Superheroes and Society: Tracing the socio-cultural trajectory of American mainstream superheroes

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2013

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Acknowledgments:

I would like to thank my family for the support they have given me over the course of this research paper, and for tolerating me in my caffeine induced manic moments. I would more importantly like to thank my supervisor Susan Gill who has been the pillar of calm and sound advice that I needed to write this research paper. Many thanks - you really were crucial!

ABSTRACT

This dissertation analyses the trajectory of superheroes within American mainstream comics. The research hypothesises that American mainstream superheroes can be traced according to the socio-cultural environment within which they were conceived. This paper will demonstrate how the role of women in society can be traced through the portrayal of Wonder Woman during WWII and Lois Lane in the workplace during the 1970s. The analysis will then suggest how the consistently increasing size of the physiques of today's superheroes has been mirrored in the arenas of professional sport and cinema. Finally this paper demonstrates how the early lack of representation, and subsequent coverage of gay and lesbian themes within comics has been telling of the socio-cultural perceptions of homosexuality since the introduction of the Comics Code Authority in 1954.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The intention of this research paper is to examine the social and cultural themes imbedded within mainstream American superhero comics. The hypothesis, or proposition that will form the basis for this analysis, will entail the examination of whether the trajectory of superheroes within comic books can be traced according to the social, cultural and political environments within which they were conceived. This paper will demonstrate how the metamorphoses of some of the leading and most recognisable superheroes from the Marvel and DC universes have been dictated by the social and political times within which they were inked. One will also theorise that superheroes can act as a barometer of the status of social issues such as the role of women, body image and homosexuality at any given time, and in extension that they, as a widely consumed medium, can contribute to the instigation of change within the same social arenas. Comics, and the superheroes residing within them don the rare power to echo, comment upon and respond to the social, political or economic concerns of the eras in within which they were produced. The requirement of superheroes to keep up with society, and adapt periodically to the changing cultural and political feelings of the times, makes them a powerful tool in tracing the cultural and political history of the society in which they were situated.

Marvel and DC Comics have remained the two publishers with the largest circulation in the United States since the introduction of the superhero genre in the late 1930s, and their publications account for roughly seventy percent of the overall comics sold within the territory. As such, the implications and significance of their content can be said to usurp that of their less widely circulated counterparts. The necessitation of the current research rests in two main areas. Firstly, both Marvel and DC have reintroduced many of their titluar superheroes in the

past four years, meaning the comics and the ideas portrayed by the superheroes residing within them are reaching the hands of a new generation which will be affected by their content. Secondly, the themes that this paper will analyse through the portrayal of superheroes have been chosen due to their significance in society. The role of women, body image, and homosexuality are issues which are constantly at the forefront of cultural and political dialogue, and as such are interacted with on a daily basis by all of society. With the view to executing the best and most appropriate investigation of the hypothesis, qualitative content analysis was undertaken in order to gauge both the literal and subtextual messages within the comics that would either help to prove or disprove the hypothesis. The sections within the study were organised according to the social theme that was to be examined, as opposed to the superhero title. The reason for this orientation was that it allowed for the more concise and branched treatment of the respective social themes, drawing examples from the illustrative comics, as opposed to the attempted derivation of a number of unconnected themes from each of the superhero titles.

The data analysis chapter of this research paper will present the key findings of the methodology commencing with the exploration of the feminist movements within superhero comics. One will present the implications that World War II had on the portrayal of women during *The Bronze Age of Comics*, and will travel right through the second wave of feminism, concluding with the status of women as portrayed within the superhero titles of today. Following this, one will present the hypothesis in reference to the issue of body image in comics. The implications of the movements within other arenas such as the film and sports industry will be presented and the possible stimuli for change that these industries experienced on account of the changing portrayal of some of comics leading superheroes will also be discussed. Finally, one will analyse how homosexual themes have been treated within comics

since the inception of *Batman* in 1939. One will explore whether of not the content within the comics is reflective of the changing perceptions regarding the position of homosexuality in the United States.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Comics as a vehicle for addressing social and cultural issues

> "The [comics] industry has a rich tapestry of American cultural attitudes
> and philosophies that reflect varying approaches to issues that continue to
> haunt, confound and rile the American public"
> (Palmer-Mehta and Hay 2005, pg.290).

The clarity of the messages transmitted within comics can often held to be more powerful than that of other mediums (McCloud 2008). As such, comics can be used as a powerful vessel to purport important messages. In the past three decades, mainstream comics have approached a vast variety of social issues in an "even-handed, open-minded manner" (Mac 2000). This commenced when Stan Lee's wrote of the dangers of hallucinogenic drugs within the pages of *The Amazing Spider-Man* followed with Dennis O'Neil tackling the delicate issue of racism through the pages of *Green Lantern* in the 70s, continued with Frank Miller's view of the superhero as a fascist in *Batman: Return of the Dark Knight* in the 80s, and remains today as this paper will outline. Following on from the hypothesis that comics can act as a barometer of the social and political environment within which it is created, theorists Duncan and Smith endorse this position, and further suggest that not only can comics be employed to comment upon politics of a particular time, but that comics can often foreshadow and act as a stimulus to social change. This notion will be explored in orientation to the influence that superheroes have on body image in society. Prior to America's accession into war with Germany, *Captain America* had punched Hitler in the jaw (*Captain America* Comics # 1) and the American Flag had toppled Nazi tanks (*Our Flag Comics* # 2). The patriotic hero comics of World War II were

overtly advocating for America to step up and take control of the "manifest evil" (Levitz 2009, p.250).

Significance of the superhero

The superhero is a figure that has held its place in the pantheon of American cultural iconography throughout the 20th century and is now seeing a loving rebirth in the early years of the 21st (Wilgus 2011). Although the comics industry in recent years has seen a surge in the portrayal of what could be considered to be sensitive or inflammatory issues, with the release of 2011 titles *9-11: Emergency Relief* (the events of 9/11) and *Jack* (plot based on Columbine School shooting), the one genre which will be eternally linked with comics is the superhero genre. Peter Coogan suggests superheroes "derived from three primary streams of adventure-narrative figures: the science fiction *Superman* (Frankenstein), the pulp Übermensch (Doc Savage, Tarzan.), and the dual-identity vigilante (Robin Hood) (Duncan and Smith 2009). *Superman* remains the epitome and perfect embodiment of the classic superhero. "He has a secret identity, supernatural powers, a costume and a boy-scout mentality" (Saemann 2011, 3). Although such elements existed prior to *Superman*'s conception, they were certainly not all employed in one character. *Superman*'s inception came from humble beginnings in the midst of The Great Depression. Created by Siegler and Shuster in 1933 with a view to sell in order to escape the poverty of the era, his role would be that of a hope giver; a release from the troubles that were being witnessed outside of the pages. As a social-activist fighting crooked businessmen and politicians, "he was for many a symbol of patriotism and pure-spirited heroism in an increasingly fragile world" (Rohrer 2006, pg. 1). The Man of Steel's first female compatriot, *Wonder Woman*, came from similar beginnings. Her creator, William Moulton Marston felt that "antisocial, violent tendencies in humanity were undesirably masculine traits

that were best subdued by the socializing and loving influence of a powerful, maternal figure"
(Moulton 1942 cited by Wandtke 2012, p.152). *Superman*'s real celebrity came to pass in June
1938, when he was selected for the front cover of Action Comics (now DC comics) #1
(Ndalianis 2009). To put this celebrity and influence in context, in 2010 *Superman* was named
one of the worlds 10 most recognised 'people' (Coville 2010). He set the tone for what the
market both needed and wanted in the time of the Great Depression, and not long after his
arrival, the 'Masked Avenger' *Batman*, and an array of other supreme beings had arrived. Since
1938, "like the idea of God, the idea of superheroes has changed with the times, subject to
canonical revision, radical exegesis and acrimonious debate (Martin 2011, p.1)".

Survival of the Superhero

Superhero comics can be said to have followed a tangible trajectory. Originating inspiringly in
the 1930's, blossoming with physically strength and numbers the 1940s, struggling in the 1950s
and the necessitated self-reinvention of the industry in the 1960s (Saemann 2012). Events like
the publication of the *Seduction of the Innocent*[1] (hereafter SOTI) and the creation of the CCA
(hereafter CCA)[2] have been major players in the formation of this timeline. Irrespective of the
ebbs and flows in the comics industry, the fundamental qualities required of a superhero have
remained the same. Despite many nuances within their personifications over the years, the main
characteristics of super heroism have remained constant. "The realm of the superheroes is
occupied by individuals with fantastic powers (whether magic or "science based"), as well as

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[1] The *Seduction of the Innocent* was a book written by psychiatrist Dr. Fredric Wertham that warned
that comic books were a negative form of popular literature and their reading gave rise to juvenile
delinquency. Other conjectures, particularly about hidden sexual themes within comics, were also
purported within the book.
[2] The Comics Code Authority set out guidelines pertaining to what comics content was appropriate,
allowing the publishers to self-regulate their content in the United States.

people who fight their battles with advanced technology (often differentiated form magic only because the author says so) or people who are just plain brave/crazy/lucky (Fingeroth 2004, p.16). "Superhero narratives, as they are traditionally understood, involve colourfully garbed heroic icons that demonstrate uncanny strength, intelligence, supernatural powers, and near infallibility" (Di Paolo 2011, p. 2). A crucial quality that a superhero but be bestowed with is the ability to adapt and change over time. *Superman* was born out of a need for hope, in a time of depression. Thus, it is unsurprising that superheroes have had to adapt to the societies within which they are functioning. The changes that superheroes undergo, then, can act as indicators of the changing needs and interests within their society. Taking *Superman* as an example, in an ode to his patriotism, just as the Second World War broke out, he changed his slogan from fighting for "truth and justice" to fighting for "truth, justice and the American way" (Harris 2013). Aside from what is required of a superhero to last the test of time, the conception of what *defines* a superhero has seen vast revisions throughout the years. The requirements of what a superhero must represent changes as society changes. In *Supergods*, Morrison takes the contrast between *Superman* and *Batman* as his illustration of this point:

> "Superman began as a socialist, but *Batman* was the ultimate capitalist hero, which may help explain his current popularity (…) Batman was a wish-fulfilment figure as both filthy-rich Bruce Wayne and his swashbuckling alter ego. In a world where wealth and celebrity are measures of accomplishment, it's no surprise that the most popular superhero characters today-Batman and Iron Man-are both handsome tycoons" (Morrison 2011, p. 56).

The ability of superheroes to conform to society's needs is matched with society's willingness to accept their frequent revision. "This survival [of the superheroes over the decades] is due largely to the willingness of the public at large to see them grow and change and be constantly updated, and be expanded into other media forms" (Wandtke, p.5-6). Next, another defining quality of many of the most successful superheroes is their 'double-life'. A double-life distinguishes superheroes from their mythological precursors. Morrison suggests that the one

factor that separated *Superman* from the mythic gods was Clark Kent. "Hercules was always

Hercules. Agamemnon and Perseus were heroes from the moment they leaped out of bed in the

morning until the end of a long battle-crazed day, but Superman was secretly someone else"

(Morrison 2011, p. 9).

