, predictable and uncanny. As such, it can act as a tenuous bridge between communities fostering radical new ideas, and a heteronormative majority that is not as much unwilling to change, as it is in lack of input to facilitate said changes. And the nature of the ideas that are transferred in this way is in part determined by the way that, at the very heart of the superhero story, there are a number of issues that are also core points in cultural studies approaches to queer-, crip- and trans identities, namely:

- the struggle between personal and public identity, as well as between regulated (legal/heteronormative) vs. unsanctioned (vigilante/activist) activity, and
- the ever-present otherness, which is exactly what makes the superhero “super”.

When these are laid out it becomes clear that the superhero comic book is, in fact, not just a barometer for contemporary issues, but a major player in the game of changing people’s attitudes towards the othered, so gently that it might seem unnoticeable at first glance. Whether it is Mystique teaching us that gender needs not be a fixed truth, or Dr. Manhattan demonstrating a casual contempt for the idea
of the taboo body, readers and movie-goers everywhere are catching a glimpse of a world they might not see otherwise; a world in which the ultimate truth is that being a slut, a shady queen, a freak of nature, or a gender outlaw is neither shameful nor debilitating. Those who do come across these rebellious attitudes on a regular basis, or even embody them – the crips, the queers, and the trans persons – are given the luxury of recognizable role models that are not marginalized by being specifically tailored as othered characters (the way a character such as Northstar is), but that are presented to, and accepted by, a society otherwise geared towards unconscious yet automatic marginalization or outright exclusion of those different in body or mind.

Comic books are pulp entertainment, yes. They are cheap and disposable, containing stories whose beginnings are often lost in the mists of time to all but the most dedicated of fans, and with no end in sight. They are also wonderful, inspiring, subversive, and a playground for all of the wild ideas that do not have an immediate and obvious outlet in the American consumption-based mainstream society. For me, comic books have been a constant companion since early childhood, and while I may have traded in Uncle Scrooge for The Sandman, many of my favourite titles and characters are still the same, after almost a quarter of a decade. When I was a teenager, Batman taught me about the hardships of maintaining a closeted identity, and why it was ultimately doomed to fail for most people, but he also taught me tolerance for those who chose to do it. Mystique allowed me to see how an untraditional gender identification could manifest as something other than the poor trannies that inevitably turned up as murder victims in various cop shows on TV from the mid-90s onwards, giving me a healthy antidote to the feelings of being locked in by stereotypes and negative associations before I had even made a conscious decision to start exploring the world of gender performance in honest. And to this day, whenever I feel locked in by a disabling society, I pick up a comic book and let Beast, Xavier, and Magneto remind me of how an impairment can be turned into an advantage. Academic research and political manifestos are
certainly a powerful tools for affecting a change in society, but to the average consumer, stories about superheroes are infinitely more accessible (and enjoyable) than, for example, the brilliant but convoluted writings of Judith Butler or the anarchist approach found in the Mad Pride manifesto. One cannot replace the other, but if we hold the theory up to the mirror of reality provided by comic books, we are rewarded with a clear look at the stunning displays of non-normative behaviour put on by these superheroes, in their position as well-established and highly visible role models for generations of Americans.
Appendix 1.

Page scan from: *The Flash* #53. Loebs et al. (DC Comics, New York, 1991)
LNNHH...  

RUH?

IT'S NOT ME, SURE.
IT'S OKAY, WHATSOEVER HAPPENED, IT'S GONNA BE FINE. NO WORRIES.

I'm OKAY?

SHATTERSTAR, YOU OKAY?

UL-KAY, DIDN'T SEE THAT COMIN!
Appendix 3a.

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Appendix 3a.

Second Series (#14, 30, 205)
Ultra Collection (#1, 3)
Prime (One Shot)
The End: Book One (#4)
The End: Book Two (#1, 4)
Odd Men Out (#1)
Endangered Species (Part One)
What If... (#46-47, #69)
The Wedding Album (#1)

Weapon X
Days of Future Now (#4)

Wolverine
Raimie of Tenor (#1)

Excalibur
First Series (#82)

New Warriors
First Series (#45-46)

New X-men
First Series (#120-130)
Second Series (#44)

Misc
Marvel illustrated: Premiere issue

Reprints/MRR's, Brochures, appendix, and Guides are NOT included here.