Social themes in comics

> *"Few enduring expressions of American popular culture are so instantly recognizable and still so poorly understood as comics" (Wright 2001, xiv).*

Since the incarnation of *Wonder Woman* within the pages of *All Star Comics* #8, her persona

has undergone tangible changes that can be used to unearth the evolution of the role of women

in American society. In *Reading Wonder Woman's Body: Mythologies of Gender and Nation*,

Emad explores the transient nature of *Wonder Woman*'s body, and uses the manifest evolution

of her form as an instrument to trace this trajectory.

> "Reading *Wonder Woman*'s body is an exercise in swinging between the binaries of women's physical empowerment (and sexual freedom) and representations of a body in bondage, lassoed into submission, sometimes by her own power" (Emad 2006, p. 956).

Emad notes the subtle softening of *Wonder Woman*'s physique after the death of her creator,

William Mouton Marston, who had conceived her to serve as opposition to the "blood curdling

masculinity" of [then] contemporary comics and to "empower women to look after themselves

and discover the strengths of their own physical and economic strengths" (Marston 1944, p.

42). Landay contributes to this notion, and uses *Wonder Woman*'s operation within wartime

popular culture as a metaphor for the "movement of femininity out of the garden and into the

war" (Landay 1998, p. 147). The subordination of women, and their issues in society in post-

WWII America is visible through the portrayal of *Lois Lane*. Williams submits how the

paralleling of *Superman* - and his foe Lex Luther, and *Lois Lane* - and her rival Lana Lang, is illustrative of this point. The scope of their respective conflicts serves only to highlight the distinctions between the alleged male and female priorities during the 1950s. While Luthor wanted to take over the world, Lana wanted only fight off her competition in *Lois*, to marry *Superman*. *Lois'*s characterisation as impulsive and frivolous reflected the tenets of post-war publication "the feminist mystique" which attained female fulfillment only through marriage, motherhood and homemaking (Williams 1990).

Taylor, in *He's Gotta Be Strong, and He's Gotta Be Fast, and He's Gotta Be Larger Than Life,* investigates how the engendered superhero has been reflected in society since *Superman's* inception in 1938. He defines superheroes as the ultimate paragons for the late 20th century cult of fitness to base itself on (Taylor 2007). Wayne Boring is credited with devising the model of *Superman*, whose "granite features and muscles body" typifies an idealized post-war masculinity and is the paradigm on which today's Man of Steel is based (Sassiene 1994 p. 23). Taylor comments upon what he refers to as the 'otherness', of the *superbody* - its strange powers, its anatomical exaggerations, its continual reconceptualisations and how these qualities have become normative, even within the realms of the 'non-super' superheroes such as *Batman* and *Iron Man*. He holds the triadic relationship between *form*, *fanship* and *history* as the stimuli for the transient nature of superhero bodies. Taylor (2007) suggests these as functioning interdependently to inform the varying strategies by which the bodies of superheroes are produced and received. In *Superstars, Superheroes and the Male Body Image,* Jirousek accords the changing body of the superhero with the emergence of televised American Football. She compares the triangular silhouette of a professional football player sporting protective shoulder padding, to that of a superhero. Thus, audiences were becoming subliminally anaesthetised to

the heteromorphic nature of the physique that was being presented to them, both on television and in comics.

The portrayal of homosexual themes in superhero comics first came to common discourse upon the publication of the SOTI. Wertham purports that within *Batman* comics there exists an overt psychologically homosexual subtext. He emphasizes the youth of *Batman's* sidekick *Robin* and that he sports a suggestive and inappropriate costume. Wertham submits the nature of their relationship to be homosexual, and damaging to young readers. Halberstam reorients this relationship, instead suggesting that the subordination of *Robin*'s masculinity to *Batman*'s is crucial for the real-life perpetuation of a "dominant heroic masculinity" (Halberstam cited by Shyminsky 2011). In *A Superhero for Gays?: Gay Masculinity and Green Lantern*, Palmer-Mehta and Hay attempt to identify the resistance to gay and lesbian issues being probed in the mainstream outlet of the comic book. Palmer-Mehta and Hay conducted an analysis of the letters send to the editor upon the publication *Green Lantern* #153 in which a hate-crime is committed to gay teen Terry Berg. The number of positive letters outnumbered the negative responses and as such they were able to ascertain that audiences were largely in favour of the coverage of gay and lesbian storylines, thus reinforcing the place of homosexual representation in superhero comics (Palmer-Mehta and Hay, 2005).

Conclusion

Within this chapter one has introduced both the significance of comics as a medium, and the reasons why superheroes have remained so popular since the conception of *Superman* in 1938. One has highlighted both what it takes for a superhero to last the test of time, and upon their subscription to these requirements, the social and cultural themes that these superheroes are

likely to be positioned among over their existence within the pages of comics. One provided an introduction to current literature relating to the social and cultural themes that this paper plans to analyse. From the patriotic, morally pure *Superman* of the Great Depression Era, to *Iron Man*, the filthy-rich playboy superhero of today, superheroes have undergone some radical changes over the years. As radical as these changes may seem, the base requirements of what it takes to become a superhero (strength, superpowers, hidden-identity etc.) have not changed, it is what they *stand for* that has changed. The methods that will be employed in order to best test the hypothesis that has been explained within this chapter will be outlined in the follwing chapter.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to outline both the methodological framework and the practical methods of the research that will be analysed within the next chapter. The first section will further discuss the aims of the research question at hand and comment upon its relevance. Next, one will discuss the nature of the methods that will be employed in respect to the research and the reason behind why they were chosen in order to best test the research hypothesis. Following this, the physical data itself, how it was collected and the reasons for its selection will be explained, in conjunction with how the chosen methods will be employed in order to analyse it. After this, one will discuss the themes that the selected data will be analysed in orientation to, how these themes will be analysed within the data, and why these themes are so pertinent today. In conclusion, one will summarise the content that was laid out within the chapter.

Aims of Research

The aim of this research paper is to examine the trajectory of superheroes within comic books in relation to the research hypothesis that submits that these characters can be traced according to the social, cultural and political environments within which they were conceived. This paper will explore the metamorphoses of some of the leading and most recognisable superheroes from the Marvel and DC. Marvel and DC have remained the two publishers with the largest circulation in the America since the introduction of the superhero genre in the late 1930's, and as such the implications and significance of their content can be said to usurp that of their less

widely circulated counterparts. The clarity of the messages transmitted within comics is often held to be more powerful than that of other mediums.

> "When we abstract images through cartooning we're not so much elimination details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential meaning, an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can't" (McCloud 2008, p. 29).

For this reason, comics can act as a valuable resource in the evaluation of the societal environment within which they were created. The themes to be explored within the comics have been chosen specifically due to their importance and relevance in society today, and also because of the wide amount of academic scholarship which is being written in relation to them across other mediums such as television and film.

The relevance of the study relies on the fact that the interest and readership of superhero titles has seen huge rejuvenation in the past decade (since the slump in the 1990s), rendering the ideas that they purport as important as ever. The recent blockbuster successes of superhero films such as *Batman* and *Spider-Man* have been counted as the main catalyst behind this rejuvenation. Other factors, such as the 2011 DC re-launch of its top superheroes in *The New 52*, have also helped broaden the once diminishing audience-base. The themes to be discussed – the portrayal of women, body image and homosexuality – are issues which are constantly at the forefront of societal dialogue, and as such are interacted with on a daily basis, be they personally experienced or latently occurring in society. This paper aims to contribute to the debate on these societal issues within this somewhat less heavily explored medium.

Research Methods

In order to achieve a comprehensive study, qualitative content analysis will be the method employed to assess the selected data. This form of analysis is most suited to the study at hand in that the writers and authors involved in creating our superheroes are so frequently changing, that to garner the overall sentiments of the characters, one will have to treat them contextually and analyse them as products of their time, as opposed to products of their respective authors and artists. DC and Marvel, who will supply the vast majority of the data for this paper, release their publications on fixed basis, rendering the results of any quantitative analysis without significant relevance or merit within this study. From nuances to distinct changes within the superheroes and their environments, the qualitative data will serve vitally in the exploration of the research hypothesis. It is important to point out at this point that it is the messages that are embedded within the comics that are being examined - not the audiences they are aimed at, or the hands they reach. According to Hansen, Lawson and Garrod, content analysis is used to "highlight the occurrence of specific characteristics or dimensions of texts" (Hansen 1998, p. 55), and to establish the "feelings, values and attitudes" (Lawson and Garrod 1994, p. 218) within the data, which is precisely the aim of this paper. Bryman (2008) contributes, "content analysis is an approach to the analysis of documents and texts that seeks to quantify content in terms of predetermined categories and in a systematic and replicable manner" (p. 34). Considering this research will be conducted under a number of predetermined themes, the employment of this method is appropriate. The qualitative aspect of the analysis will be used in order trace the portrayal of the main themes within the relevant comics. Bryman states, qualitative analysis emphasizes words (or in this case, words juxtaposed with images) rather than quantification in the collection and analysis of data. "As a research strategy it is inductivist, constructivist, and interpretivist" (Bryman, p. 697). Inductive research will be

employed, and entails that the theory should be the outcome of the research, in this case meaning that one should be able to substantiate the theory that superheroes can act as a barometer of their time, upon the analysis of the comics within which they reside. To further qualify the qualitative aspect of the research, an iterative strategy will be employed during the analysis process. By "weaving back and forth between data and theory" (Bryman, p. 14) one can both seek for evidence of historical trends within the data, and establish further parallels upon the examination of the data.

Data

The data to be tested against the hypothesis will be the portrayal of superheroes within mainstream American comics. In order to establish specifically what comics to analyse in order to best test the hypothesis that superheroes can be traced according to the social and cultural time within which they operate, one was initially guided by the literature discussed in the previous section in the direction of a number of previously studied comics which had been commented on in conjunction to the themes that would be explored within this paper. In order to make this study unique, one also analysed a variety of both DC and Marvel superhero comics with a view to establishing unique and hitherto uncommented-upon parallels within them. The combination of both the comics that had been mentioned within prior literature, and those found via one's own research would then provide the basis for the more in-depth analysis that would ensue. Superhero comics can be classified as falling into one of four categories: Golden Age (1938-c.1950), Silver Age (1956-c.1970), Bronze Age (c.1970-c.1985) and Modern Age (c.1985-present). In order to once again improve the range and quality of the data sample, for the purposes of a more conclusive study, comics from the Golden Age that have lasted the test of time, such as *Superman*, *Wonder Woman* and *Batman* will comprise part of the

data sample, along with some of the newer age superheroes from comics such as *Alpha Flight* and *X-Men*. By including a variety of superheroes within the data sample, it is foreseen that validity of the research hypothesis will be reinforced. There exists an on-going debate as to whether comics should be reviewed as a legitimate source of literature, thus worthy of academic review. Following the perspective taken by DiPaolo, Eisner[3] and Klock - that comics should be considered as literature, in conjunction with McCloud, who qualifies the medium as justifying their own genre, this paper will consider comics as its own genre, to be examined through the same means that literature would be. As McCloud highlights in *Understanding Comics,* the

> "Juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence are intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer" (McCloud 2008, p. 9).

This aesthetic response is no different to that which would be experienced upon the reading of any other form of literature, thus it is the synergy between the juxtaposed text and images within the comics that will act as the data for this research paper. "The perceiver is, after all, termed a 'reader'—and the subordination of the pictorial to the literary in comic art is one of the subtlest realities of the medium" (Abbott 1986, p. 156). The images and text will be qualitatively analysed in conjunction with one another, as they were intended, in order to garner the true sentiments that the comics are purporting.