Shatterstar Appearances

The New Mutants
Volume 1 (#99, 100 *first appearances*)
Annual #7 (1991)

X-Force
Volume 1 (#1-7, 9-17, 19-30, 32-36, 38-41, 43-45, 47-68, 70, 76, 91, 100)
Volume 2 (#1-6)
Volume 3 (#9 – cover)

X-Force: Shatterstar #5 (#1-4)

X-Force Annuals/Specials
Shatterstar 1992
#2 (1993)
#3 (1994)
Cable and X-Force '95
Cable and X-Force '96
Cable and X-Force '97
Annual 1999
X-Force & Youngblood (2 issues)
Second Series (#1-6)

Cable
Volume 2 (#13, 22, 29, 59)
Cold and Bottled (#57, 60)

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Appendix 3a.

(Carpe and Deadpool (pts. 40)

**New Warriors**
Volume 1 (#31, 45, 46)
Annual #1 (1991)

**X-Men**
Second Series (#4, 30, 41)
Annual ’95
Ultraverse Collection (#3)
Civil War (All issues: #1-4)
Ultraverse: First Series (#8, 12)
Prime (One-shot)
What if...: Still, the X-Men
What if...: Storm Had the Power of the Phoenix
Millennial Visions 2001 (Vol. 1 #2)
Gambit & Bishop (#3)
Legacy (#208)
The Wedding Album (#1)
X-Men/Clandestine (#2)

**Uncanny X-Men**
#293, 304, 331
Annual #15 (1991)

**X-Men: The End**
Book One: Dreamers and Demons (#4)
Book Two: Heroes and Martyrs (#4, 5, 6)
Book Three: Men and X-Men (#6)

**Wolverine**
#54

**Spiderman**
#16

**X-Man**
#19

**Excalibur**
Volume 1 (#92)

**X-Factor**
Volume 1 (#84, 106)
Annual #6 (1991)
Volume 3 (#26, 43, 45-50)
Renumbered (#200)
Nation X: X-Factor (#1)

**Misc**
Marvel Masterpieces (#4)
Astonishing Tales (#5)

*Reprints/TPB's, Sourcebooks, and Guides are NOT included here.*

**Rictor and Shatterstar Appearances**
(Totally)

**X-Force**
#1, 17, 18, 19, 20
Appendix 3a.

#14-17, 19-27, 29, 30
#32-50, 59-60, 63-64, 67-70, 76, 100
***Ric’s appearances with Weapon Prime are not included here (#11-13)

X-Force Annuals and Specials
Annual #2 (1993)
Cable and X-Force ’97
Annual 1999
X-Force Megazine #1

Cable
Second Series (#22)
Cable and Deadpool (#18*, 40)

New Warriors
First Series (#45, 46)

X-Men
Second Series (#14, 30, 41)
Ultra Collection (#5) - Cover
Prime (One Shot)
The End: Book One (#4), Book Two (#4)
What if...? Skyfe Killed the X-Men?
What if...? Storm had the Power of the Phoenix?
The Wedding Album (#1)

Uncanny X-Men
#295, 304

Excalibur
First Series (#62)

X-Factor
First Series (#84, 106)
Third Series (#43, 45-50)
Renumbered (#200)
Nation X: X-Factor (#1)

****Reprints/TPB’s, Encyclopedias, and Guides are NOT included here.

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(Shattering the Earth: A Rictor and Shatterstar Fansite. 10-05-2010)
At first glance one unfamiliar with the characters of Rictor and Shatterstar may think they are just another slash pairing. Two male characters forced together from imaginative fantasies with no grounds or basis for affection. And while in most fandom cases this tends to be true, Ric and Shifty are quite a different story.

For many years their relationship was built up and hinted at -- teased even -- while these two best friends teamed together. Marvel dropped many hints in both their art and dialogue, and even as far as some plots. During a time when outwardly gay superheroes weren’t particularly a common thing, many fans still had their speculations.

And while Marvel writers denied it at the time, their very own books spoke otherwise. Ric and 'Star’s relationship can be compared to a comic “urban legend”; were they, or weren’t they? What were the writer’s true intentions? Was there really anything there, or was it all wishful thinking?

Most writers have been tight-lipped, while others have continually teased the possibility. But after getting to know these two boys, the chemistry cannot at all be denied. Behold below the complete history of Rictor and Shatterstar’s relationship -- as teammates, friends, and perhaps one of comics’ first canon pair of gay lovers.

Our boys first met in X-Force #14. Rictor had been serving as a member of GW Bridge’s Weapon PRIME, and X-Force was being sought out as a means to locate Cable. Upon seeing his old buddy from the New Mutants apart from Cable’s
Appendix 3b.

leadership, Rictor quickly defects and joins the team. He and Shatterstar didn’t have much to say at first, but it began the series of snappy dialogue between them.