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[3] Will Eisner, in his *book Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narratives* suggests that "in every sense, this misnamed form of reading is entitles to be regarded as literature because the images are employed as language"

Themes

The sections within the study will be organised according to the theme that is being documented, as opposed to the superhero title. The reason for this orientation is that it allows for the more concise and branched treatment of the respective themes, drawing examples from the data, as opposed to extracting a number of unconnected themes from each of the superhero titles. The research will be explored within each theme in a largely chronological format. The reason for this decision is to further reinforce the 'trajectory' aspect within the research hypothesis, tracing the change of the superheroes over time. Each section of analysis will look specifically at different social issues. First, *Wonder Woman* and *Lois Lane* (*Superman*'s love interest) will provide the data basis for tracing the trajectory through the portrayal of women in American society. The orientation of their societal position in conjunction with the imagery used to portray them, will be analysed using qualitative content analysis in order to establish whether their journey reflects that of the American woman over pivotal points in women's history, including their status in society surrounding World War 2, and the 1960s when major gender disparities were taking place for women in the workplace. Next, the issue of body image will be analysed using the portrayal of superheroes including *Superman* and *Captain America*. Based on the analysis, one will illustrate how the increasing size of the physiques of male superheroes can act as an index of the evolving American cultural ideals of male body image. The research will analyse the changing physiques of the superheroes in question, in accordance with the emergence of icons such as Arnold Schwarzenegger in the 1990s, and in the wake of the steroid and doping scandals in sports arenas of the 2000s. One will 'highlight the occurrence of specific characteristics', such as the changing muscle mass of superheroes, from the fit quarterback physique of the early *Superman*, to his modern day rippling counterpart. Finally this paper aims to analyse the question of sexuality within comics such as *Batman* and

X-Men. From Dr. Fredric Wertham's purported ideas of the homosexual undertones within *Batman* comics of the 1950s, to the portrayal of HIV/AIDS within the pages of DC's first openly gay character *Extraño* and conclude with an analysis of the comics world's first lesbian character in *Batwoman*. The theme of homosexuality will be explored in accordance with the trajectory of gay rights in the United States, including the condemnation of homosexual portrayals under the CCA, and how its subsequent revisions opened the door for the introduction of gay themes.

Summary

Upon presenting the analysis of the research, if the hypothesis is proved, one should be able to trace and define the superheroes as products their time, and as a means of determining that period's attitudes towards societal themes such as gender relations, body image andhomosexuality. Qualitative content analysis will be used to ascertain the feelings, values and attitudes within the data. The fact that many of the leading superheroes have been re-launched means that the new audiences will likely be young, making the ideas that they purport as all the more important, pedagogically or discretionally. In accordance with the methods that have been laid out within this section, both examples that have been discussed within current literature, in conjunction with unique examples found within one's own readings of superhero comics spanning from the Golden Age to the Modern Era, will provide the data to be analysed.

Chapter 4: Data Analysis

1. The Role of women

World War Two: Wonder Woman and Post-First Wave Feminism

Pre-WWII, the primary role of the American women was that of the wife, mother and homemaker. In uncommon circumstances, women also held service-based positions, with only 12million women in the workforce (one quarter of the workforce) upon the United State's accession to war. Due to the vast number of men enlisted in the armed forces, a hole was left back home in the industrial labour force By the end of the war, the number of women working outside of the home had grown to 18 million. Despite tight paper restrictions and enlistments of many of the best comics creators[4], over the period of the war, comic book sales grew from 12 million copies each month in 1942, to more than 60 million in 1946[5]. These productions provided and unparalleled means to alter public opinion concerning women's wartime activities and roles (Knaff 2012). Created by William Moulton Marston, *Wonder Woman* made her debut in All Star Comics #8, in the midst of WWII. As the world's first female superhero, her inception closely coincided with the Rosie the Riveter[6] era, which represented the time of

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[4] Leading comics talents including Jerry Siegel (creator of Superman), Will Eisner and Jack Kirby temporarily left their drawing tables to enlist in the war effort.

[5] Defense spending finally pulled the nation out of the Great Depression, increasing household disposable income levels, allowing for this rise in sales.

[6] As a cultural icon of the United States, Rosie the Riveter represented the six million women who entered the workforce for the first time during World War II. The character is now considered a feminist icon in the US, and a herald of women's economic power to come. Rosie and her slogan "We Can Do It!" were featured on posters, magazines, and more (see appendix)

economic empowerment for women. Speaking of his character in 1943, Marston declared: "Not even girls want to be girls so long as our feminine archetype lacks force, strength, and power. Not wanting to be girls, they don't want to be tender, submissive, peace-loving as good women are. Women's strong qualities have become despised because of their weakness. The obvious remedy is to create a feminine character with all the strength of *Superman* plus all the allure of a good and beautiful woman" (DC Comics 2000). Essentially then, *Wonder Woman* was predicated on the notion that girls don't want to be girls because girls are fundamentally weak. Girls want to rebel against what makes a "good" woman, which – according to Marston - entails little more than being tender, submissive and peace loving. The casual inclusion of "beautiful" is interesting, too. Would *Wonder Woman* be reoriented as non-super should she not maintain her figure or tend to her makeup? What Moulton failed to highlight in his justification for the creation of *Wonder Woman*, was the overt bondage subtext that inhabited her persona. She sports heavy manacles on her wrists, carries a lasso (which makes whomever she ropes submit to her orders) and spends much of her time restraining her prisoners with chains (and herself sometime, too - see *Figure: 4.1.1*), taking them to Transformation Island where they must sport a "Venus girdle" and submit to "loving authority" (Fleisher 1976, p. 176). In a Family Circle interview in 1942, Moulton admitted:

> "Tell me anybody's preference in story strips and I'll tell you his subconscious desires...*Superman* and the army of male comics characters who resemble him satisfy the simple desire to be stronger and more powerful than anybody else. *Wonder Woman* satisfies the subconscious, elaborately disguised desire of males to be mastered by a woman who loves them." (Richard 1942, p.22)

Figure 1: Wonder Woman wants to be bound as tight as possible with the biggest ropes and chains
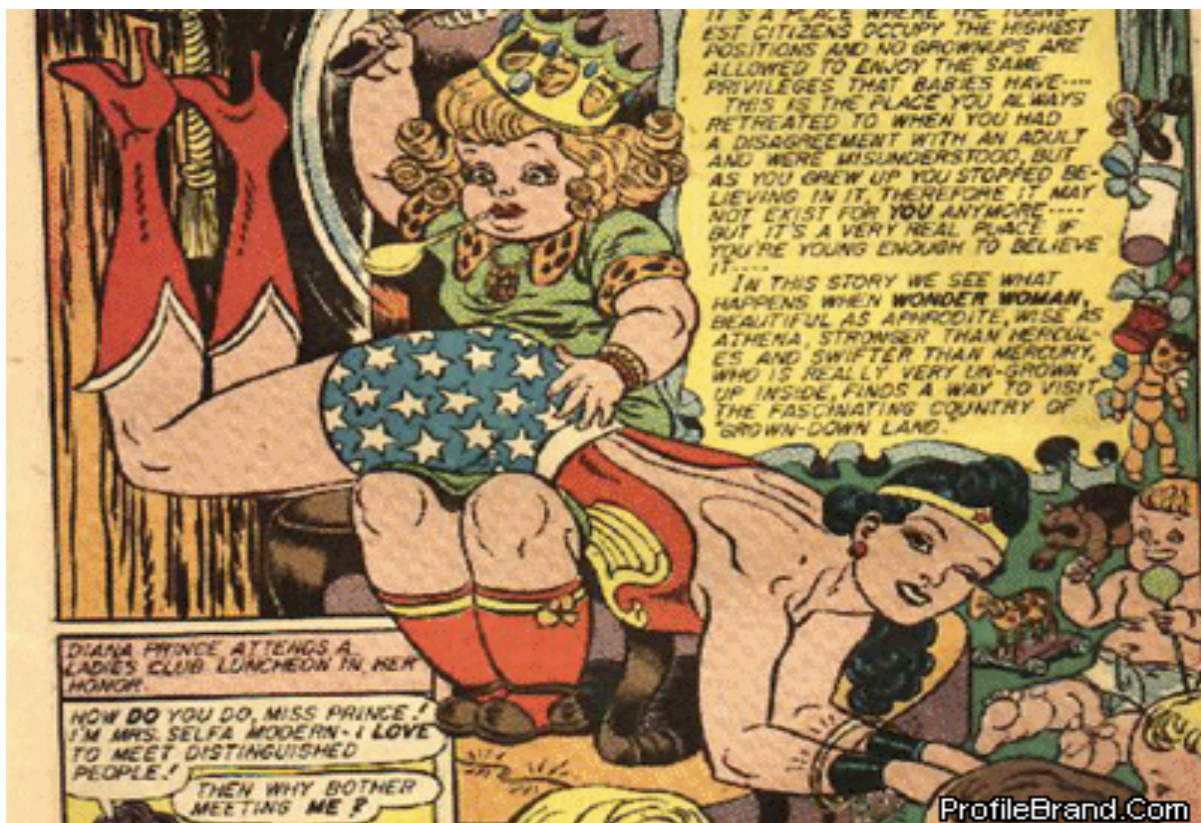

Figure 2: Wonder Woman being spanked on her travels in 'Grown-Down' land.

Moulton's *Wonder Woman*, and her alter ego Diana Prince, espoused his alleged tenets of

"goodness" - strength, power and beauty, and were punctuated with the presence of an affinity

for bondage. As *Wonder Woman*, she was initially depicted fighting the Axis military forces

(along with an array of super-villains) and as Diana Prince, she lived as army nurse, thus representing both the 350,000 women enlisted in the Armed Forces, along with those holding professional positions on the home front during the War.
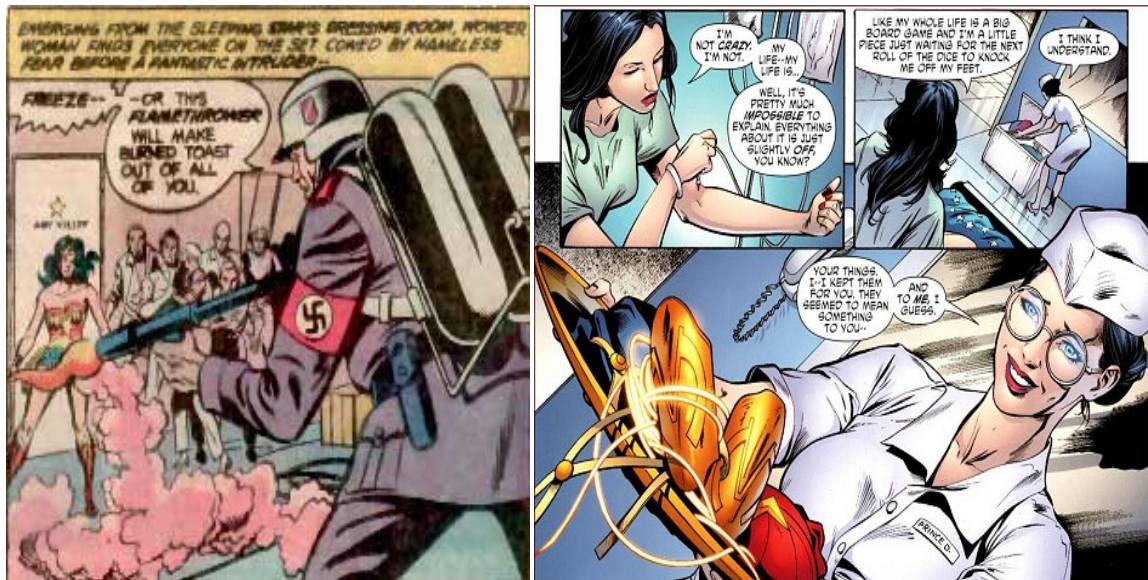

Figure 3 Wonder Woman fighting the Nazis; Figure 4. Diana Prince as her nurse alter ego

During the war, *Wonder Woman* rebelled against the feminine tradition of skirts, thick socks and high heels. Her then split-skirt reneged in favour of the iconic pair of shorts that she would become known for. By doing this she would reinforce herself as the 'strong' character Moulton had envisioned. Following the conclusion of WWII, Marston died prematurely to skin cancer in 1947, leaving his creation in the hands of the DC's Robert Kanigher. *Wonder Woman*'s trajectory would change, coinciding with the changes that would be experienced by women in post-WWII America. As women were being forced out of their newly found jobs to make way for men returning from the war, the strength and power *Wonder Woman* had come to be known for embodying took a decidedly less empowering turn. Her storylines would begin to resemble those of traditional American heroines, with focus being taken away from fighting for justice, and instead being placed on domestic virtues and romance in accordance with the guidelines set within the CCA.

Figures 5, 6 & 7: Wonder Woman's change from empowered to romanticised

Dr. Wertham's book had major implications on the portrayal of women in comics. Wertham

pointed out that not only did *Wonder Woman* contain a bondage subtext, but also that she was a

"morbid ideal" for young girls, and that "the homosexual connotation of the *Wonder Woman*

type of story is psychologically unmistakable" (Wertham 1952, p. 192). The publication of the book led to widespread public concern and was the stimulus to the Congressional hearings that led to the creation of the CCA. The Code prohibited the depiction of women as anything but wholesome[7], thus *Wonder Woman* remained subscribing to the American heroine outline until the 1970s. Adhering to several clauses within the Code, her costume was once again revised so that there was less skin visible[8]. The comics creators functioning under the guidance of the CCA followed its diktat to the letter, while at the same time exposing post-war relationships as hotbeds of abnormality, where "women were ring-chasing harridans and men were quivering *puer aeternae*[9] terrified of responsibility" (Morrison 2011, p. 68). In 1963, Betty Friedan's[10] *The Feminine Mystique* was published, and was widely credited with sparking the beginning of second-wave feminism in the United States. The distinct change in *Superman*'s girlfriend, *Lois Lane*, provides a good example of this movement.

Superheroes and Second Wave Feminism

1972 saw the first major-party radical feminist candidate to run for the presidency of the United States. Having already been elected the first black female Congresswoman, Shirley Chisholm ran for the Democratic nomination, eventually losing out to George McGovern. 1972 also fell within the middle of the Women's Health Movement, which saw the creation of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act. This Act meant fair treatment regarding consideration for

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[7] Among other guidelines, the Comics Code Females outlines that "women shall be drawn realistically without exaggeration of any physical qualities", "Nudity in any form is prohibited, as is indecent or undue exposure" and "Illicit sex relations are neither to be hinted at or portrayed" (Comic Book Association of America, 1954)

[8] Her revised costume would see her back almost fully covered, as opposed to the low-slung corset she has been wearing.

[9] *Puer aeternus* is Latin for *eternal boy*, used in mythology to designate a child-god who is forever young; psychologically it is an older man whose emotional life has remained at an adolescent level.

[10] Friedan went on to become one of the founding members of, and first president of the National Organization for Women, a hugely influential feminist organisation.

employment, promotion, training and other personnel actions without regard to race, religion, colour, origin, or sex (EEOC, 1972). It was an important year in women's empowerment and a reading of *Superman*'s Girlfriend *Lois Lane* from 1972, can prove illustrative of the changes that were being witnessed in society. The title was originally established shortly after the induction of the CCA and as such, *Lois* was portrayed in a highly dependent fashion. Her main ambition prior to 1972 was "to become Mrs. *Superman*"(Hanley 2012), and her endeavour led her to selling her soul to Satan in the process (*Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane*: #41) and also to trying out an experimental youth ray (accidentally turning herself into a baby in the process) (*Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane*: #10).

Figure 8 & 9: Lois Lane as a baby, and Lois Lane selling her soul to Superman as Satan in order to marry him.

The establishment of the first Woman's Studies Department at San Diego University in 1970 closely coincided with *Lois*'s newfound journalistic independence, and a shift from strictly romance-based storylines gave way to a new focus on current affairs. She became deeply involved in civil rights, in one issue turning black to garner a better understanding of life in

Metropolis's "Little Africa" (*Superman's Girlfriend Lois Lane*: #106). 1972 saw *Lois*'s comic

gain a new editor in Dorothy Woolfolk, and within several editions *Lois* had ended her

relationship with *Superman*, moved in with three girls whom she referred to as her "sisters",

and quit her job at the *Daily Planet* in order to pursue her own stories as a freelance journalist.

The new empowered and independent *Lois Lane* represented the tenets of the Women's

Liberation Movement[11], which was at its peak during this period.

Figure 10 & 11: Lois Lane turns Black to aid her investigative journalism; Wonder Woman on this cover of the first Ms. Magazine.

Ms. Magazine launched in 1972 with a view to eschew stereotypically 'feminine' articles about

beauty and vanity and expose the control that many advertisers were asserting over content in

women's magazines. It was the first national magazine "to make feminist voices audible,

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[11] The women's liberation movement was the collective struggle for equality, most active during the late 1960s and 1970s, that sought to free women from oppression and male supremacy.

feminist journalism tenable, and a feminist worldview available to the public" (*Ms. Magazine*

2013). The icon selected to grace the first ever cover was *Wonder Woman*.

The 1980s to the modern day portrayal of women

The mid-1980s saw a slump in the sales of many of DC and Marvel's big name comics (Emad,

p.969), as a result both DC and Marvel devised to penetrate the female market by increasing the

authority being entrusted to their female superheroes. Non-profit organisation Friends of LuLu

created a handbook setting out guidelines as to how comic book stores can hope to attract more

women, such as "Treat customers with courtesy, both in the shop and when entering the shop"

(Loubert cited by Emad, p.970). 1987 became a pertinent year in the history of *Wonder Woman*

and her grasp on the female market. George Perez began writing her, and until 1992 when he

finished his tenure, the comics saw all-time high sales because he shifted the comic's focus to

appeal to women. "*Wonder Woman* can be seen as resurrecting her positive status as a national

icon by vanquishing the dangerous blurring of boundaries that she came to represent in the

1970s" (Emad, p.972). Perez created foes for *Wonder Woman* that would metaphorically

represent current environmental, societal and cultural problems such as pollution, crime and

unemployment. *Wonder Woman* would battle these foes issue by issue, thus winning the

support of the female audience who appreciated her new strong and independent incarnation.

With the arrival of the 1990s and the departure of Perez, *Wonder Woman*'s position in society

once again shifted. There emerged a trend of representing women in comics around this time as

hypersexualized objects of male fantasy. "Many of the comics which do portray strong,

interesting heroines nevertheless still pander to young male readers" (Cawley, 2012). Robbins

writes that the female superheroes of the 1990s "possess balloon breasts and waists so small

that if they were real humans they'd break in half" (Robbins 2002, p.262). The truth of this change can be seen in the way *Wonder Woman* was portrayed over these years, as seen in *figures 12* and *13*.

Figure 12 & Figure 13: The 'hypersexualisation' of Wonder Woman in the 1990's.

A major component of the third-wave feminism being witnessed at this time was the sex-positive movement[12]. This ideology coincided with the 'hypersexualised' nature of the artistry in comics, nevertheless many women were angered by the unrealistic proportions which she was being endowed with. *Wonder Woman* was relegated from her position as a founding member of the *Justice League of America*, and began working as a member of the Department of Metahuman Affairs. Since DC's reboot*, Wonder Woman* has being reconceived as being the child of Zeus and Hippolyta thus re-establishing her as being raised in a matriarchal society

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[12] Sex-Positivism is as an attitude towards human sexuality that regards all consensual sexual activities as fundamentally healthy and pleasurable, and encourages sexual pleasure and experimentation.

(not moulded from clay, which is how Marston originally had conceived her). "The notion that a matriarchal society could train a woman to be as strong physically and as fearsome as the most powerful character in the DC Universe (*Superman*) is a pretty empowering notion" (Lima, 2012), especially since women (for a long time) were referred to as "the weaker, gentler sex" (Marston). Apart from this minor empowering storyline, *Wonder Woman*'s main story-arc has revolved around becoming a love interest for *Superman*; a move that would become a trend within DC's reboot. This move disappointed many fans who believe it could see the demise of *Wonder Woman*: "The shift from being a headliner in her own right to being Superman's leading lady will ultimately hurt *Wonder Woman* as a character" (The Week 2012). *Wonder Woman* is being subordinated to a more powerful male counterpart, much like *Lois Lane* was to *Superman* in the 1950s. *The New 52* has also brought criticism for its portrayal of other female characters in an overtly sexualised manner, and for the cancellation of many of its titles with female leads such as *Power Girl*, who instead became a minor character in *Mister Terrific*'s girlfriend. The current successes of superhero films at the box-office such as *Batman* and *Spider-Man* has oriented male superheroes even further in front of their female counterparts. The success of these films has also brought about a resurgence within the comics industry, rendering an increase in comics sales. Given the precedent of George Perez being brought in to write for females in the 1980s in order to reignite the readership, one would suggest that until a similar ratings slump occurs within the market, that the subordination of female superheroes may well continue.

Figure 14: Romance of Wonder Woman and Superman in The New 52

Figure 15: Wonder Woman sporting trousers as part of the New 52's Justice League.

2. Body Image

The Golden Age and the Silver Screen

> *"There is no denying that standards of male attractiveness, as represented by public taste in popular entertainment stars, have shifted towards the more muscular"* (Jirousek, 1996, p. *6).*

Superman and *Batman* arrived onto the pages of American comics in the midst of a silver

screen renaissance in the late 1930s and 1940s. The Office of War declared films an essential

industry for morale and propaganda. Actors Cary Grant and Clark Gable were two of the stars

in most demand, their classical good looks and charm making them the ideal leading men of

their time. *Superman*, *Batman* and *Captain America* also proved valiant symbols of morale

during the War effort and were idolized for their incredible bravery, moral superiority, and (for

the first time) fantastic physical strength and proportions. Since they were more powerful than the ordinary man, they were drawn with physiques to reflect that (Jirousek 1996). This period represented a time in the United States before the syndication of the National Football League had taken place and while bodybuilding was confined to specialist gyms across the country. Despite advertisements for gyms and fitness programmes within the pages of the comics, promising that even a "97-pound weakling" could hope to look like *Superman*, this time preceded the widespread proliferation of anabolic steroids, thus the likelihood that any mere mortal could reach such vast proportions was slim.