During the X-Cutioner’s Song crossover event, X-Force was wanted and apprehended by the X-Men and the government sanctioned X-Factor team. During the altercation, Shatterstar had been impaled through the chest by the claws of Wolverine. Upon seeing this, Rictor is quick to react and even chose to take out his former girlfriend (and proclaimed love) to avenge him. (Issue #16).

Upon being released, X-Force is placed on probation, in the weeks they were at the school. Star and Rick hung out and messed around in the Danger Room. They get a nice work out in, and Shatterstar looks as though he enjoys Rictor’s leisurely stretching. (Issue #19).

After spending some time on their own and settling into the Camp Verde Reservation, the boys had already completed a few missions together. By the time Cable returns though, things become a bit tense. Shatterstar has girls throwing themselves at him left and right, but all that flirting only sends him over to the one he really wants -- and Rictor is perplexed. (X-Force #26)

We next see them together in X-Force #29. Shatterstar decides he should get some experience out in the world, and like a good pal, Ric takes him into town. But not before voicing his concerns and telling him that he’ll be there if he needs him. Aw.

X-Force #34 was a nice defining moment. Catching a telecast from Mexico, Shatterstar seeks out Rictor and informs him that his family is in trouble. But not only does he inform him, but he does so in Rictor’s native tongue, Spanish! Rictor is astonished that Shatty had learned, and when asked how and why, Shatterstar responds that in case they ever need to speak of highly personal things, they can do so without eavesdroppers being able to listen in. And this was just the first language learned for such reasons.

After really spending some time together and getting to know each other, Rictor drags Shatterstar out for a night. Murderworld was the first base in a city, and Ric was ready for some fun. But harmless dancing for the Mexican was a sore spot (perhaps even jealousy?) for Shatterstar, and he has no problem showing it.

After being grabbed at, Shatty takes off and voices his concerns to Rictor. There they admit to each other they are virgins, and discuss Shatty’s bioengineered package in an alley on a rainy night. Then, Rictor promises to help him with anything he needs. Aw, (X-Force #43).

Murderworld didn’t last long, and was eventually blown up by a fail safe left by Arcade, issue #44 (following the Age of Apocalypse Arc) found X-Force back at the Xavier institute. Shatty and Ric seem closer than ever, but when Cable

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announces he will be telepathically linking himself to everyone on the team. Rictor goes ballistic and decides he would rather live back at home with his gun running family than stay with X-Force. Shatterstar is absolutely devastated and begs him to stay.

**Cable #22** saw the heart wrenching scene that saw the two best friends say **goodbye**. Shatterstar begs and pleads for him to stay, and Rictor's best to **let him down easy**. But Cable is able to pick up on the **emotions being displayed** and even he tries to persuade Rictor to come back.

And as soon as Rictor leaves, **Shitty is broken**, in a fit of rage, he jumps a machine gun wielding criminal in a suicide dive --- and takes a **gunshot wound to the chest** for his efforts.

After being released from the med lab, Shatterstar joins his teammates in an attempted intervention on his teammate, Tabitha. But when help turns into a bully fast, Shatterstar angrily steps out, claiming that when someone you care about wants to live their life a certain way, you must let them --- if only for their happiness --- even if he thinks it's wrong. Just like he did with Rictor when you love something, **let it go**.

In X-Force #69, Shatterstar goes out on the town alone, and finds himself back at the dance club Rictor took him to. There he tors and another **Lovely Lady's Straves** and returns to thinking about his best friend. While deep in thought, our warrior stumbles across a **gay bashing** and breaks it up.

The next mention came in the form of a **narrative box**. Shatterstar and Siyn are both lonely with the recent loss of their friends and take up a sparring exercise at an abandoned church. This one small box is probably the biggest piece of evidence of their relationship yet. (X-Force #58).

At the peak of Shitty's identity crisis, Cable finally **interrogates him**. The negative attention gets them no where near closer to solving the problem, but one dear amigo thinks otherwise. **Rictor finally returns** and wants to help 'Star in a positive manner. They are happily reunited, and can't keep away from each other. (X-Force #59)

Shatterstar is suddenly abducted by Mojo and his Protectovate. At the abrupt loss of his friend, Rictor is in absolute shambles, proving the deep affection was not just one sided on 'Star's part. Rictor is quick to **dismiss and disrespect anyone** who may in the way of him getting his friends back. (X-Force #60)

And when Shatterstar finally fulfills his destiny, he dies. And no one is more broken and alone then Rictor. The Mexican threatens to **destroy the Earth** to get his friend back, and no one can stop him from leveling the place with his anger. However, Spiral pulls through and claims she can save him, but needs Siyn's familiarity with the Wiesman institute to do it. Rictor refuses, stating if anyone should be saving Shatty, it's him.