Figure 16: Cary Grant in 1940   *Figure 17: Superman in the first Action Comics in 1938*

As spectators entered the 1960's, the emergence of televised American Football and popularization of bodybuilding was beginning to alter what could be considered achievable physically. 1962 saw the syndication of the NFL by CBS, and stars of the game such as Joe Nameth, quickly became celebrities both on and off the field (Jenkins, p. 42). Heavy shoulder pads were being introduced into the sport and as such, audiences were becoming accustomed to the triangularly shaped bodies that were being found both on the field and on the pages of their

comics. This Silver Age of comics was in trouble, as the once favoured superhero genre was engaging in a hard-fought sales battle with crime titles that were benefitting from the publication of Dr. Wertham's *Seduction of the Innocent,* which purported a link between superheroes and homosexuality. In an ongoing effort to attract new audiences, superheroes were frequently being bestowed with additional powers, such as *Superman*'s newfound ability to fly. The characters were being inked larger in order to convey a more imposing and arresting physique, and suddenly the emergent bodybuilding community had their own prototype on which they could model themselves[13]. These changes that were being witnessed within the superhero world were not being mirrored in other media at this point. The prototypical star of the silver screen remained largely unchanged, with actors such as John Wayne and Robert Moore still representing the type of star that was being cast in leading male roles. *Batman* however, found his own place on the small screen, with Adam West playing the iconic character.

Figures 18 & 19: Batman and Robin, the TV series; Charlie Atlas gym ad, found in Batman Comic

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[13] International Federation of BodyBuilding (IFBB) co-founder Joe Weider began placing ads in comic books encouraging young men to undertake weight training to improve their physiques to resemble the comic book's muscular superheroes.

'Mass Monsters': The emergence of the real life Superheroes

The 1970's coincided with the beginning of the Bronze Age of comics. A trend of darker themes emerged for the superheroes of the time, and the stylized artistry took a turn towards the realistic. The hitherto large, bulky yet relatively undefined physique of *Superman* transformed, emerging chiselled and vascular[14]. At the same time, the rise of the bodybuilding "mass monsters" was beginning. The arrival Arnold Schwarzenegger and Lou Ferrigno (who, fittingly, would go on to play *The Hulk*) would mark a permanent change in both the bodybuilding industry and the film industry. The use of anabolic steroids remained legal, and was on the rise, rendering the potential for bodybuilders to finally reach superhero proportions. Schwarzenegger won great celebrity from his influence on the bodybuilding circuit, winning Mr. Universe at the age of 20 and a subsequent seven Mr. Olympia titles. After starring in *Pumping Iron* (a documentary which brought great attention to the bodybuilding industry), he attracted the attention of a number of directors, who wanted him to star in heroic roles such as *Conan the Barbarian*. By the late 1980's and 1990's the rise of bodybuilding started to take its appeal to the movie screen. "Many film producers were looking for actors who portrayed strength and huge muscularity, as well as film stars who began to use bodybuilding as a means to promote their marketability, as well as performance" (Munday, 2012). These were actors such as Chuck Norris, Sylvester Stallone, and of course, Arnold Schwarzenegger.

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[14] Vascularity became an important factor in the judging of bodybuilding contests. It refers to having many highly visible, prominent and often extensively ramified superficial veins. The skin appears thin due to an extreme reduction of fat, allowing for maximum muscle definition.

Figure 20: Lou Ferrigno (The Hulk) and Arnold Schwarzenegger in 1975

The rise of superhero films began in the late 1980's and finally producers were being supplied with actors who could more realistically portray the title characters. Former *Batman*, Adam West was replaced by a more imposing Michael Keaton, who was made even more intimidating upon the addition of *Batman*'s new super-suit, which had its own built-in rubber musculature. This trend of casting super-sized actors is still evident today, in a more selective way due the massive success of franchises such as *Batman* and *Spider-Man*.

> "The Hollywood people want superheroes not only to do super heroic things,
> but to look super heroic. That's why these days, leading men in movies
> cannot look like leading men of 40, 50, 60 years ago. They would not be
> allowed to take their shirts off" (Kortsha 2012 p.59).

Actors such as Chris Hemsworth (*Thor*, 2011), Chris Evans (*Captain America*, 2011) and Ryan Reynolds (*Green Lantern*, 2011) championed the physiques that set the tone for what it takes to portray a modern-day superhero on the silver screen.
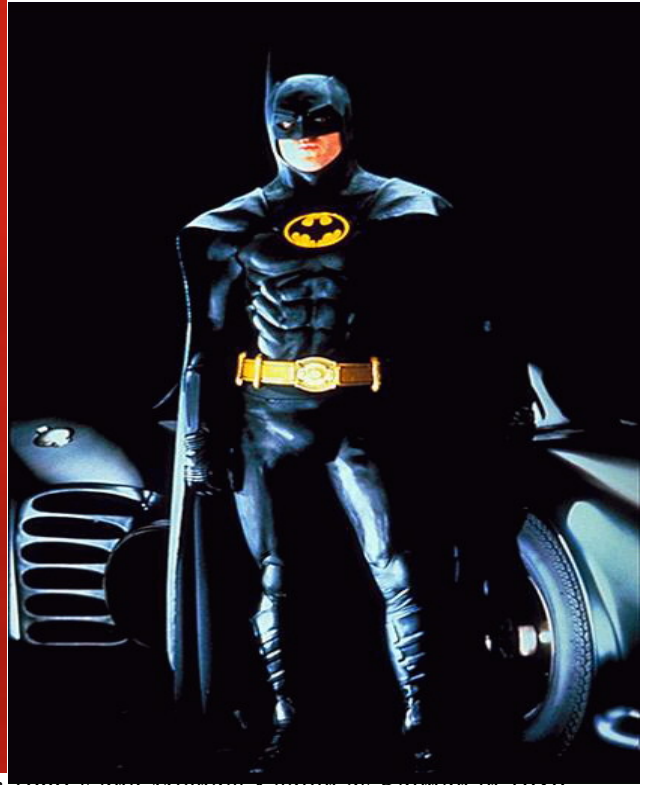
Figure 21 & Figure 22 Adam West as Batman in the 1960's and Michael Keaton as Batman in 1989

Figure 23: Chris Evans as Captain America in 2011

Do superheroes need to be super-sized?

Unlike a sportsperson who can directly benefit from a stronger physique, a superhero's abilities rest within the concept of closure - in other words - the imagination of the person who is reading the comics, rendering their physical size purely superficial. As such, the only tangible reason for the consistent enlargement of superheroes is that they are replicating the trends that are being set in other areas, such as on field, stage and screen. Comics artist Jamie McKelvie notes, "logically, of course, *Superman*'s power has nothing to do with his muscles, but I think an imposing frame on someone who doesn't use his power to oppress is part of his point" (Wheeler 2012). Superheroes have the ultimate vanity muscles, because they never use their bodies at all; they only move in the minds of the reader. Cartoonist Ramon Pérez explains how "the body of a character, from musculature, to lack thereof, to posture, to gait ... tell us a lot about the individual" (Wheeler). Author Scott McCloud in *Understanding Comics* suggests that that the simpler and more iconic a character, the easier it is for anyone to identify with them. With this is mind, one could suggest that comics artists are not necessarily trying to portray an physically attainable physique in their superheroes, and that they are in fact just trying to hyperbolize their bodies in order to make them iconic and memorable. The trajectory of their sizes in relation to the growing size of professional bodybuilders and sportsmen however is less accidental, with workouts such as "The Superhero Workout", which promises "an Avengers body in just 6 weeks" (Borland 2012). Compare *Figure 4.6* with the physique of Schwarzenegger for example; the similarity is uncanny.

Figure 24: The rippling muscles of Modern Age Superman

Figure 25: Advertisement for the "Superhero Workout"

Doping in comics

The 1980's and 1990's proved a significant era for professional sport. The emergence and success of the aforementioned "mass monsters" brought great concern from the IFBB, as it was at the time bidding to be recognized as an Olympic event. As such the IFBB introduced doping

tests in the early 1990's and the Anabolic Steroid control Act was founded in 1990. 1987 saw the introduction of drug testing in the NFL, with such tests proving a more effective steroid deterrent than was witnessed in the IFBB, which despite the illegality, remains heavily concentrated with steroids. Until recently, it seemed many spectators were either unaware, or unconcerned about this emerging trend in sports. Professor John Herman conducted a study in 2003, to trace the concern relating to doping in American professional baseball, and found that two-thirds of the fans were either mildly concerned or indifferent to the fact that their baseball icons doped (Johnson 2012). Less documented however, is the existence of drugs in the superhero world. In 1940, Steven Rogers, or *Captain America* as he is better known, was once a tall, scrawny fine arts student in his teens. It was not until his rejection upon attempting to enlist into the Armed Forces pre-World War II that he received the elixir that would transform him into his super alter ego. Super Soldier Serum, in the words of the administering Dr. Reinstein would "make him a terror to spies and saboteurs!" (*Captain America*: #1). Like a super-version of steroids, Super Soldier Serum would prove to enhance all of his metabolic functions, prevent fatigue poisons from developing in his muscles, and give him endurance "far in excess of an ordinary human being". The only tangible difference being that one dose was all *Captain America* would receive, as fortunately the super serum never wears off. Other notable examples of substance abuse in the superhero universe include both *Iron Man* and *Wolverine's* frequent abuse of alcohol (*Iron Man: #* 169) (*Wolverine: #133*), the *X-Men's* recreational use of "Kick", the highly addictive aerosol used to boost mutant powers (Marvel Database, 2012), and even *Batman* has experienced his arch nemesis, *Bane's* drug of choice "Venom" (*Batman: Legends of the Dark Knigh*t #16).
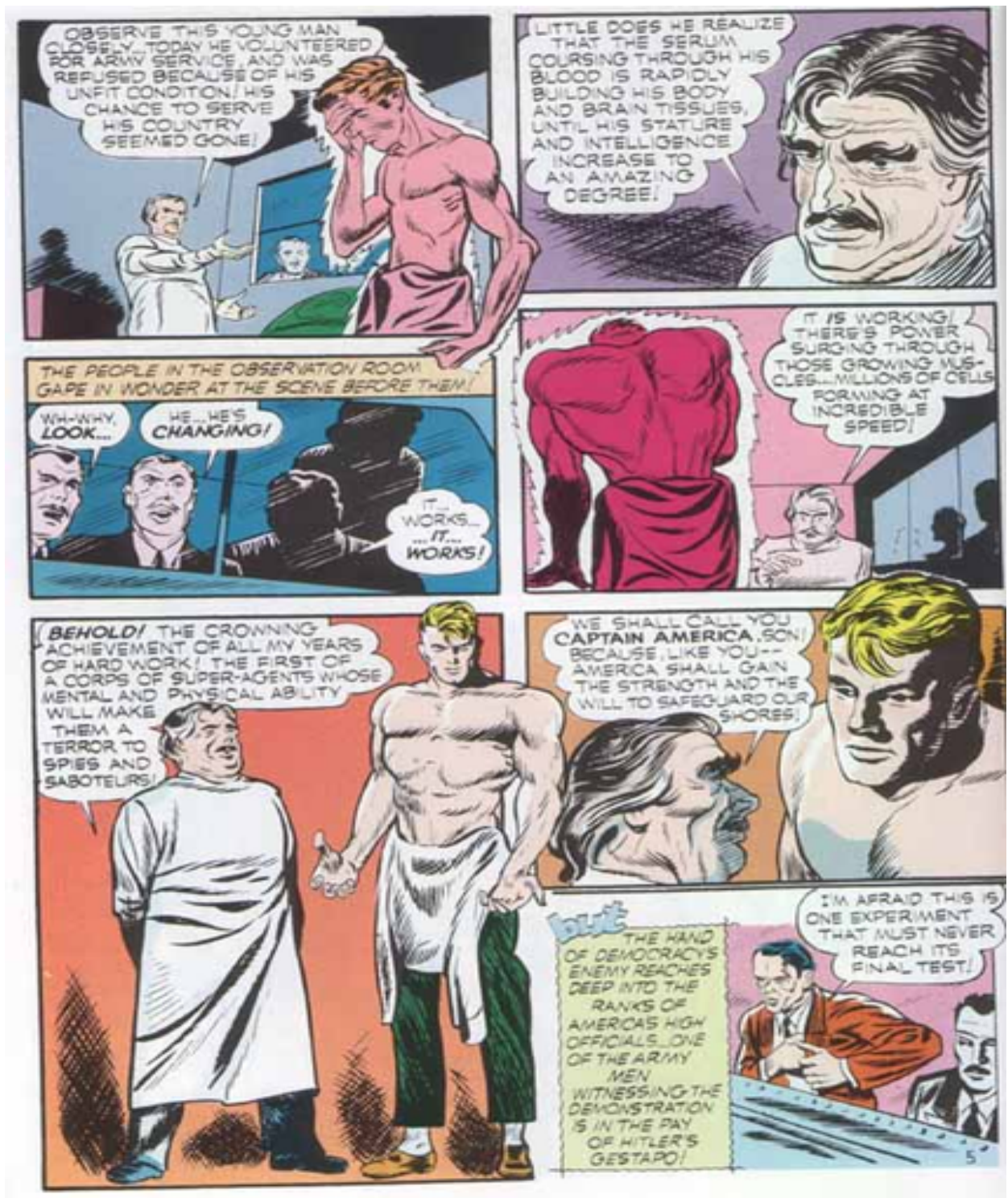
Figure 26: Captain America's transformation into a superhero

Although *Captain America*'s experience with Super Soldier Serum preceded the mainstream

arrival of steroid use in professional sport, the continued employment of drugs in comics serves

to reinforce the point that superheroes deal with many of the same social issues that are found

in real life arenas. The doping admission and subsequent demise of Lance Armstrong, once considered a veritable superhero himself, has brought a great amount of attention to the problem of doping in professional sports. It will be interesting to trace whether this newly taboo subject will be addressed within superhero comics.

3. Homosexuality

Batman and Dr. Wertham

The status of homosexuality in comics has witnessed great debate since the introduction of *Batman* in 1939. Wertham's contribution to the field (Wertham 1956), and the subsequent prohibitions laid out within Comic Code Authority shaped the industry in such a way that would greatly stifle comic writers and artists in their portrayal of homosexual storylines. *Batman* (Bruce Wayne) arrived in the DC universe shortly after *Superman* in 1939. After the murder of his parents, Bruce Wayne decides to avenge their deaths by becoming a vigilante crime fighter. He adopts a costume modelled on his main fear-bats, and devotes his nights to protecting Gotham City from evil. By 1940, he had adopted a sidekick in Richard "Dick" Grayson, otherwise known as *Robin*. The 'Dynamic Duo' arrived at a time in the United States history when homosexuality was still considered a mental disorder within the Domestic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association[15]. In 1953, during the peak of the Lavender Scare[16], Dwight D. Eisenhower issued an executive order barring gay men and women from all federal jobs, and the FBI began an intensive surveillance program against

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[15] It was removed from this list in 1973.
[16] The Lavender Scare refers to the fear and persecution of homosexuals in the 1950s in the United States, which paralleled the anti-communist campaign known as McCarthyism.

homosexuals (Society of American Historians, 1991). Essentially, it was a hostile environment that vigorously denounced homosexuality. As we have touched on in other sections, Dr. Wertham wrote a book that would mark a tangible change in the comics industry forever. The *Seduction of the Innocent* (thenceforth SOTI) purported that comic books were a negative form of literature and that their reading instigated juvenile delinquency[17]. Within "I Want to be a Sex Maniac"(Chapter 7), Wertham sought to create links between comic books, in this case *Batman*, and the psycho-sexual development of children (Wertham 1954).

Figure 27: Batman and Robin

Wertham accused the duo of conducting a homosexual relationship that "may stimulate children to homosexual fantasies, of the nature of which they may be unconscious". He continues with how Bruce is "sometimes shown in a dressing gown" and that "it is like a wish dream of two homosexuals living together". Wertham describes *Robin* as "a handsome ephebic

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[17] A recent study conducted by Dr. Carol Tilley has discovered that much of Wertham's data was misrepresented. She said he misstated their ages, combined quotations taken from many children to appear as if they came from one speaker and attributed remarks said by a single speaker to larger groups. The findings also suggest that the test subjects totaled in the hundreds instead of the "many thousands" that Wertham claimed (Tilley, 2012).

boy, usually shown in his uniform with bare legs. [...] He often stands with his legs spread, the genital region discreetly evident" and notes that "there are practically no decent, attractive, successful women" in *Batman* comics (a subject which we will return to) (p. 191-193). The following figures are examples of the scenes that were considered by Wertham to be indecent (for illustrative purposes, only).
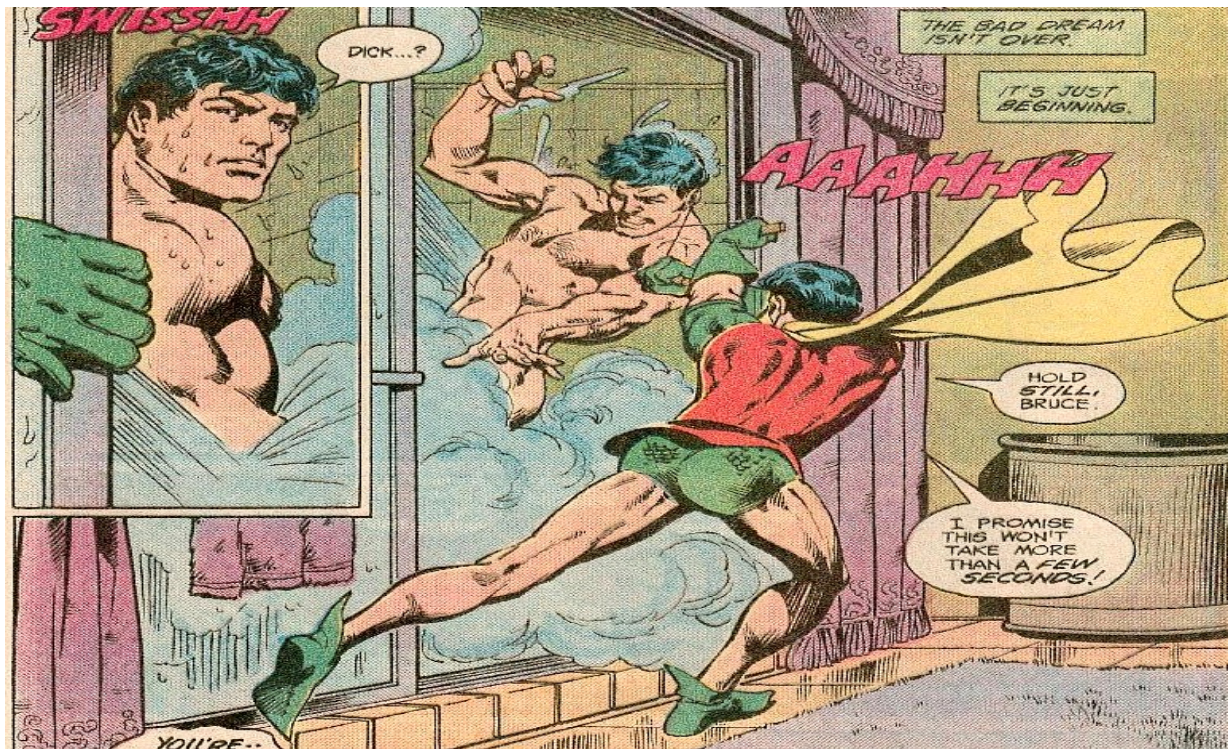

Figure 28: Wertham cites how the characters are often lacking clothing.

Figures 29 & 30: Batman sporting a pink Batsuit; Robin with a potentially suggestive substance on his face.

The SOTI supplied the stimulus that led to the creation of the Comic Code Authority, which strictly prohibited the illustration of "sex perversion". "Illicit sex relations" were "neither to be hinted at or portrayed", and "the treatment of love-romance stories should emphasize the value of the home and the sanctity of marriage" (Comics Magazine Association of America 1960). One fundamental and glaring issue with the original conception of the Code was that due to the strict nature of the rules relating to the depiction of sexuality, heroes could not be portrayed as having any sort of overt sexual relationships, unless they were married. As such, despite homosexuality being embargoed, heterosexuality could never really be confirmed, leaving the relationships between superheroes and their subordinate companions open to queer reading (Lendrum 2005). The Code was revised in 1989 to finally allow for the portrayal of gay and lesbian lifestyles. Homosexuals, the poor, the homeless and senior citizens comprised the "social groups identifiable by lifestyle", that were to be portrayed in a positive light (see "Institutions") (Comics Magazine Association of America).

The queering of an American Icon

Unprepared to create a new gay character, or even reconsider the sexuality of one of its successful characters (like DC's Green Lantern), Marvel comics instead decided to re-appropriate something far more sacred to American culture: *the cowboy*. *The Rawhide Kid* emerged into the Marvel Universe in 1955, and after a poor reception the series concluded after just 16 issues. Revived in 1960, by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, it successfully ran until 1979, publishing more than 150 issues. In 2003, the same year that same-sex sexual relations were decriminalised in the United States, *The Rawhide Kid* was back once more and the once shy-around-women gunslinger emerged as a gay man (though he never officially declared it).