The warrior returns to his amigo in one piece, and they

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A few issues later, Ric and Shatty are captured and experimented on during Operation: Zero Tolerance. The boys escape together eventually and reunite with X-Force, but Cable has other plans for them. For their protection he announces he has created aliases for them, and orders the team to live underground. Rictor openly states the only important thing keeping him on the team is Star, and that he won’t be living underground to help Cable. Shatty agrees, saying he would rather give his limbs to be with his friend then hide like a coward. The boys break away from the team and leave to go live together in Mexico. (X-Force #70).

We don’t see Ric and Shatty again until a few issues later. Arcade has kidnapped Rictor, and the only way he is to be released is by Shatterstar fighting against Domino in a choice to kill his friend and former leader, or let Rictor die. Star tells Dom not to take it personally and attacks her. The fight is a brutal one, but Domino comes out on top. The end shows that Rictor was not actually the target at all, but rather Star was. His healing gets him out of the jam, and both boys escape with their lives in tact. (X-Force #70).

Finally, the issue that sealed it all, the X-Force Annual 1999. Rictor and Shatterstar are a team of vigilantes taking down organized crime, and are propositioned by a mysterious business man offering them ten thousand dollars to take on some test experiments. The endeavor gives us a nice look at Shatty from Ric’s POVs, as well as an infamous hotel scene — in which the boys politely turn down two executive suits for one shared quarters. They spend the night together and start their mission the following morning, and again we see some great team work and the boys taking care of one another.

The business was not all it seemed, and they uncover ulterior motives, as well as some familiar faces from the past. They fight them off but X-Force shows up to stop them. Ric and Shatty could care less what their old friends have to say about their choices, and take off on them again with some unique help from Rictor’s powers.

The end of the issue saw them take off together to (Seemingly) live happily ever after. This would be the last time the boys appear together on panel in a #verse book.

in an alternate future, Ric and Shatty are teamed up together again in X-Force. They are attacked on a plane in mid air and in the midst of battle against an alien force, Shatterstar is killed and dies. And Ric is the one left to bury him. Eventually, the Mexican is a casualty as well, and it taken by the same fate. (X-Men: The End, Book One #6).

X-Force is launched again a few years later in a limited series. And while our favorite Mexican wasn’t asked back to play, we do get a nice mention of him. Sam Guthrie has seen the future, and isn’t about to side with Cable ever again. When Nathan points out that even Star trusts him, Sam retorts by

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Appendix 3b.

saying, “Star would never follow Cable if he was aware of
Nate’s responsibility for Rictor’s death in the
future. Even Sam knows Star would take Cable’s head for such a
file. (X-Force 2nd Series #5).

Shatterstar shows up again with X-Force, and even though
Rictor isn’t visibly in attendance, he does get a speech
bubble. Whether or not this was an artist or writer mistake
remains to be seen, but in any sense, this would show they
were together again just around the time of the Desolation.
(Cable and Deadpool #15).

After joining Madrox’s X-Factor, Rictor has been down in
the dumps and depressed. One day he finds himself in a bar with his
boss, and finally makes a comment about his stance on man
on man relations. He doesn’t outwardly make an
announcement, but the implication is there.

And after he washes himself of Madrox’s spit, Rictor gets
a turn to shower. Jamie; Madrox claims Rictor wouldn’t hook up with
Pietro, especially when it may make Shatty jealous.
Ouch, did someone hit a sore spot; Rictor? (X-Factor, Volume 3,
#14).

When life gets tough for Rictor, he finds himself in bed with an
old flame. And while that old flame isn’t Ray, it begins to flash
out Rictor’s character as a bisexual. More references and hints are
dropped about his sexuality throughout the book (including
throw away lines from Brokash Mountain, sheets). (X-
Factor, Volume 3)

Later on in the X-Factor run, Rictor and Strong Guy take a
road trip to visit one of Madrox’s dupes in Vermont. When
they show up, it appears they are being followed by a masked
man. Once the doppelganger is in his home, the masked
man makes his presence known and attacks through an
office window. Guido immediately goes to fight him, and
pulls off the mask to reveal Shatterstar underneath. He
says nothing but the word “Cortex”.