Rawhide Kid: Slap Leather, was released under Marvel's mature-audience MAX imprint, and featured the cowboy in an overtly effeminate manner. Many of his actions were punctuated with offensive gay stereotypes; he would critique women's clothing, make overt sexual innuendos, and scream out "toodles" and "meow!" in combat. *The Kid's* emergence as a gay character was admittedly not a politically fuelled statement to challenge the dominant hetero-normative standard of a superhero, but as an acid test to determine whether the cowboy genre had any life left. Acknowledging the cowboy comic genre as almost deceased, then Marvel Editor-in-Chief Joe Quesada said, "to do a straight-up Western would have been a double-death" (Robinson 1994 cited by McAllister 1999). The queering of the *Kid* was used as a tool to spark a new audience. By portraying him as an overtly effeminate cowboy, Marvel both subverted a fundamentally masculine American icon and missed an opportunity to quash the pre-existing stereotypes and taboos surrounding the gay community. Perhaps the most disappointing aspect of the four issue miniseries, though, was its "mature" rating. The comics contained no sex, no nudity or even kissing – the comic was stamped "explicit content", because the *Kid* was gay.
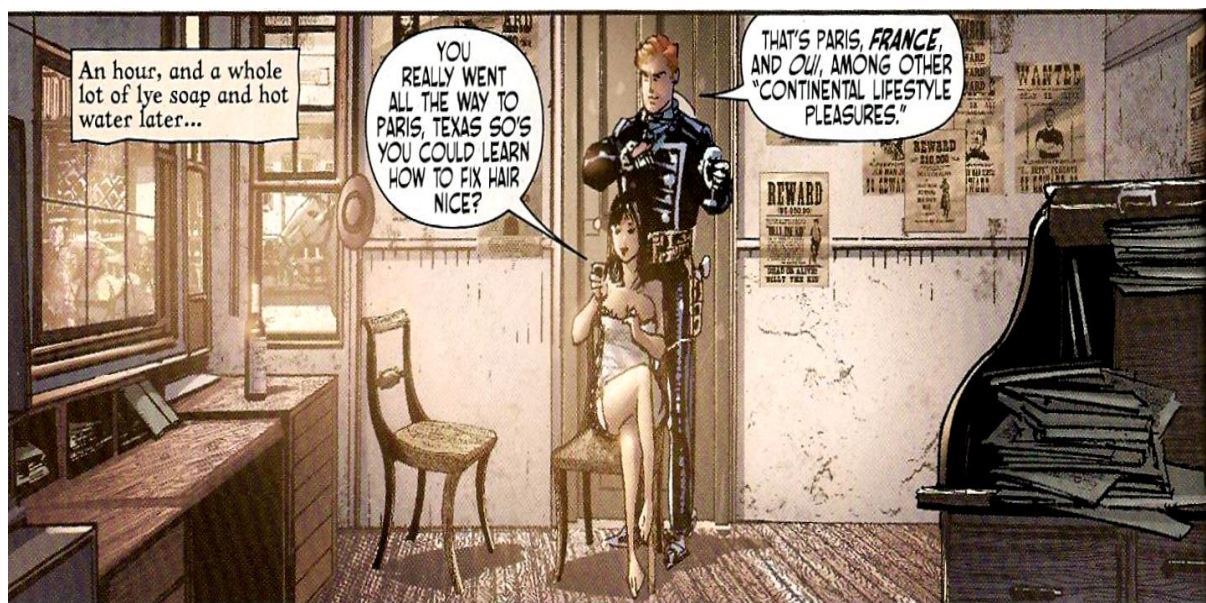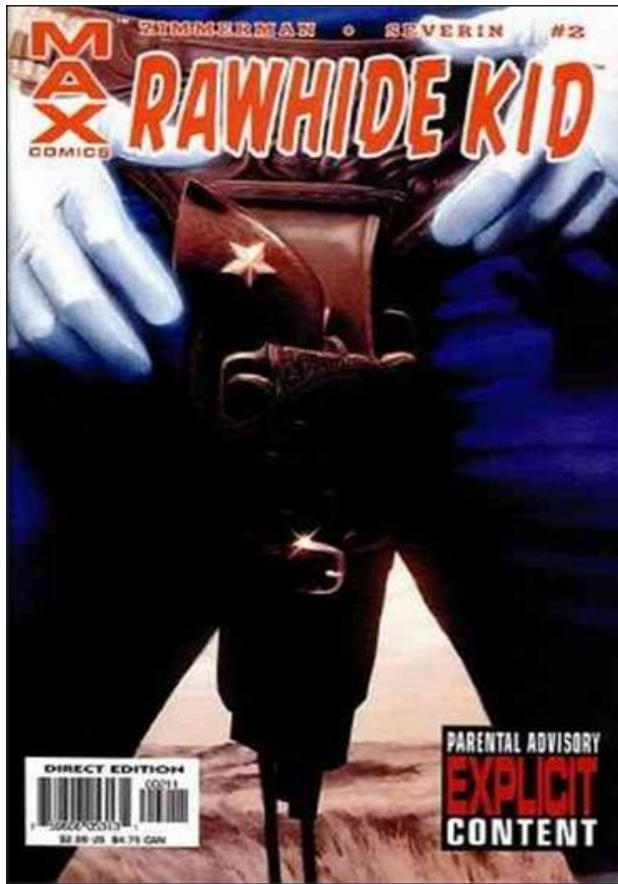

Figure 31: The Rawhide Kid tells of the hairdressing skills he picked up while in Paris

Figures 32 & 33: The suggestive cover of Marvel's Rawhide Kid MAX edition; The Kid critiques a lady's fashion sense.

Had Marvel portrayed the cowboy is a more masculine light they could have avoided much of the criticism that they received upon the publication of *Slap Leather*. Many Americans – protective of their cultural icon of the cowboy – strongly opposed *The Kid's* conception. Robert Knight, director of *Concerned Women for America's Culture and Family Institute*, said of the *Rawhide Kid* "[he is] a perversion of Westerns. All Western heroes have been portrayed as straight shooter – and that just don't mean hitting a target with a gun. It's a matter of character". He continues "why is Marvel glorifying homosexuality when it has taken so many lives and played a role in so many sexually transmitted diseases?" (Robinson 2003). One would suggest that the incarnation of a gay character could only serve to create awareness about the potential health risks associated with homosexuality, and that this vital message would trump

any protectionism over an American institution (Westerns), and dispel any accusations relating to the 'glorification' of homosexuality.

The first gay couple and comics matrimony

In 1977, Murray Head and Peter Finch shared the silver screen's first gay kiss in John Schlesinger's *Sunday Bloody Sunday*. Thirty years later, in 2007, Marvel's *X-Force*, superheroes *Shatterstar* and *Rictor* shared the first mainstream comic book kiss (*X-Factor*: #45). The distance between these dates serves as a reminder of how far behind other mainstream media comics are in terms of their coverage of non-heteronormative themes. Although there had been a number of implied gay characters since the revision of the Comics Code in 1989 (and 1983, in *Northstar's* case[18]), it was not until 1992 when Marvel's *Northstar* finally declared to the world "I am gay" (*Alpha Flight*: #106). Later that same year many of the LCR (Left Centre Right) publicly decided not to endorse President George H.W.Bush for re-election on account of his failure to denounce anti-gay rhetoric at the Republican National Convention (Anderson, 2004). By January 1993, Bush was no longer President of the United States, and after nine years of inference the comics world had their first officially 'out' superhero in *Northstar*. An interesting side note worth mentioning at this point is that *Northstar* was in fact Canadian. The fact that Marvel selected one of the few non-American superheroes in their Universe as the first openly gay character can be viewed as a distancing mechanism. By broaching the controversial issue with one of their less famous, non-American characters, Marvel demonstrated a lack of confidence in their decision. The repercussions that would have been felt had *Northstar's* revelation not been a success would have been far more sustainable

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[18] Northstar's creators said that they started actively writing Northstar as a gay character in 1983, but that they had to be cautious with his portrayal due to the Comics Code.

than that which would have been witnessed had they revealed one of their cash cows such as *Captain America* to be gay.
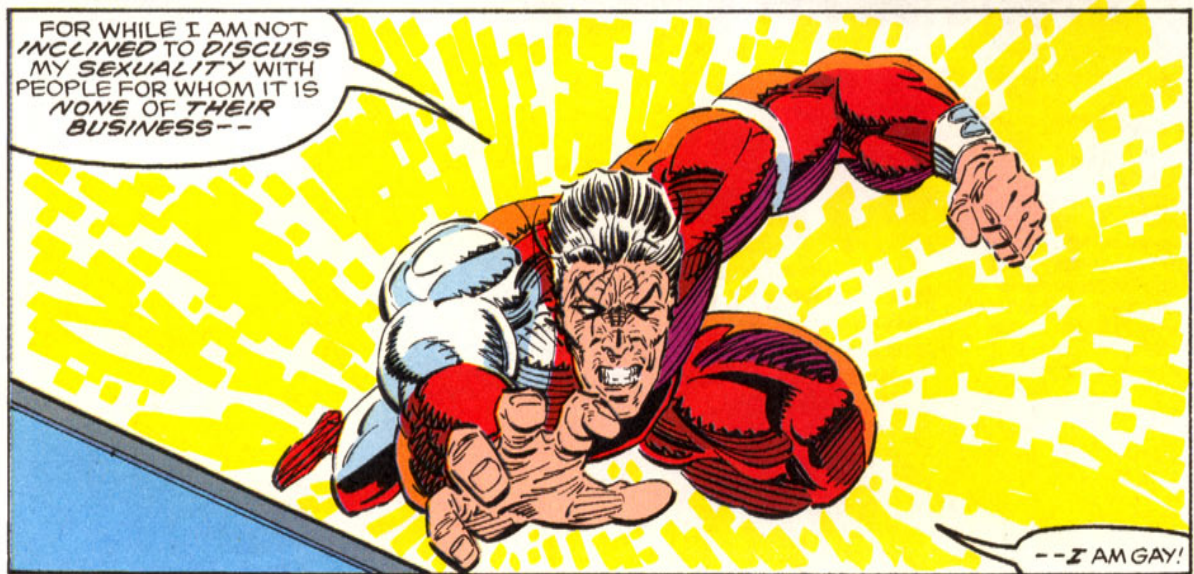

Figure 34: Northstar officially comes out as gay

Gay marriage in the United States has been a subject that has divided the nation since 1971 when activists Faygele Ben-Miriam and Paul Barwick applied for a marriage license (and were subsequently denied) in Seattle "to make a point about having the same rights as heterosexuals[19]" (Atkins 2003). Massachusetts were the first state to allow same-sex marriages, but it was not until DOMA[20] was found unconstitutional in 2012, that these marriages would be finally recognised by the federal government. Marvel lead the way, once again, as *Northstar* would be the first (and to today, the only[21]) superhero to marry his gay lover in the comics world.

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[19] Their case *Singer v. Hara*, attached a media flurry. The case closed in 1974 with a unanimous rejection by the Washington State Court of Appeals (Atkins, 2003).
[20] The federal Defense of Marriage Act (1996) defined marriage as a legal union between one man and one woman only and allows states to refuse to recognize same-sex marriages performed in other states (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013).
[21] *Batwoman* becomes engaged in 2012, but has yet to marry.

Figure 35: Northstar aka Jean-Paul Beaubier proposes to his boyfriend Kyle Jinadu

In May 2012 this union finally took place. In a country within which still only 9 states allow for such a ceremony, and in which thirty prohibit it within their Constitution, this was a big step in popular culture. *Northstar* and his (non-super) boyfriend Kyle Jinadu tied the knot in *Astonishing X-Men* #51. As would be likely witnessed in a similar union in the real world – their decision to marry wasn't to everyone's satisfaction. *Warbird*, a close friend of *Northstar*, (Marvel's *Avengers*) expresses her concern that she "doesn't recognise the validity of the ceremony vows"(*Alpha Flight:* #106). *Havok* and *Puck*, two other of *Northstar's* friends are also unsure of what the make of the union. By including the anxiety of some of the other characters (including some of his closest allies), Marvel is reflecting the real-life stance that not everyone is accepting of gay marriage[22].

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[22] A poll conducted by Langer Research in November 2012 reported that only 51% of Americans support gay marriage, while 47% are opposed (ABC News, 2012).

Figure 36: Warbird expresses that she doesn't believe in the nature of the union

Figure 37: X-Men Havok and Puck don't know what to make of the situation

Figure 38: Northstar and Kyle marry in front of the Astonishing X-Men

The first lesbian superhero

By 2006, DC Comics were trailing. Marvel had already introduced two gay characters by this stage (the *Rawhide Kid* and *Northstar*), and apart from the short-lived *Extrano* (who will be discussed further in the next section) DC had yet to release a gay character. Each gay character to this date had been male, so to the delight of gay female comics fans around the globe, *Batwoman* was reintroduced as gay. This move by DC proved a greater risk than that taken by Marvel. Not only was *Batwoman* already a household name from her days serving alongside *Batman*, she was a woman. The success of *Northstar* meant that DC could have simply reoriented one of their less famous male characters as gay without a great amount of risk. Unlike The *Rawhide Kid*, who only served to purport negative stereotypes of gay men, *Batwoman* proved to remodel some lesbian stereotypes while dispelling others. In a similar fashion to how gay men have long been referred to as "queens", lesbians have been called "butch" (Zastrow, 2010, p. 554). *Batwoman* is strong and tall, but still inherently feminine – a trait which many negative stereotypes claim lesbians are lacking (Zastrow).

Figure 39: Batwoman returns as a crime-fighting lesbian

Her writer Greg Rucka describes her;

> "With fiery red hair, a skin-tight leather cat suit and knee-high red stiletto boots - complete with a blood red bat symbol on her ample chest" (Rucka 2009, p.1).

By portraying her as a strong sexy crime-fighting woman, unlike Marvel, DC are serving to quash negative stereotypes surrounding gay women. DC would again prove to trump Marvel upon the reorientation of one of their most famous superheroes, *The Green Lantern* in 2012.

Figure 40: Batman proposes to her girlfriend Maggie Sawyer.

HIV / AIDS

Long before the introduction of *Northstar*, *Batwoman* or *The Rawhide Kid*, DC Comics
had already swiftly killed off and brushed under the carpet their first foray with a gay
superhero: the Peruvian magician, *Extraño (*Spanish for "strange" or "odd"). He was
conceived as "one of the ten people on earth chosen to advance the human race", which
was surprisingly progressive for the time (*Millennium*: #2). Apart from the fact that he
might have been the most poorly written superhero ever to enter the DC universe,
embodying almost every negative gay stereotype imaginable (he had a lisp, an obsession
with his hair, a flamboyant wardrobe and a penchant for calling himself "Auntie"), it was
the manner in which his run came to a close that the most troubling. After being talked out
of suicide by *The Flash*, *Extraño* (after the revision of the Comics Code) becomes infected
by an AIDS carrying vampire named Hemo-Goblin. Shortly before his death at the hands
of the villain *Krona*, *Extraño* is confirmed to be HIV positive.

Figures 41 & 42: Extraño the Peruvian magician was infected with HIV

Figure 43: The "AIDS vampire" that infected Extraño with HIV

Although *Northstar* was never officially diagnosed HIV-positive, in 1987 under new writer

Bill Mantlo, he began showing signs of illness. Matthew P. McAllister notes that *Northstar*,

"contracts a 'mysterious illness' which breaks down his body's systems" (McAllister 1992,

p. 10). As the story-arc was taking place one year before the revision of the Comics Code,

Mantlo was unable to definitively portray his character as HIV-positive. Despite this,

Northstar's intended prognosis was evident in his frequent references about how unwell he

was feeling. In issue 47, one of his foes remarked that he sensed "decay" in the hero, and

commented that there was a "slow disease spreading like cancer through your cells" (both

expressions strongly suggestive of HIV[23]). As this storyline preceded the 1989 revision of

the Comics Code to allow for openly gay themes to be discussed, the intended outcome was

quashed, and in *Alpha Flight* #50 the superhero is miraculously cured.

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[23] A severe immunological disorder caused by the retrovirus HIV, resulting in a defect in cell-mediated immune response that is manifested by increased susceptibility to opportunistic infections and to certain rare cancers (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013).

Figure 44: Northstar is told that he is diseased and decaying.
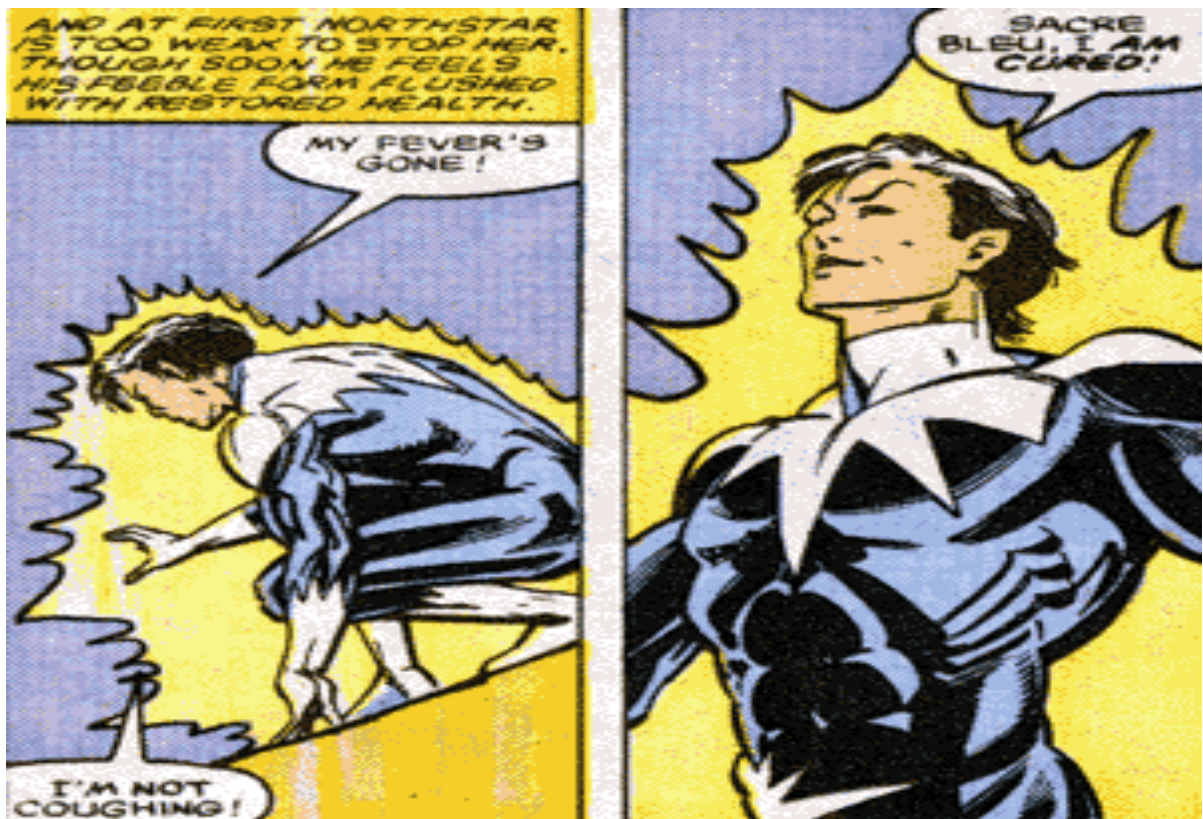

Figure 4.3.18: Northstar miraculously recovers due to the perception that his affliction was inappropriate under the CCA.

The addressing of HIV and AIDS by DC and Marvel can be seen as a double-edged sword. On one hand they were helping to bring awareness of this awful disease to a wider audience, but on the other they were proving to reinforce the stigmas regarding the association between the tragic affliction of HIV and homosexuality.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Considerations

Over the course of this research paper one has explored social and cultural themes as portrayed by superheroes within the mainstream American comics industry inline with the research hypothesis that purported that the trajectory of these superheroes can be traced according to the social and cultural environments within which they were conceived. This paper sought to demonstrate how the metamorphoses of some of the leading and most recognisable superheroes from the Marvel and DC universes have been dictated by the social and political cultural within which they functioned. The selected themes that were to be explored in orientation to the hypothesis were chosen on the basis of their pertinence in society. The role of women, body image and homosexuality are themes that are consistently at the forefront of cultural and political society, and as such are interacted with on a daily basis by all of society, thus necessitating the research that was conducted within this research paper.

Concerning the role of women, the hypothesis held true as both *Wonder Woman* (and her alter-ego Diana Prince) and Lois Lane reflected the changing role of women in society. During WWII *Wonder Woman* fought the Axis powers as Diana Prince held the position of a nurse back home as many women did over the period. When the war concluded, women were being forced out of their jobs, as *Wonder Woman* was coerced into domesticity and romance stories, removing the empowerment she saw during the war effort. In the midst of Second Wave of Feminism during the1970s, Lois Lane's focus shifted from her pursuit of marriage to the pursuit of an independent career. Lois's decisions mirrored the real societal movements that were occurring during the Women's Liberation Movement. An interesting aside to note at this

point is that currently the ratio of men to women working in the comics industry is roughly 9:1; the vast majority of this 10% hold editing or subediting positions, as opposed to writing or illustration positions.

Next, one considered the hypothesis in orientation to the perception of body image. The analysis suggested that there is a great level of interaction between the physiques of superheroes and those witnessed in the arenas of professional sport and film. Upon *Superman*'s inception in 1938, he was illustrated as being strong, but not chiselled. With the proliferation of televisions across America came images of American Football players sporting great shoulder pads making them visually similar to superheroes. As bodybuilding began to take off, gymnasiums began to place advertisements in superhero comics expressing to the readers they could look just like *Superman*. With the emergence of anabolic steroids, so too emerged the 'mass monsters' who, for the first time, began to resemble superheroes. The inundation of superhero titles at the box office in recent years has had a direct influence on the required physiques of expectant leading men. From the slender, athletic body of Cary Grant in the 1940s and 50s to the heavy, ripped stars of today such as Chris Hemsworth, there is huge pressure on action stars to maintain a physique that as closely resembles a superhero as possible. The hypothesis was then tested with regard to the theme of homosexuality in comics. Although there were limitations within this particular analysis, as the implications of the Comics Code prohibited the explicit reference to the theme of until 1989, these limitations only proved to help the hypothesis. In the 1950s, homosexuality was not only illegal but considered a mental illness. Wertham's 1954 book was reflective of this position, and the public concern caused upon the publication of the SOTI reinforced that he did not stand alone in his views. The prohibition of homosexual themes under the CCA, and consequential lack of explicit coverage of the theme until the Code's revision in 1989 represented how taboo the theme was. Upon the

removal of the prohibition of coverage of homosexual themes, the distanced approach taken by both Marvel and DC proved that although they were willing to create gay characters, they were in a sense testing the waters. By placing a mature rating on the *Rawhide Kid* titles, and by making *Northstar* (the Canadian superhero) their first officially 'out' character, the comics were trying to both please audiences, while not offending others who were still uneasy about the portrayal of gay characters. The marriage of *Northstar* and his husband Kyle also proved significant. The fact that a number of *Northstar*'s closest allies had trouble with his decision to marry was reflective of the divided opinion on same sex unions in the United States. *Batwoman* then, was used as a tool to alter the stereotypical perception of lesbians as being 'butch'. By envisaging her as a strong, yet feminine character, the comics were rebutting this negative stereotype. Throughout the course of the content analysis, the research hypothesis has held true. Although there were some limitations in terms of the potential to explore the selected themes at a more micro level, their examination within the scope of this research has proven that superheroes can act as a barometer of the social and cultural times within which they existed. In terms of the role of women, body image and homosexuality, the superheroes residing within mainstream comics have proven that they can not only be illustrative of, but comment upon America's stance on the respective issues since the inception of the Man of Steel in 1938.

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