A fight ensues, but even with Shatterstar under the
supposed mind control, the boys still buster at each
other back and forth. Rictor eventually realizes that he can’t
stop ‘Star, and most likely would have been injured or killed if
Strong Guy didn’t intervene. Despite the attack, however, Ric
don’t want to see ‘Star hurt and begs Strong Guy to be
careful. Not Guido’s strength; a large fall, or any strikes we
able to stop Shatterstar until Cortex is intercepted by his
bosses’ Shatterstar is let free of the control and, when he
finally gathers his bearings, recognizes Rictor. The two friends
don’t take much time after that to meet for a kiss. This
marks the two officially becoming a “cannon” couple, and
arguably Marvel’s first romantic male/male on panel kiss. (X-
Factor, Volume 3, #43, 43, 44)

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*X-Factor #45* (Marvel Comics, New York, 2009)

*X-Force # 104* (Marvel Comics, New York, 1992)

*X-Men Forever #5* (Marvel Comics, New York, 2001)
Summary.

While Superman’s perfect physique or Catwoman’s slinky grace might be the first things that come to mind when thinking about the (super)heroic body, the simple fact is that no other genre of literature has quite such an array of disabled, monstrous, scarred, vulnerable and rebellious bodies as comic books (and their off-shot movies). We respect Batman for the way he ignores the aches and pains of his abused and all-too-human body to carry out his chosen mission, and empathize with Fantastic 4’s the Thing when he goes to a pub in all of his orange, rocky glory, despite his insecurity and vulnerability to body-shaming. When Superman is rendered weak and helpless by Kryptonite, we understand his helplessness and frustration, and cheer him on when he still manages to overcome his weakened state to save the day. In their own ways, superheroes make us re-involve and rethink the body as both a marker of, and a fundamental element in, personal identity in a social setting. And since these heroes are also fabulous, and often supremely fit for the niche they inhabit, we are treated to a glimpse of a world in which being different does not mean being less-than-normal, pitiful, or in desperate need of a cure – a world in which being different can even be an advantage.

At the same time, a fair number of the powers that make many of these heroes “super” effectively ensures that their wielders embody qualities that are (usually) only seen on the margins of society; shape shifting abilities mean that a number of characters are effectively non-cisgendered, while even the simplest acts of physical affection between partners are queered when one partner is monstrous/an android/ alien/non-cisgendered/etc. – regardless of the actual gender of the people involved. Lois Lane is, after all, in love with an alien; however humanoid Superman may be, the lines between innocent love, technical bestiality,
and outright fetishism of the other-than-normal body are being crossed and examined over and over again, as new writers take over from old and put their own spin on a story that has been told continuously since 1938.

Through these explorations of the other-than-normal identities and lives, the superhero stories create a space in which we can think about gender performance, body-shame and sexual liberty, personal and political responsibility, and minority issues – to name but a few. And not simply by providing handy metaphors for the experiences of queer, disabled, or transgendered individuals. Comic books exist in a liminal space, somewhere between mass-produced entertainment and obscure cultural artefacts, between normative and subversive, adult and childish, mainstream and outcast. They tell deceptively simple stories perched precariously on top of ridiculously complicated continuities, and encourage the reader to trust her own competence, intuition and experience when it comes to making sense of the messages embedded in the deeper layers of the text; while there are a few instances in superhero stories where the similarities between the “superheroic” experience and minority issues are spelled out, most of these parallels are hinted at or apparently incidental. Whenever a superhero has to come out (as a superhero), the nod to queer experience is obvious. When mutants are the victims of persecution, it is easy to think racism or sexuality into the equation. But what might not be obvious is the way the physicality of the manifest difference between superheroic and average encourages us to think about the value inherent in both being able to pass (for normal), and in inhabiting a body or mind that is too unlike the cultural ideal to pass – and how these varying types of experience are translated into activism and strategies of empowerment.
Using tools such as crip-, queer- and trans- theory, as well as theories exploring the link between status, normativity, gender and consumption, this thesis unwraps the layers of the superhero comic books and movies to find examples of both outright queer imagery, and of the subversive ethics hidden behind years of approximated heteronormativity, self-imposed censorship, and half-forgotten continuities. The superhero is presented as a role model for non-normative individuals, as a (subversive) agent of change in heteronormative society, and as a mirror for contemporary activist strategies in queer, trans and disability-based communities.